

The Land Stewardship

37 Years of Keeping the Land & People Together

Letter



LAND
STEWARDSHIP
PROJECT

Volume 37

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LSP Photo

Field day season begins (page 25).

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A Remembrance

Mr. Return on Investment

Dean Harrington Believed in the Inherent Wealth of Land, People & Communities

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Land Stewardship Project, rural communities, and family farmers lost a true friend when Dean Harrington passed away on Feb. 2 at his home in Plainview, Minn. He was 69, and is survived by his wife Sally, five children and eight grandchildren. For several years, Dean served as the president of the First National Bank in Plainview. Through that capacity, as well as his work with the Land Stewardship Project—he served on LSP's board of directors from 2014 to 2018—and numerous other organizations, Harrington worked tirelessly to support everything from beginning farmers and intergenerational farm transfers to rural arts and solar energy. As this remembrance written by LSP member Ken Meter makes clear, Dean's passing leaves a big hole in the community.

By Ken Meter

I first learned about Dean Harrington in the late 1970s, while attending one of the gatherings hosted by the *North Country Anvil*, an alternative magazine being published at the time. Editor Jack Miller mentioned the prairie west of the Driftless Region, adding that there was a banker in Plainview tackling some creative ventures.

I filed that away in my memory, but it was not until 2003 that I actually met Dean. The late Dick Broeker, director of what was then called the Experiment in Rural Cooperation, had seen some writing I had done highlighting the importance of strong local credit sources to rural communities. Farmers in Green Isle, Minn., had told me that in the 1950s, bankers often played the role of gatekeepers to small towns: by deciding who they lent money to, they often determined who could move in. And when farmers paid interest on these loans, their payments cycled back into the community. Dick and Dean invited me to help launch Dean's brainchild, the Hiawatha Fund — a regional investment fund we hoped would allow southeastern Minnesota residents to invest in firms "you can drive by."

As soon as I pulled up to the First National Bank of Plainview, I recalled Jack's tip. In this rural town of 3,000, the bank building was retrofitted with a façade that echoed a Japanese terrace. As we entered, asking for Dean, we were guided to the basement break room where the fourth-generation president of the bank often officed, working from his laptop. In future visits, I would learn that Dean had vested bank employees with shares of the bank's stock so they could share the profits. Dean often reminded me that small banks like his were frequently more efficient than the larger firms, despite the larger firms' use of technology: "I know

each of my customers by name, so I spend less time on transaction costs," such as asking people to prove who they are.

Meetings at the bank evolved into an invitation to dine at his home, a lovingly restored Arts and Crafts house that scarcely stood out from its neighbors. We discussed how Dean and his wife

Sally had launched a theater company in a former implement dealership building on Main Street. They named it after the late author and teacher Jon Hassler, who had spent his formative years in Plainview. The Harringtons had spent a small fortune forming a top-notch performance company, yet their Plainview neighbors never fully embraced live theater.

Dean's view of theater was much like his view of investment: he primarily wanted to see plays when he knew members of the cast. Since several expert actors had used roles at the Hassler Theater to become better known in Twin Cities acting circles, he saw lots of plays. It was not long before Dean would call me on a Sunday afternoon, suggesting that he and Sally were going to take in a new play featuring one of their actor or director friends — would I like to join them?

Dean also wrote poems, and had convened an ongoing writer's group so a small group of regional authors could share their work. Dean and I swapped our own poems. One little-known fact about Dean Harrington: he wrote poetry using Excel. That software was always up on his banker's computer, and it made the line breaks easy.

When Dean's doctor suggested that he needed a bit more exercise in his 60s, Dean pedaled around Plainview on a sturdy one-speed bicycle. If we convened at his home

after a meeting, he always got there before I did, by car. Well, he was halfway home by the time I settled behind the steering wheel, and home was only three blocks away.

Dean passed management of the bank over to his daughter Cassie, who renamed it the Foresight Bank, and introduced a focus on making loans that would help shift Plainview to renewable energy. After retirement, Dean collaborated with two of his sons to form a solar-panel installation company.

Still, I save my favorite Dean Harrington story for the end. One day Broeker, Harrington, and I visited one of the largest foundations in the Twin Cities to ask them to invest in the Hiawatha Fund. Dean had written a tight business plan that concluded that if we could attract \$900,000 of capital up front, potential investors would know their investments would be safe, and we could earn a positive cash flow in a few years, returning interest payments to the community for decades. But that concept required several foundations to pony up.

I will never forget how the executive director of the fund leaned imperiously back in his swivel chair as we made our case. With

a near sneer, the man whose job was to give away someone else's money honed in on Dean and said, "Mr. Harrington, this is all very nice, but what would our return on investment be? Surely, as a banker, you would never invest in something without a clear ROI." Dean looked him straight in the eye, and calmly responded. Only the most astute student of small-town culture would have identified the brief quiver on Dean's

lips as irritation. Indeed, it was as tense as I ever saw him. With a measured tone, he simply said, "I would, and I have." □



Dean Harrington

LSP member Ken Meter is one of the most experienced food system analysts in the U.S., working with community partners in 141 regions and 40 states, two Canadian provinces, and three Native American tribes. Details on his work are at www.crcworks.org/crossroads.

Give it a Listen

Episode 111 of the Land Stewardship Project's *Ear to the Ground* podcast features the late Dean Harrington talking about the key role sustainable farming can play in generating community wealth: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/46.

A Remembrance

Chris Blanchard's Beginning Farmer Legacy

By Karen Stettler

The sustainable agriculture community lost a passionate beginning farmer advocate when Chris Blanchard passed away recently. From the early days of the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course, Chris brought his creative thinking and passion for marketing and numbers to many beginning farmer participants via the classes he led.

The first year Chris presented, he started out covering a small part of one workshop. We quickly realized that he had much more to share and ended up filling the entire three-hour workshop with foundational ideas, thoughts, and tools to help beginning farmers. When he first started leading Farm Beginnings classes, Chris was a successful produce farmer himself, which allowed him to share many practical, on-the-ground tips for making a go of it on the land. In



Chris Blanchard leading a Farm Beginnings class in Goodhue, Minn., in December 2008. (LSP Photo)

later years, beginning farmers continued to benefit from Chris through his work with MOSES, Purple Pitchfork Consulting, and his wildly popular *Farmer to Farmer* podcast (www.farmertofarmerpodcast.com). In fact, on a number of occasions beginning farmers shared with me how the *Farmer to Farmer* podcasts educated and sustained them through the long and sometimes lonely hours of farming.

Chris lived his values, prioritizing farmer education that would result in clean water

and soil, as well as healthy communities.

In his last podcast, produced shortly before his death as a result of cancer, Chris made it clear he was thinking of farming's next generation right up until the end. "Thank you for listening," he said. "Be safe out there. Keep the tractor running."

You are already missed, Chris. □

Karen Stettler works on farm transition issues for the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings Program.

Roots of Justice

Sovereignty, Sustainability & Social Justice

LSP's Change to its Land Gifts Program Reflects the Need to Address Historical Injustices & Current Realities

By George Boody

When I was growing up in rural Minnesota during the 1960s, I was taught in school that settlers of European descent came to this region to occupy open, nearly uninhabited, land. But that popular "settler story" has far more complex roots that include the removal of American Indian people from their land.

For thousands of years, all the land in what eventually became Minnesota was held and had been used in common by various American Indian nations. However, starting in the early 1800s, business interests and the U.S. government increasingly desired these lands to draw white settlers from the eastern part of the country as well as Europe. And so they acted to take it, first through a series of treaties (1805, 1837, 1851, and 1858), which did not protect Indian peoples and intentionally disrupted their cultures. Under pressure from traders and threatened by military force, the Dakota ceded 35 million acres of

land in the 1851 treaty alone.

The U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862, brought on by ongoing deprivations and starvation resulting from U.S. government policy, prompted Dakota leaders, in defense of their people and way of life, to attack and kill white settlers in southwestern Minnesota. After that conflict, which culminated in the mass execution of 38 Dakota men at a gallows in Mankato, the 1858 treaty that purportedly preserved a 10-mile swath of land along the Minnesota River for Dakota tribal members was abrogated by the U.S. government. Dakota people in the area, whether or not they participated in the 1862 conflict, were forcibly moved or fled from the remaining portions of their land.

U.S. federal laws such as the Homestead Act of 1862 then made it possible for my great-grandparents and thousands of other European immigrants to access land inexpensively in the previous home of the Dakota Oyate. From that humble start and through hard work, these immigrant ben-

eficiaries set in motion the gradual increase in wealth and wellbeing that those who descended from them now enjoy. This is a common story throughout the Midwest.

Acting on Knowledge

We can no longer claim ignorance of this history. The question is, what should we do with this knowledge? How do we use our values and goals to address this grave injustice? Two key values for the Land Stewardship Project are stewardship and social justice. Stewardship is about a land ethic and respectful way of engaging people and the land. Our organization has understood that we can't have a sustainable food system unless it is equitable for all farmers, workers in the food system, and eaters. Such equity must include American Indians.

In 2003, LSP's board of directors created a "Land Legacy" option to accept gifts of

Tribal Lands, see page 5...

real estate. The board's intent was to enable a person who owns farmland or other kinds of real estate to benefit a future generation of stewardship-minded farmers and the wider community through a gift to LSP that would then be sold to beginning farmers or established family farmers. Since 2003, LSP has accepted six parcels of farmland and sold three to family farmers. We continue to manage the others through leases or other agreements.

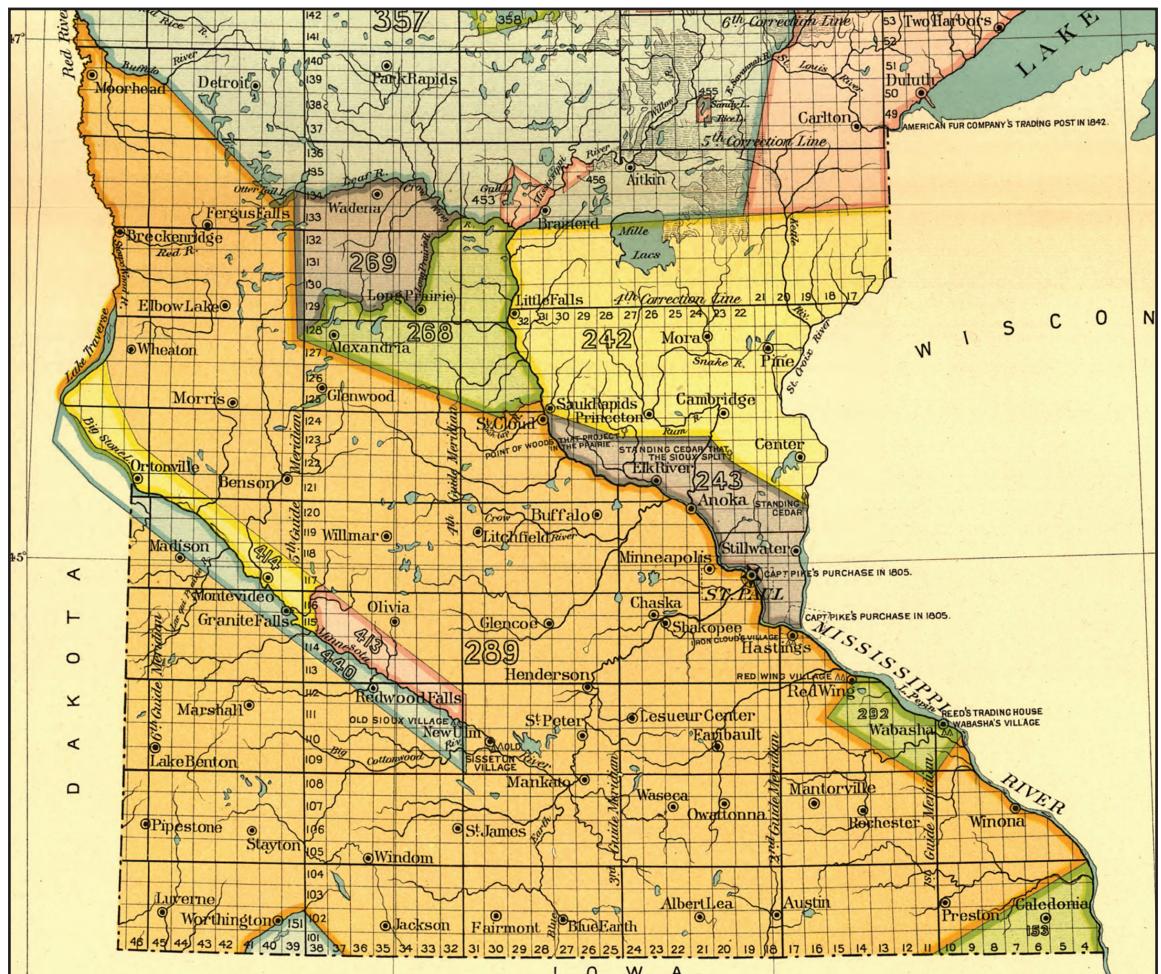
In recent years, led by staff members Scott DeMuth and Amy Bacigalupo, we have been building relationships with the Upper Sioux Community, the Red Lake Nation, and other tribal entities. Through these relationships, we have learned about the importance of food sovereignty. We approach this as long-term relational work and seek to create mutually beneficial outcomes.

LSP believes that Indian tribes are important allies in our common struggle to steward the land and keep the land and people together.

For the past year, the LSP board's Land Legacy Committee has worked to develop an organizational policy that would align with and assist tribal communities that are working to regain some of the lands that were stolen from them in the early years. The committee felt that by returning land to Indian tribal entities on which they can grow culturally appropriate foods and restore ecological function, we can help the overall movement for sustainable agriculture and healthy communities to become more powerful and successful.

Members of the committee, with the assistance of western Minnesota farmer Audrey Arner, as well as DeMuth and I, have examined maps of treaty boundaries, researched other organizations doing this work and reviewed drafts of policy changes. Most importantly, we have listened to tribal members.

"I am so grateful to the native educators who have helped me to understand the position of privilege occupied by those of us who have farmed indigenous land for our livelihood and benefit," says Arner. "What was a promising beginning for the immigrant settlers was a devastating collapse for



This map shows the land — the orange area labeled “289” — covered by the Minnesota portion of the 1851 treaty between the U.S. Government and the Dakota. The Dakota ceded 35 million acres of land as a result of that treaty. Source: U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology, obtained through Wikimedia Commons

the people who lived here before mostly white, mostly European, people came. Being engaged in this work is an important step for us as individuals and as an organization to begin to repair some of the harms.”

LSP Land Gifts Policy Change

These discussions have resulted in an exciting change in the way LSP can handle land gifts. Under changes approved unanimously by our board of directors in March, we have now made selling or donating gifted farmland to Indian tribal entities one of our priority options. This amended policy seeks to address, in part, the issue of corrupt land treaties as well as the actions of land speculators who purchased parcels from individual Indian landowners under duress on terms that were unfavorable to the tribal members.

“Returning land that was theirs is an act of stewardship,” says Andrew Ehrmann, an LSP board member who farms in southeastern Minnesota and was involved in the recent decision.

“As we move forward as an organization

and as Midwesterners, we must reckon with the history of injustice that connects tribal nations, settlers, and who controls the land,” says Mark Schultz, LSP’s executive director. “There is much to do, but changing LSP’s policy regarding land that is given to our organization is a step forward.” □

Former LSP executive director George Boody is the organization’s Science and Special Projects Leader. For details on LSP’s Land Legacy initiative, contact Boody at 612-722-6377 or gboody@landstewardshipproject.org.

Give it a Listen

For more on the issue of the taking of tribal lands and how it relates to farming, stewardship, and justice, check out a recent *Ear to the Ground* “Living on Stolen Land” podcast series — episodes 224, 225 and 226 — that was developed by staff member Elizabeth Makarewicz: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast.

A Guy Could Use a Gender-Neutral Pronoun

Don't Let Noninclusive Language Become a Barrier to Stewardship of the Land

By Robin Moore

I have been a woman involved in agriculture for 23 years, and I can tell you without any fanfare that it is has been a distinctly male arena. I have been patronized, ignored, assumed to be someone's wife, laughed out of offices, literally patted on the head, paid less, and denied access and opportunity with predictable regularity. All that was completely survivable, because I've also been supported, heard, respected, and seen by neighbors, employers, friends, and customers. I think this dichotomy describes a lot of our lives.

One of the small heartbreaks and constant irritations of being a woman in agriculture is the default association of the word "farmer" with male pronouns. My name is slightly gender ambiguous (my voice is not), and many times people refer to me as "mister" until they hear me speak. Can you imagine being a female at an informational meeting and literally every pronoun referencing a farmer, with the exception of the mention of a wife, being masculine? That is the reality, and it drags on a body like lake weeds on a fishing line.

I often had to remind myself consciously that I was legitimate, that I had a right to ask questions, use resources, be paid as much as a male for my labor. But the other reality is that I learned to avoid interactions with unknown agricultural men as much as possible. Men in agencies, men working for other farmers, men at the elevator, men in the equipment stores. I apprenticed as a blacksmith to avoid turning to male strangers to help me fix equipment after one-too-many asked if my husband was around. Unless I had to interact with them, I chose not to expose myself to exclusive, derisive or dismissive comments or behavior.

Through my work with the Land Stewardship Project, I had the good luck last November to talk with a woman who farms organically, with cover crops, and by herself. I was excited and quickly asked if she would be willing to be a panelist for a workshop, but she declined. "I learned to keep to myself and that no man wanted to hear what I had to say," she said more than once during our

"I learned to keep to myself and that no man wanted to hear what I had to say."

— a woman who farms in southern Minnesota

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A guy, he, his, him, his son, his father, etc. etc., etc. Every female-identified person in the room is, on one level or another, excluded from those scenarios. Crap, we don't even get to go fishing with our dads. I like fishing.

How hard would it be to start talking about people? "A farmer could go to their SWCD office and ask their agent..." "My grandparents and parents cared about this, and I want my kids to care about it too." Not hard at all. A little awkward, and we may have to stop and correct ourselves, but change is rarely smooth.

So let's stop saying, "A guy could..." whenever we can. Let's acknowledge that the hypothetical we aspire to is filled with possibilities, of people all along the gender spectrum, from different cultures, and of all colors. Let's assume that we don't know who might go down to the SWCD office, or who might want to go fishing, or who's going to carry our legacy forward. Let's talk about "people" instead of "guys." □



Women learned how to monitor soil health during an LSP workshop in southeastern Minnesota. One of the small heartbreaks and constant irritations of being a woman in agriculture is the default association of the word "farmer" with male pronouns. (LSP Photo)

conversation. What a loss for everyone.

There are big problems that we as individuals cannot change, or at least cannot change quickly. But there's one little thing I'm going to ask of everyone, especially those of you in agriculture: please stop saying "a guy," as in, "A guy could start farming." It's a hypothetical usage, and in Minnesota, at least, it's supposed to mean "anyone," "someone" or "somebody," but it's a male hypothetical, and it creates one

more barrier for anyone who is not a man to push through. It's a word choice that the men in the room do not need to even think about.

Here are a few quotes from a workshop I was at this past winter: "A guy could go down to his SWCD office, and ask his agent if he had any program money to help with cover crops" and "A guy can't go into his field and find worms any more to take his son fishing" and "My grandfather and my father cared about this, and I want my son to care about it too."

I call it the cascading pronoun syndrome.

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A guy, he, his, him, his son, his father, etc. etc., etc. Every female-identified person in the room is, on one level or another, excluded from those scenarios. Crap, we don't even get to go fishing with our dads. I like fishing.

Land Stewardship Project organizer Robin Moore works on helping landowners develop leases that represent their stewardship values (see page 16). She is based in LSP's Montevideo office in western Minnesota.

Myth Buster Box

An Ongoing Series on Ag Myths & Ways of Deflating Them

→ Myth: Every Acre is a Potential Nitrogen-Fueled Superstar

→ Fact

Farmers know that their fields do not conform to a single, uniform blanket of productivity. Everything from soil type and topography to rotation history and accessibility of field equipment to that odd corner can trigger yield variability from one acre to the next. And when yields vary, so does the efficiency with which inputs such as nitrogen fertilizer are taken up by plants and used. That's important, because a field or a portion of a field that is not utilizing fertilizer efficiently is seeing a fair amount going to waste as it's either emitted into the atmosphere or washed through the soil profile by water. That imposes a cost on a farmer's bottom line as well as the environment. Nitrogen that escapes Midwestern farm fields pollutes water in the region, and is a major cause of the hypoxic dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, lost nitrogen can be a potent greenhouse gas.

One strategy farmers use to deal with yield variability is to apply more nitrogen fertilizer on those consistently poor performing parcels as a way to bring yields all across a farm to one uniform level. But a recent breakthrough study of Midwestern crop farms shows that such an approach is probably a waste of money, as well as bad for the environment. This study has implications not only for how fertilizer management is carried out, but also how land overall is best utilized.

Overachievers vs. Underdogs

The study, which was led by researchers at Michigan State University, used satellite imagery combined with other data to estimate the proportion of nitrogen fertilizer that was removed during harvest of corn on some 70 million acres in 10 Midwestern states, including Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and the Dakotas. The nitrogen that was not removed by harvesting the plants was considered "surplus," and thus lost into the environment. If a field or a part of a field produced low yields, then less nitrogen fertilizer was taken up by the corn plants and hauled off the land during harvest.

Cornfields were examined over an eight-year period, and the data was validated by comparing the satellite information to 10 years of yield information collected by sensors mounted on combines from more than

1,000 farms. It's the first time yield variability has been quantified to such a micro-scale.

The resulting paper, which was published in the April 8 edition of *Scientific Reports*, created three categories: "stable high yield," "stable low yield," and "unstable yield." It turns out that across the Corn Belt, on average 48 percent of the subfield areas analyzed for the study were stable, high-yielders — year-in and year-out they crank out good corn harvests. The unstable acres—they can yield high one year, low the next—accounted for 28 percent of the cropped land. Around 26 percent of the land was the crop equivalent of the runt of the litter—consistently low yields, no matter what the circumstances.

That means a quarter of the land studied is leaking nitrogen fertilizer on a consistent basis, and adding more to prop up yields is not working, and in fact is only making the problem worse. The study found that these consistently low yielding areas contribute around 44 percent of the nitrogen lost.

Lost nitrogen from the 10 states studied annually totals nearly \$1 billion of wasted fertilizer and 6.8 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions. The study's authors argue that research like this reinforces the need to implement "precision agriculture" systems when producing row crops. Such systems rely on a combination of satellite data, yield monitor results, soil tests, and other information to fine-tune how much fertilizer is applied to each acre. Such technology could be particularly useful on those acres that are "unstable" yielders.

But Dr. Bruno Basso, the lead author of the study, makes it clear that no amount of fertilizer micro-managing is going to make those consistently low-yielding areas consistently viable crop producers. In a Michigan State press release, he said this study makes the case for leaving those dud acres unfarmed. He maintains that with good nutrient management the consistently high yielding acres, even the unstable ones, can more than make up for the lost corn production on that 26 percent of low-yielding land. He suggests planting such marginal land to "conservation grasses" or "perennial bioenergy crops."

Basso and his colleagues make a good point, and this kind of research could help identify areas that would benefit from the restoration of prairie and wetland habitats, for

example. This data also bolsters the argument for reforming crop insurance so that it does not provide so many incentives for tilling marginal acres.

Valuing Acres Differently

But here's another idea: make those marginal acres into livestock production areas. Managed rotational grazing has been shown to protect water quality, improve wildlife habitat, and even build soil carbon, all the while producing income for farmers without a major investment in equipment. In fact, before changes in the crop insurance program made it economically viable to grow row crops on marginal acres, those were the parts of the farm that were often grazed.

Two farming operations featured in this issue of the *Land Stewardship Letter* (pages 14 and 17), have chosen to take their own "low-yielding" acres out of crop production and make them places where they produce livestock. Granted, many crop farmers today do not have livestock to graze, but increasingly we're seeing situations where cattle, sheep and other animals can be "borrowed" temporarily to graze pasture or even land that's been cover cropped. Lightweight, portable fencing systems make it possible to reintroduce livestock onto farms, and the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota has worked with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop an "exchange" where livestock farmers and crop producers can connect (www.mda.state.mn.us/cropland-grazing-exchange-1).

Ultimately, good grazing management can help get us out of the rut of valuing an acre of land based solely on its corn suitability rating. Given the right tools, management, and incentives, one farmer's underperformer can be another's superstar.

More Information

- The *Science Reports* paper, "Yield stability analysis reveals sources of large-scale nitrogen from the US Midwest," is available at www.nature.com/srep.

- For more on how grazing can build a farm's resiliency, see pages 14-18 of this *Land Stewardship Letter*.



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LSP News

LSP Staff Changes

Bryan Simon has departed the Land Stewardship Project to return to fulltime farming. Simon joined LSP's Community Based Food Systems team in 2016. For that past three years, he has done land-owner outreach as part of the Chippewa 10% Project. In that position, he organized field days and workshops, and provided support for numerous farmers seeking to establish crop and livestock systems that support watershed health and are economically viable. In that capacity, he helped launch LSP's new "Grazing Helpline" (*see page 17*). A graduate of the Farm Beginnings and Journeyperson courses, Simon and his wife Jessie raise grass-based livestock near Barrett in west-central Minnesota, and were featured in the book *Wildly Successful Farming* (*see page 31*).

Jonathan Maurer-Jones has wrapped up his work with the Land Stewardship Project's Policy and Organizing Program. Maurer-Jones joined the staff in 2016 and has been involved with various organizing



Bryan Simon

projects, including the Affordable Healthcare for All initiative and doing lead work on the "Vision for Rural Minnesota" and "Our Minnesota Future" initiatives. Most



Jonathan Maurer-Jones

recently, he was instrumental in moving forward the work of LSP's 501c4 organization, the Land Stewardship Action Fund. Maurer-Jones lives with his family in Duluth.

Laura Schreiber recently helped coordinate the Land Stewardship Project's 14th Annual Family Farm Breakfast at the Capitol (*see page 10*). Prior to that, she served an internship with LSP's Policy



Laura Schreiber

and Organizing Program researching policy related to local food systems.

Maddie Hyde has joined LSP's Membership and Individual Giving Program team. Hyde has a bachelor's degree in global studies and studio art from Concordia College, and she has worked for Seed Savers Exchange and Prairie Restorations. Most recently, Hyde has worked as a communications and evaluations specialist with Dream of Wild Health.

In her position at LSP, Hyde is working as a membership and base building organizer and is focusing on bolstering membership recruitment efforts across the organization. She can be reached at 612-722-6377 or mhyde@landstewardshipproject.org.

Ben Anderson has been named the associate director of LSP's Policy and Organizing Program. Since joining LSP's staff in 2016, Anderson has been focusing on federal farm policy, and, more recently, the new Local Foods Initiative.

In his new position, Anderson is working with Policy and Organizing Program director Bobby King to help the program reach its planning and fundraising goals. He is also supervising LSP's Affordable Healthcare for All initiative. □



Maddie Hyde



Ben Anderson

Land Stewardship Project Staff Photo



Staff members of the Land Stewardship Project recently gathered in Mankato, Minn., for an all-staff meeting. Front row (*left to right*): Mike McMahon, Amelia Shoptaugh, Megan Smith, Liana Nichols, Amy Bacigalupo, Amanda Madison, Barbara Sogn-Frank, Karen Stettler, Maryan Abdinur, and Brian DeVore. Back row (*left to right*): Paul Sobocinski, Annelie Livingston-Anderson, Terry VanDerPol, Johanna Rupprecht, Bobby King, Dori Eder, Josh Journey-Heinz, Elizabeth Makarewicz, Nick Olson, Maddie Hyde, Timothy Kenney, Amanda Babcock, Tom Nuessmeier, Ben Anderson, Scott DeMuth, Doug Nopar, Alex Romano, Karen Benson, Shona Snater, Robin Moore, and Mark Schultz. Not pictured: Clara Sanders Marcus and George Boody. (LSP Photo)

Soaking Up a Valuable Resource

During a Land Stewardship Project field day in early May, LSP staffer Liana Nichols and farmer Art Thicke demonstrated (right photo) how long it takes water to infiltrate the soil in one of the pastures Thicke rotationally grazes on his ridgetop farm near the Mississippi River in southeastern Minnesota. Art, along with his wife Jean, are in the process of passing their organic dairy operation onto Melissa and Chad Crowley.

During the field day, the hosts described how they have been able to utilize managed rotational grazing to build the kind of soil organic matter that allows their land to absorb even the most intense rainstorms, drastically reducing runoff. During one storm that dumped 15 inches of rain on the farm in 24 hours, a pond at the bottom of a steep slope did not overflow its dam, a sign of the soil's ability to manage precipitation.

"The soil is just like a sponge when it rains," Art told the more than 90 tour participants. "When it rains, people get worried



and look at the river—I think people should turn around and look at the farm."

In episode 50 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast (www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/228), Art talks about how

building soil health has bolstered his farm's resiliency, as well as its financial bottom line. For more information on LSP field days, see page 25. □ (LSP Photo)

Dining for LSP

Two Minneapolis businesses hosted April events in support of the Land Stewardship Project's work.

On April 7, Du Nord Craft Spirits Cocktail Room in south Minneapolis hosted an Eat for Equity dinner (top photo) in support of LSP's racial equity work. The event featured locally sourced food and drinks, and a performance by the Wailing Loons. Eat for Equity (<https://eatforequity.org>) puts on community feasts that emphasize food sourced from sustainable farms.

Members from LSP's racial justice organizing cohorts were on-hand to talk about how LSP is working to organize white rural Midwesterners to lead with their values and educate their community members about the legacy and impacts of structural racism.

On April 22, Red Stag Supperclub in northeast Minneapolis (bottom photo) hosted the 9th Annual Earth Day Breakfast for LSP. During the breakfast, LSP staffers gave presentations on LSP's work to promote local food systems and help land-owners learn how to set up leases that support their stewardship values.

Thanks to Eat for Equity, Du Nord and the Red Stag for generously supporting LSP's work. □ (LSP Photos)



Stewardship Talk

The Land Stewardship Project's award-winning *Ear to the Ground* podcast features over 225 episodes focused on everything from beginning farmer issues and soil health, to policy and local food systems: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast. *Ear to the Ground* is also available on Stitcher and iTunes. □



LAND
STEWARDSHIP
PROJECT

LSP News

14th Annual Family Farm Breakfast

Over 260 citizens and lawmakers came together over locally produced food during the Land Stewardship Project's 14th Annual Family Farm Breakfast, held Feb. 26 at Christ Lutheran Church across from the Minnesota Capitol in Saint Paul.

After the meal, LSP members and allies underwent lobby training and then fanned out across the Capitol to talk with lawmakers about legislation related to support for farmers in crisis, healthcare, sustainable agriculture research funding, local food initiatives, beginning farmer tax incentives, and more. Later that day, LSP members testified before the House Agriculture and Food Finance and Policy Division Committee in favor of a "farm-to-school" bill. □



As in the past, food for the Family Farm Breakfast was sourced from LSP members who farm in Minnesota and Wisconsin. It was prepared by Marshall Paulsen, a chef at Birchwood Cafe. (LSP Photo)



During the breakfast, members and allies discussed with lawmakers policy priorities LSP worked on during the 2019 session of the Minnesota Legislature. For more on LSP's legislative work, see page 12. (LSP Photo)

Ignoring a Problem Never Works—Help is Available

Are you under a large amount of stress related to farm finances, legal issues, the weather, or a combination of these factors? You are not alone and help is available. The Land Stewardship Project has developed a list of resources for farmers seeking help with stress.

These resources are available on an *Ear to the Ground* podcast page that features a recording of legal, financial, and mental health experts discussing what farmers can do to reach out and deal with problems. Check it out at www.landstewardship-project.org/posts/podcast/1077.



"When you go over to the Capitol today, you multiply by 20 the power of each LSP staff member," said Thom Peterson, Minnesota's Commissioner of Agriculture, during remarks he made at the Family Farm Breakfast. (LSP Photo)

The Breakfast Food

The food for the 14th Annual Family Farm Breakfast at the Capitol was supplied by the following Land Stewardship Project members and supporters:

- Niman Ranch
- Pastures A Plenty
- True Cost Farm
- Earthrise Farm
- Hidden Stream Farm
- Shepherd Moon Farm
- Common Harvest Farm
- Urban Odors Gourmet Garlic
- Living Song Farm
- Organic Valley Cooperative
- Hoch Orchard & Gardens
- Birchwood Cafe
- Baker's Field Flour & Bread
- Whole Grain Milling
- Peace Coffee
- Velasquez Family Coffee

The food was prepared by Marshall Paulsen of the Birchwood Cafe.

MN Supreme Court Hears Frac Sand Case

By Johanna Rupprecht

In our democracy, it is up to us as organized people to use our power to make sure our governments and institutions best serve people and the land. Nearly two-and-a-half years ago, the people of Winona County won an historic victory when the County Board of Commissioners voted to pass a ban on any new frac sand operations in the county's jurisdiction. Our Commissioners listened to the will of the

public and correctly took this bold action, using the zoning abilities of local government to protect the common good for both the land and people.

But frac sand interests soon turned to the courts in an attempt to undo this democratic decision. So far, the ban has been resoundingly upheld both by the District Court in 2017 and by the Minnesota Court of Appeals in 2018.

Most recently, Minnesota Sands LLC appealed to the Minnesota Supreme Court,

which heard oral arguments in the case on April 10. This is the last appeal available to Minnesota Sands. Because the ban would never have happened without our grassroots organizing campaign, the Land Stewardship Project filed an amicus curiae ("friend of the court") brief to make sure the interests of our Winona County members are fully represented in this case. To read the brief, see www.bit.ly/2V7e6jO.

A decision on the case is expected to be handed down later this summer. □

LSP organizer Johanna Rupprecht can be reached at 507-523-3366 or jrupprecht@landstewardshipproject.org. More on LSP's frac sand mining organizing work is available at www.landstewardshipproject.org under the Organizing for Change tab.

SE MN Factory Farm Proposals Go Down in Face of Public Opposition

A pair of factory farms proposed to be built in environmentally sensitive parts of southeastern Minnesota were stopped this winter.

Daley Farms Denied Variance

On Feb. 21, officials in southeastern Minnesota's Winona County denied a request to exceed the county's animal unit cap by nearly four-fold. The county's board of adjustment found that the record clearly showed the variance request being made by Daley Farms did not meet the legal requirement for a variance. For now, the decision has put an end to a major expansion proposed by Daley Farms, although the dairy has announced it is suing the county in an attempt to overturn the decision.

Daley Farms, already one of the largest dairies in the state, wanted to add 3,000 cows to its operation near the town of Lewiston. This would have increased the number of animal units at the operation to 5,968, almost four times the Winona County animal unit cap. The expanded mega-dairy would have consumed 92 million gallons of the area's groundwater annually and produced 46 million gallons of manure and wastewater per year. In comparison, Lewiston (pop. 1,564) uses 33 million gallons of water per year. The expanded operation would have been near towns plagued with nitrate levels nearing or above the maximum allowable safe drinking water level of 10 milligrams per liter.

At the Feb. 21 hearing, which lasted for six hours, 40 people, including several Land Stewardship Project members, testified. Concerns were brought up about water quality and quantity, the long record of past violations, the impact on small- and moder-

ate-sized farms, and more.

Winona County set a limit on how large feedlots can be so that no one operation would profit at the expense of the community's air, water, and wellbeing. The Winona County animal unit cap is generous at 1,500 animal units—this is the equivalent of 1,071 dairy cows, 5,000 hogs, and 1,500 beef cows. The overwhelming majority of feedlots in Winona County and the state are well below this cap. The cap readily allows for a family farm-based system of livestock agriculture in Winona County. LSP applauds county officials for upholding a common-sense animal unit cap, one that's good for the land and the people who live on it.

Catalpa Feedlot Plans Dropped

Plans to build a 4,980-head factory hog farm in southeastern Minnesota's environmentally vulnerable karst region were dropped in mid-February. Al Hein was proposing to build the facility in Fillmore County. The Catalpa Ag operation would have been managed by Iowa-based Waukon Feed Ranch.

Karst geology is composed of porous limestone that creates sinkholes and disappearing springs. This geology can allow surface pollution to enter groundwater in a matter of hours. As a result, this part of the state has long had problems with groundwater pollution.

As proposed, the Catalpa Ag factory farm would have generated 7.3 million gallons of liquid manure and used 8.8 million gallons of the area's groundwater annually. Local residents, including several LSP members and members of Responsible Agriculture in Karst Country, were highly alarmed by the proposal. During a comment period for Ca-

talpa's environmental assessment worksheet, 771 comments were submitted, and 760 expressed concern about the project. More than 580 commenters called for a more stringent environmental impact statement (EIS) to be completed on the proposal. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) declined to order an EIS, but in December it made the rare decision to deny issuing a permit to Catalpa Ag. Catalpa could have reapplied for the permit, but the MPCA's denial was a major setback for the proposal. □

For more information on LSP's factory farm organizing work, contact Barbara Sogn-Frank at 612-722-6377 or bsognfrank@landstewardshipproject.org. More information is also available at www.landstewardshipproject.org under the Organizing for Change tab.

Township Manual

Protecting Your Township from Unwanted Development has been updated by the Land Stewardship Project's Policy and Organizing Program. This booklet provides guidance to townships on using the Minnesota Interim Ordinance and other tools in the state's Municipal Planning law to control where factory farms and other major developments are located. It also contains an extensive list of resources. The 2018 version includes information on frac sand mining operations.

It can be downloaded at www.landstewardshipproject.org. Paper copies are available by calling 612-722-6377 or e-mailing bking@landstewardshipproject.org.

Policy & Organizing

2019 State Legislature

LSP Pushes for Policy that Supports Sustainable Ag, Family Farms & Rural Communities

As this *Land Stewardship Letter* went to press, the 2019 session of the Minnesota Legislature was wrapping up. During the session, which convened in January, the Land Stewardship Project and its allies worked hard to advance policy initiatives related to the Forever Green research initiative, creating a statewide farm-to-school program, preserving funding for the Health Care Access Fund, protecting local government control, bolstering support for farmers in crisis, improving a beginning farmer tax incentive, and reactivating the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Citizens' Board. LSP members testified before legislative committees, met with lawmakers, made telephone calls, and spoke to the media. A summary of how LSP's initiatives fared will be included in the next *Land Stewardship Letter*. □



Kayla Altendorf, a University of Minnesota doctoral student, spoke at the Capitol this winter about the environmental, economic, and scientific benefits a fully funded U of M Forever Green Initiative could produce. (LSP Photo)

"I know farmers will adapt and take on these crops if they see the economic benefits of them. The U of M's Forever Green research can help prove that to farmers."

— LSP member Carmen Fernholz

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During a lobby training session LSP held after the Family Farm Breakfast (see page 10), members and allies discussed strategies for discussing various issues with lawmakers. Over 75 meetings with legislators were scheduled during the LSP lobby day. (LSP Photo)

Latest on the Legislature

A final summary of where the Land Stewardship Project's priorities stood at the conclusion of the legislative session will be posted at www.landstewardshipproject.org. LSP will also have a link to the summary in an upcoming issue of our e-letter, the *LIVE-WIRE*. See page 27 for details on subscribing to the *LIVE-WIRE*.



Becca Carlson of Seeds Farm in Northfield, Minn., testified at the Capitol in favor of a bill that would fund a program for getting more local food into school cafeterias. "The purchasing power of our schools is immense," she said. "This bill is a win for our local businesses, a win for our local economies, and a win for our schools." (LSP Photo)



Farm Beginnings graduate Andrew Hanson-Pierre of Clover Bee Farm in Shafer, Minn., testified at the Capitol in support of legislation that would make the Beginning Farmer Tax Credit available to beginning farmers who have completed an approved farm business management course prior to applying for the credit. When Andrew and Margo Hanson-Pierre bought their land, they were ineligible for the credit because they had completed Farm Beginnings prior to applying. (LSP Photo)

In Major Victory, Legislature Continues Provider Tax

LSP & its Allies Pushed to Prevent the Sunsetting of Support for the Health Care Access Fund in 2019

By Johanna Rupprecht & Paul Sobocinski

In a victory for the Land Stewardship Project and our allies, Minnesota lawmakers have decided to continue a major source of funding for healthcare programs in the state. For over a quarter-century, stable funding for public healthcare programs and public health initiatives in Minnesota has come from a small tax paid by healthcare providers. However, unless Minnesota legislators took action this year to save it, the Health Care Access Fund would have been eliminated by the end of December, creating a hole in the state budget of roughly \$700 million annually.

Just a day before the regular session of the 2019 Legislature was set to adjourn, an agreement was reached by Governor Tim Walz, House Speaker Melissa Hortman, and Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka to continue the provider tax at 1.8 percent without a sunset date.

This is a significant victory for Minnesotans enrolled in public healthcare programs. Minnesota's Health Care Access Fund is used to fund public health programs and healthcare for one million Minnesotans enrolled in Medicaid and MinnesotaCare. This money comes from a 2 percent tax paid by healthcare providers, a formula which has worked successfully since 1992, when it was created with bipartisan leadership and signed into law by Arne Carlson, who was the Governor at the time. But as part of a deal to end the 2011 state government shutdown, Republican leadership of the Minnesota House and Senate struck an agreement with then-Governor Mark Dayton to set a December 2019 sunset date on the tax.

During the past few months, LSP members and our allies testified at hearings, spoke directly to lawmakers, were interviewed by the media, and participated in public actions at the Capitol. We also conducted a major postcard campaign calling on legislators to support the provider tax and to undertake other concrete actions to bolster quality, affordable healthcare in rural Minnesota. Less than a week prior to the budget agreement, Senator Gazelka announced that keeping the provider tax was completely off the table for his Republican caucus. This stance appeared to be based on a commitment to an extreme anti-tax ideology, rather than a focus on what is best for the people of Minnesota.

Final details on healthcare and other budget bills were to be completed during a



LSP Healthcare Organizing Committee member Jennifer Jacquot-DeVries (right) told her healthcare story to Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan at a Capitol meeting this spring. LSP and allied organizations met with Walz and Flanagan to talk about the importance of preserving the healthcare provider tax. Jacquot-DeVries, who lives in Brainerd, Minn., is self-employed and enrolled in MinnesotaCare. She has a genetic kidney disorder and will always need significant healthcare. (Photo by Ben Anderson)



Dairy farmer James Kanne spoke at a Capitol press conference in February about the 3,200 petitions he and other LSP members collected from around Minnesota that called on Governor Tim Walz's administration to take concrete steps to address the rural healthcare crisis. "During the petition drive, every person we visited had a story to tell," said Kanne. "We need a permanent solution, not a stopgap solution." (LSP Photo)

special legislative session tentatively scheduled for late May. A final summary of where the Land Stewardship Project's priorities stood at the conclusion of the special session will be in the next issue of the *Land Stewardship Letter* and linked in the *LIVE-WIRE* e-letter. See page 27 for details on subscribing to *LIVE-WIRE*. □

For more information on LSP's Affordable Healthcare for All work, contact LSP organizers Johanna Rupprecht at 507-523-3366 or jrupprecht@landstewardshipproject.org; or Paul Sobocinski at 507-430-1509 or sobopaul@landstewardshipproject.org.

A Hilltop View of the Land's Potential

Mark Erickson's Relationship with Landowners is Rooted in Healthy Soil

By Brian DeVore

When considering significant changes to the way one farms, there's nothing like a couple acres of convincing, a template for the potential offered up by tapping into the land's ability to build soil health in an economically viable manner utilizing livestock and perennial plants. Mark Erickson points out just such a personal proving ground on a fall day while guiding an old Buick coupe across a pasture in west-central Minnesota's Stevens County. Beyond a thin line of trees and next to a neighbor's cornfield is a two-acre patch of grass. He explains that fertility-wise, it's probably the best corn ground on the 450 acres of land he farms, but for years he grappled mightily to get it to reach its cropping potential. It was hard to get equipment to that spot and the soil is heavy, making it often too wet to crop. Once it dried up, it was full of ruts. Weeds like cockleburs were a major headache.

"And when I planted that into grass, it went from the worst spot on the farm, the biggest headache, to the best," recalls Erickson.

By grazing beef cattle on that two-acre patch, he calculates it went from a \$300 suck on the farm's finances, to a \$500 benefit.

"When I first converted it, I'd come and sit down in the grass there and remind myself just how bad that used to be and how productive it is now. That corner convinced me about grass farming," says the farmer as he slowly heads for the road.

This and other experiences with grass farming won Erickson over, but it turns out he wasn't the only one that needed convincing that this land's future did not lie with annual row-cropping. He rents all 450 acres of what makes up Boss Ridge Ranch from four different landowners. These landowners, who are mostly in their 70s, pretty much

leave it to Erickson and his family as to how the land will be managed on a day-to-day basis. But seeding crop fields to grass, erecting fencing, laying down water lines and pretty much abandoning a farming system that dominates well over 90 percent of the surrounding landscape is a bit different than, say, deciding to buy a higher horsepower tractor. It truly is going against the grain and requires, at least philosophically, a long-term investment in a different way of managing the land.

For Erickson, it all started with the most basic resource present on those rented acres: soil. He talked to the landowners about how



On a day in late September, beef producer Mark Erickson moved cattle on land he rents in west-central Minnesota. He tries to communicate to the landowners the critical nature of building the long-term resilience of their land. "I think it's important to talk about what the future of the land is, and what the value of it is to children and grandchildren," he says. (LSP Photo)

when a certain farming practice improves the world beneath our feet, everything follows, from improved resiliency of the land to guaranteeing Erickson and his family can remain economically viable enough to steward those acres long into the future. That meant not only convincing the landowners that their real estate is better suited to a regenerative way of farming, but that the benefits of building soil health are worth waiting for, a tough sale when the immediate gratification of getting the highest cash rent for corn and soybean ground is dangling out there.

"I think it's important to talk about what the future of the land is, and what the value

of it is to children and grandchildren, and how you can make a system that will fit something other than just be all big farms," says Erickson. "Is there a value to that, is there a value to returning the soil to the organic matter standards it used to be?"

A Preference for Livestock

From the time he began farming on a part-time basis in the 1970s, Mark Erickson has always felt livestock out on the landscape played an important role in the viability of rural communities. For a time, he worked at a feed mill and he would collect sweepings from the plant to give to his small herd of pigs. And as a feed salesman, his customer base was made up of small- and medium-sized pork, beef, and dairy producers who integrated crops, livestock, and pasture into their diverse operations. Erickson worked for a short time in a confinement hog operation and that experience helped sour him on livestock production systems that rely on lots of inputs—energy and water, as well as infrastructure such as manure and feed handling facilities—and take animals off the land. Plus, while growing up on a farm in southwestern Minnesota, he was exposed to pasture-based beef production by a neighbor.

But when he started renting land in Stevens County in 1993, Erickson was mostly a crop farmer, raising corn, soybeans, and wheat. His main farm, 240 acres, is owned by Delano and Linda Meyer, and it's where Mark and his wife Deb live. When Mark and Deb began leasing from the Meyers, they inherited three other landlords Delano and Linda had been renting from.

Crop farming on those acres was tough from the beginning. The Ericksons were virtually hailed out in 1994, and the heavy soils were difficult to manage even in "normal" years. This is a part of Minnesota where prairie pothole wetlands had once predominated—a public waterfowl area adjoins the land the Ericksons farm—and it's difficult to get good, consistent drainage.

"I planted this bottom, I dug it, I put fertilizer on it, and then I sprayed it, and then it rained," recalls Erickson, recalling one typical growing season. "And when I combined

Rent It Out Right, see page 15...

the corn, the combine is going down the row this way and all of a sudden the combine's going that way and I'm stuck."

Meanwhile, Erickson had kept his hand in livestock and had built up a small beef herd. He grazed pasture, cornstalks, and government wildlife land, and in 1998 started marketing grass-fed beef. As machinery wore out, weather conditions became increasingly unpredictable, and crop prices became too volatile to rely on for consistent profitability, he became convinced that row-cropping didn't fit this farmland or his goals for producing a long-term living on those acres.

Erickson was also concerned about the impact intensive row-cropping was having on the soil's health. Compaction and low organic matter levels were leading to excessive runoff and erosion, and low areas were consistently flooded out while higher spots tended to be droughty — all signs that the soil was in need of some biological life.

As a result of workshops and field days put on by the Land Stewardship Project and the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, Erickson became fascinated by the role rotational grazing can play in building the kind of soil health that, for example, manages water better while producing quality forage.

By the late 2000s, the farmer was convinced that his future in agriculture did not lie with row-cropping, and he developed a plan to convert all of those rented acres to rotationally grazed pasture. In order to convert the land to pasture and grazing paddocks, the farmer needed to finance the improvements with the help of cost-share funds available through the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which is administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Under an EQIP contract, the grass planting had to stay in place at least five years and the new perimeter fencing would need to remain untouched for 20 years.

Even though Erickson would be managing the contract, the landowners would have to agree to having grazing infrastructure on the acres they owned for a couple of decades. That meant he needed to bring them in on his plans, explain the impacts, and in general share his vision of what the farm could look like long into the future. Why not give them a firsthand look?

Sharing a Vision

On a summer morning in 2009, members of the four families that own the land the Ericksons are farming gathered at the farmstead for a field day, cookout, and a little socializing. As the landowners gathered, Mark explained how he was going to need to make some dramatic changes to stay in business.

Then they all climbed onto a hay rack for a ride up to a hilltop that afforded a nice view of the corn and soybean fields the farmer was managing on the rented land. Mark pointed out where the grazing paddocks could go, as well as the water lines and walking paths for the cattle. He asked the landowners to imagine what their land would look like covered in grass 365-days-a-year, a stark contrast to devoting those acres to annual row crops for just a few months each growing season. They then headed back to the farmstead for a lunch of beef that had been raised on the farm.

"I was trying to help them visualize



This photo of a field near where Mark Erickson farms is how crop acres typically look in his neighborhood during the fall harvest. "I think they enjoy being a part of something that's a little different, that has a different look to the land," says the farmer of the landowners he rents from. (LSP Photo)

what was going to happen to their land," recalls Erickson. "It felt like a powerful tool, because when you're sitting out there on that hill, then people can visualize it and it makes so much more sense. Being on the farm brought up questions you would never be able to get just by trying to tell them about it over the telephone or writing a letter."

Not surprisingly, one question that came up had to do with the EQIP contracts. Who was responsible for managing them and for how long? What if they decided to rent to another farmer, who then wanted to plow it up, tear out the fences, and raise row crops? Erickson had prepared for such questions by inviting two staffers from the local Natural Resources Conservation Service office. They showed maps of the proposed graz-

ing set-up, which would include water lines out to the paddocks, and explained that the Ericksons were responsible for managing the infrastructure.

Mark also explained that the water lines would be buried 20 inches deep, so if tillage returned to the land, they would be below the plow line. Also, the interior fencing would consist of one strand of portable line, so it could be easily removed (the farmer moves the interior fencing constantly to manage his grazing schedule anyway).

"So, it's not something that would be impossible to reverse," says Mark.

The sales pitch worked.

"That was really helpful," recalls Delano Meyer. "Mark has been really helpful in explaining things in ways that people could understand. He's good at laying out his vision."

For the Meyers, seeing their farmland in all grass was an attractive idea, both from an environmental and economic point of view.

They started farming in 1972 on some of Linda's family's land after Delano returned from serving in the military during the Vietnam War. Over the next several years, they grew their crop and livestock operation rapidly until they were running 1,000 acres and had two employees. Delano concedes they expanded without enough equity and in the late 1970s and early 1980s hit hard financial times. They downsized to 640 acres, and in 1994 decided to get out of farming so they could do missionary work overseas. That's when they rented out their 240-acre home place to the Ericksons, and connected them with the other landowners they had been renting from. When they are not doing missionary work, the Meyers live a few miles from the Ericksons in a rented house.

Farming systems that build soil health in the long-term resonate with Linda and Delano. When they were farming, they grew wheat as part of their rotation. This gave them a window during the growing season to plant a rye cover crop, which they grazed cattle on in the fall, helping build soil health while providing an inexpensive source of forage. They also grazed pasture as well as area wildlife lands.

"When we were farming, having cattle grazing was one of our favorite things," says Linda, adding that the one thing they did not miss about farming was running machinery to raise crops.

The hilltop visioning session worked on the other landowners as well, who do not have the extensive farming background the Meyers do. Another landowner, who is a

retired CEO of a steel company, got up after the meal and said he had to get back to the Twin Cities, where he was going to tell his brother “to go along with this.”

It helped that the farmer already had a good track record of being up front and honest with the landowners. For example, one 80-acre piece Erickson rents from a retired engineer sits next to land that in 2013 sold for over \$7,000 an acre. That 80-acre parcel lies flat and is relatively square. Although it’s full of potholes, it could be drained with tile lines, making for good crop ground.

“I thought the landlord should know that this is what’s happening with the neighboring land, how much it’s worth,” recalls Erickson. “I called him and said, ‘It would be a perfect time for you to come in with a bulldozer and take out that small grove of trees and tile these 80 acres.’”

The farmer explained that, on the other hand, if he was to continue as the renter, he would need to plant it to grass and put in fencing and water lines. The landowner didn’t hesitate.

“He said, ‘I want that 80 in grass. I love what you’re doing there,’ ” Erickson recalls.

The Land Responds

The year of the landowner field day was Mark’s last one raising row crops. Since then, he’s built up a cow-calf herd of Scottish Highlands crossed with Black Angus. He has as many as 320 animals grazing on 450 acres and finishes cattle on grass, direct marketing the beef as well as selling through the Thousand Hills Cattle Company.

As Erickson explains on a recent fall day while moving cattle from paddock-to-paddock, he is constantly tweaking his grazing system. He utilizes mob grazing, a system that moves the animals through the paddocks on a daily basis, leaving behind plenty of forage to feed the soil and build resilient pastures in the long-term.

Erickson has built his organic matter levels from around 3 percent to, in some cases, 6 percent, and that’s paid off in more productive paddocks and better water infiltration. On a day when neighboring farmers were idled from corn harvest by heavy rains, the grazier was able to drive his coupe out into his pastures to move cattle without getting stuck.

“The infiltration here is mind-boggling,” says Erickson. “We got four inches of rain in July and normally that would have drowned out whatever crop I had out there. After that rain, there was not a

drop of water in any bottom ground here.”

Indeed, NRCS estimates show that 1 percent of organic matter can hold as much as 25,000 gallons of water per acre in the top six inches of soil. And a recent study on farms in the United Kingdom showed a relationship between higher soil organic matter levels and better animal performance. Fields that were grazed more intensively had healthier soils and were less prone to water and nutrient losses, found the study.

Erickson has been able to increase the carrying capacity of his pastures and the cattle are healthy and productive. But he isn’t satisfied — some pastures have bare spots where the ground isn’t armored properly, and when he looked at one of his soil samples through a microscope during a 2018 LSP field trip, he didn’t detect any nematodes, which he took as a sign that the soil isn’t as biologically active as it could be. Erickson has been experimenting with composting and “fungi piles” to boost his soil health further, and attends workshops and field days to learn more techniques.

And he believes talking about soil health and all of its benefits, from healthier livestock to cleaner water, is important as well — especially with the people who own the land that soil sits on.

“I think they enjoy being a part of something that’s a little different, that has a different look to the land,” says Erickson.

Delano Meyer agrees. “Mark hit the nail right on the head,” he says. “That is exactly the case.”

A Long-Term Relationship

When that kind of vision resonates with a landowner, it means seeing things from the farmer’s perspective, including the economics of the situation. Erickson is very happy with how he has developed a grazing system that produces quality beef, but concedes that marketing has been a bit of a “nightmare” in recent years. Processing headaches, coupled with customers’ changing lifestyles and desire for low cost convenience have made it difficult to attain consistently profitable prices. One small advantage Erickson has is

Give it a Listen

On episode 222 of LSP’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast, Mark Erickson discusses how talking about soil health to landowners can help them see the benefits of creating long-term relationships: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1167.

that since the land he’s farming isn’t in row crops, it’s not receiving top dollar on the rental market. His landowners are willing to maintain reasonable rental rates so that they can keep a good steward like Mark on their land in the long term.

“I don’t even bother to ask what the top cash rent is, because we are able to make a living and Mark has made a lot of improvements to the farm with sweat equity,” says Delano.

Sweat equity is hard to calculate in a cash rental rate, and so are, at least in the long-term, improvements to the soil’s resiliency.

“Maybe they were getting high cash rents, but I think the soil is worn out.” Delano says of landowners in the area who have been renting out their own crop ground. “I like that our soil is not getting soaked up by Roundup, it’s not washing away, it’s not blowing away.”

Mark is 65, and he and Deb have four adult children, some of whom are interested in farming. Erickson concedes that being a renter puts the long-term future of his family’s farming dreams in doubt. But for now, he feels purchasing land does not pencil out financially. The Meyers—Linda is 71 and Delano 74—have two children who are in their 40s and who have no interest in farming. They feel good about the long-term relationship they have with the Ericksons, and that such a relationship can survive past their own lifespan.

“I’ve seen the improvements with regenerative agriculture. I don’t think we’ve even begun to see the returns we can get from improving microbial life,” says Delano. “But to get there is a long-term endeavor.” □

Leases that Fit Your Stewardship Values

The Land Stewardship Project and the League of Women Voters have assembled a “toolkit” for people seeking to utilize leases that emphasize building soil health and other conservation practices. Tools include: tips on how to hold conversations with renters, lease templates, guides on setting rental rates for soil building practices, and background materials on soil health. For free copies of the **Conservation Leases Toolkit**, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/stewardshipfood/conservationleases. More information is also available by contacting Robin Moore at 320-269-2105 (rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org) or George Boody at 612-722-6377, (gboody@landstewardshipproject.org).

While on the Conservation Leases web page, check our LSP’s latest fact sheet: **“Why Do MN Farmers Do What They Do? A Farming Practices Primer for Landowners Who Don’t Farm.”**

Short-Term Gains, Long-Term Dividends

How One Farm's Focus on Soil Health Helped Make Row-Cropping Viable...& Fun

The economic benefits of building soil health are a balancing act between immediate payoff and delayed gratification. In an ideal situation, the source of those quick profits will set the foundation for a longer-term investment that pays dividends.

For example, Dawn and Grant Breitkreutz recently showed a chart

full of financial information during a Land Stewardship Project Soil Builders' Network workshop in the southeastern Minnesota community of Preston.

The top of the chart showed the immediate return they got by adding wheat to their corn-soybean rotation. The wheat itself was pretty much a break-even proposition for their farm, which is in southwestern Minnesota's Redwood County. But by having a crop in the rotation that is harvested in August, the Breitkreutzes were able to get a multi-species cover crop mix planted early enough that it was well established by fall. That provided excellent grazing for their beef cow herd in November and December. Once the cost of seeding the

cover crop was subtracted and the feed value of the grazing was added in (plus money made from selling wheat straw), the farmers estimated their net gain was \$87 per acre. Not a bad short term-gain on investment.

"But this is the part about paying it forward that's hard to consider if you're just starting into this—that's the gains that follow," said Grant.

The lower part of the chart tallied "delayed gains/savings" for the following crop year. When they went to plant corn on that same land the following spring, the Breitkreutzes were able to reduce the amount of fertilizer and herbicide they used as a result of the increased soil health benefits

grazing cover crops produced a few months before. In addition, they were able to plant hybrids that lacked the expensive "stacked" traits normally needed to fend off pests and disease. Grant and Dawn feel their soil biology is so high that their pest cycles have been broken. The result: the "delayed" savings was \$103 per acre.

"So, after wheat, we can show a \$190 an acre net gain, after costs," said Grant. "That's really hard to explain to a banker, because they just look at January 1 to January 1. It's not

The Economics of Soil Health



Dawn and Grant Breitkreutz, shown here during a small group discussion at a recent LSP Soil Builders' Network workshop, have integrated crops, livestock, and pastures on their operation. "It makes farming fun again," says Dawn. (LSP Photo)

about bushels, it's about net dollars per acre. That's key, that really changed our thought process."

It's also hard to quantify economically benefits such as the Breitkreutzes' ability to get in the field under wet conditions when their neighbors' field equipment is stuck up to the hubs. Or being able to produce a profitable crop and good forage even in a drought year. That's because they have been able to, in some cases, quadruple organic matter levels over the years, which has greatly increased their soil's ability to soak up and store water.

Part of the reason farmers like the Breitkreutzes have a hard time explaining their

LSP Grazing Helpline

The Land Stewardship Project has launched a toll-free helpline for farmers seeking support related to grazing livestock. Check it out at **1-888-664-7293 (1-888-MNGRAZE)**.

Have questions about how to improve your grazing practices? Want some advice or resources regarding rotational grazing, cover crop grazing, stockpile grazing, winter feeding, pasture rent, etc.? Give LSP's helpline a call. Leave your name, number, where you're from, and a brief description of your reason for calling—we'll be in touch. If we don't have an answer, we should be able to point you in the right direction.

way of making money via a typical profit and loss statement is because the resource that is at the core of their enterprise has a lot of complex, hard-to-understand components.

"The number one resource concern you should be looking at is fixing the soil biology," said Grant as he flashed another slide showing a neighbor's crop field swamped with water and full of wheel ruts, despite the fact it had been tiled. "You can fix these things, biologically."

Doubling Down

The Breitkreutzes admit that soil was not their number one resource concern when they started looking at ways to significantly change the way they farmed back in the early 2000s. Their main goal was to provide enough forage—both grazed and harvested as hay—for

their beef cattle. It seemed like their pastures were constantly overgrazed and prone to drought, making them more reliant on stored

Soil Dividends, see page 18...

Give it a Listen

Episode 132 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast features Grant and Dawn Breitkreutz talking about how their grazing system is improving the economic and environmental health of their farm: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/451.

...Soil Dividends, from page 17

forages, which can be expensive to produce or buy. They were working harder than ever, and their financial situation and quality of life were suffering. Dawn said they even considered quitting farming. "I didn't want to go work in town," she said.

In around 2003, the Breitkreutzes began utilizing managed rotational grazing in a serious way, rotating their cattle to allow the grazing paddocks to recover while spreading manure and urine evenly across the soil. They started with one 47-acre pasture that they broke up into nine paddocks utilizing cost share funds from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. In the past, this was a pasture that never seemed to be able to grow grass taller than six inches. Through rotational grazing, they were able to double the number of grazing days they got off that pasture, and then double it again, all the while controlling weeds like bull thistles.

The couple modified the system and now utilize mob grazing, which crowds more cattle into paddocks for shorter periods of time before they are moved — often at least once a day. Such a system can leave behind as much as half the forage present in the paddock, which allows it to recover while building soil health.

Dawn showed a slide of a pasture that at one time could only handle 16 to 18 cow-calf pairs during a grazing season.

"Through managed grazing and putting water in strategic places, we now run 55 cows for 180 days on this pasture, and we eliminated fertilizer and herbicide," she said.

Another crop field on their farm long gave them headaches: it had light soils, which made it prone to drought, and it was full of rocks, creating tillage problems.

"We would collect insurance on it three out of five years," said Dawn. "We couldn't get anything to grow on it."

The soybeans they grew there had cyst nematode problems, so they planted it to alfalfa for hay production to break up the pest cycle. Four years into the alfalfa planting, grasses started coming up, so they decided to stop haying it and grazed it. Dawn showed a slide of the 21-acre field: a variety of grasses and forbs were thriving. "It's one

New Fact Sheet: Financial Advantages of Grazing

The Land Stewardship Project has developed a new financial analysis of utilizing rotational grazing to manage a cow-calf herd. The fact sheet, which was written by LSP's George Boody, compares the economic returns of rotational grazing to continuous grazing, as well as corn and soybean production. The advantages to increasing stocking densities through adjustments to grazing rotations and the use of cover crops in a grazing system are also analyzed. The fact sheet includes a list of practical grazing publications.

A free copy of "Financial Analysis of Cow-Calf Grazing: Why Shifting to Managed Rotational Grazing Can Make Sense for Your Profits & Improve Soil Health" is available at www.landstewardshipproject.org/repository/1/2748/financial_grazing_fact_sheet_2018.pdf, or by contacting Boody at 612-722-6377, gboody@landstewardshipproject.org.

of our most productive fields on our farm now," she said.

As the soil has revived, so has the diversity of their grazing areas—one pasture went from three species of grasses to over two dozen-plus. The farmers did not seed those extra species—they say it comes from creating the right environment for a variety of plants to thrive by carefully balancing periods of disturbance and rest. And that diversity pays off in the form of pastures that are more resilient and productive for a longer period throughout the year.

Lessons Applied to Row Crops

Dawn makes it clear that she is no fan of row-cropping. It's hard on people, equipment, and the land; she'd like to see the whole farm planted to grass. Grant concedes that row-cropping is still a major part of their farm's enterprise mix because of peer pressure, even though he's not a fan of the toll it takes on the land either.

"Our current model of farming—it took me awhile to get brave enough to

say this, but I say it all the time now—it tells us to kill everything," he said.

But both farmers feel they have been able to make row-cropping a better fit for their farm economically, agronomically, and environmentally by borrowing ideas from their rotational grazing enterprise—namely, relying on diversity above and below ground 365-days-a-year. That's why they've integrated multi-species cover crop mixes

into their no-till corn and soybean system. They utilize mixes of legumes, small grains, and brassicas that include as many as nine different species in a planting; they've also experimented with a 12-way mix. Grant said rather than competing with each other, getting the right mix of cover crops seems to create a mutually beneficial soil environment. For one thing, the Breitkreutzes like the variety of root depths they get with various cover crop species. Different depths provide different services for the soil.

"Some can harvest nutrients, some can take care of compaction, some are for erosion control," said Grant as he showed a photo of a pit that had been dug on their farm. It displayed how several years of cover cropping had enriched a spot where road work had left a gravelly substrate a dozen years before. The farmers encouraged workshop participants to follow the principles of soil health: armor the soil, minimize soil disturbance, utilize a diversity of plants, keep living plants and roots on the land all year-round, and, when possible, integrate livestock.

"We graze every acre we farm, every single year," said Grant. "There's something in that cow's gut as far as biology that helps kick that soil biology in gear."

As the financial charts they shared during the workshop indicated, using soil health as a pivot point for integrating crops, livestock, and grass is paying off economically. And it's also given the couple more control over a way of making a living that's often buffeted by the vagaries of weather, markets, and input prices. That pays dividends in another important way.

"It makes farming fun again," said Dawn. □

Join the Soil Builders' Network

The Land Stewardship Project invites crop and livestock farmers to join the southeastern Minnesota-based Soil Builders' Network to get regular updates on workshops, field days, and on-farm demonstrations, as well as soil health and cover crop research. For more information, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/lspoilbuilders or call 507-523-3366.

Brainstorming a Better Food System

LSP Members Outline Policy Priorities for Building a Viable Local Foods Economy

By Ben Anderson

Land Stewardship Project members rearticulated our deep vision and values for our communities last year in the “A Vision for Rural Minnesota” document (*see the No. 1, 2018, Land Stewardship Letter*). What was made clear by our members in that document was that while we must fight against changes we know are bad for our communities and the land, we also have to fight for the changes that will bring our vision for a better future to life.

Many LSP members are already advancing one aspect of this vision through the hard work of building viable local foods economies. Strong local foods economies are vital to the prosperity of beginning and established farmers alike. They are an essential part of healthy and strong rural communities. One major barrier to building these local community food systems is the lack of public support. At the LSP Leadership Assembly in October, members determined that this needed to change and that we can make Minnesota a leader in supporting farmers who are growing food for their local and

regional communities.

To decide what policies we should fight for to move us towards this goal, between November and January we held six regional listening sessions around Minnesota. At these listening sessions, we asked: “What is our vision for local foods and what policies do we need to fight for to move towards our vision?” We also circulated an online survey that hundreds of members responded to.

At the listening sessions and via the survey, common problems and themes emerged. The most prevalent were the lack of markets and investments in the local foods system, the difficulty in finding consistent places to process meat, and the issue of regulations. At each listening session, we attempted to brainstorm what policy fixes would solve the problems many spoke to. Below are the top 15 policy ideas that came from those listening sessions.

In late December, a group of 15 LSP member-leaders who farm or are leaders in some aspect of the local foods community met to discuss what we were hearing from other members and to start to plot our course forward. At this meeting, it was decided that there was more to do than one policy

campaign could contain. We needed to start a broad “Local Foods Initiative” that would proceed in three directions:

1. Launch a Campaign at the MN Legislature: Farm-to-School

The issue that emerged as a top priority from the listening sessions and that we worked to pass during the 2019 Minnesota state legislative session was a “farm-to-school bill” which would create a statewide program that funds school districts and early childcare centers that want to buy local foods (*see page 12*).

We know this isn’t the “silver bullet” for local foods, but it could be a key first step in advancing our narrative that public institutions should support and invest in rebuilding a local foods economy. A coalition of allies worked on this bill, which sets the foundation for future efforts in this direction.

2. Research & Develop Bold Policies for Transformation

At the listening sessions, there were a lot of bold and creative ideas presented to transform our food system. The leadership team that met in December prioritized these ideas and determined four immediate areas LSP should work on during the coming year. These areas of work are not tied to exact policy solutions or bills yet, but as we move forward on them we are committed to gathering more input from our members while doing some coalition building.

Local Foods Initiative, see page 20...

Top 15 Local Foods Policy Ideas

Money to help schools buy local food

Carbon tax/credit

State incentives for small farms

Mandate for every institution/company/restaurant to source a certain percentage of its food locally

Fix the meat processing system

Creating clear, consistent regulatory connections between the state and county when it comes to local foods

Local foods tax credit

More money or clear policy to create more meat processors

Community grant program for local foods infrastructure

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture should create a small farms/local foods division

The state should help pay farmworkers — ‘Farm Core’ program

Create a farm-to-school coordinator at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture

Farm ambassadors, paid for by the state, in every region to help build farm-to-institution network

Mandate for all state institutions to source a certain percentage of their food locally

Strong state labeling system for what is considered “local”

...Local Foods Initiative, from page 19

The leadership team's priorities for development are:

- Fixing the meat processing system so that it works for small- and medium-sized livestock producers.
- Creating clear, consistent regulatory connections between local and state authorities around local foods.

- Supporting food sovereignty and giving local communities more money and autonomy to develop their own culturally appropriate food systems.
- Developing a statewide mandate or goal that all state institutions source a certain percentage of their food locally.

3. Local Foods Initiative Structure

The leaders LSP convened also voiced interest in developing a new organizational

structure around our organization's Local Foods Initiative that makes space for more people to get involved and decentralizes some of our work. There is more to do than one LSP staff member can work on and we do not want that to be a limiting factor. Discussions around this are just beginning—stay tuned. □

Ben Anderson is the associate director of LSP's Policy and Organizing Program. He can be contacted at banderson@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377.

Keep the Small Farm Exemption

'One Size Fits All' Rules Hurt Small Farms & the Communities that Rely on Them

By Daniel Miller

For this small-scale vegetable farmer, winter is awesome. We love our summer work, but in the winter we get a chance to spend more time together as a family, let our bodies recuperate, and hopefully do some good thinking and reading. I spent this past winter reading some of the back issues of an alternative magazine my parents published for almost 20 years. Pauline Redmond and Jack Miller edited and printed *The North Country Anvil* in the tiny southeastern Minnesota town of Millville — just five miles down the road from where our farm now sits. The *Anvil* was a forum for “nuclear power opponents, organic farming advocates, peace activists, home-schoilers, community and labor organizers, food co-op analysts and other literate attackers of corporate society.” My dad said what the *Anvil* “tried to do was hold up alternative ways of seeing the world and living. The theme was taking personal responsibility for things.”

Ever since I and my wife, Hannah, began farming on our own in 2010 and started to raise a family, part of our goal was to try to cultivate some of the things the *Anvil* was advocating for. We latched onto ideas like “small is beautiful” and that people and communities thrive when they seek out “good work” and “good living.” With unabashed idealism, we are still excited about small-scale farming’s potential to create gratifying and meaningful work. We see small-scale farming as extremely valuable to our society and a way of life that can be productive, low-consuming, community building, and a wrench in the gears of corporate greed. Not only that, but as more people wake up to the destructive nature of

our corporate industrial food system, our hope is that lots of other young families will have the opportunity to make their living in small-scale farming. We would love to see these new farmers help repopulate and rejuvenate our rural communities.

But as a result of reading the *Anvil* and from our own experience, we know that any vision promoting a small farm renaissance will always be running head-on into the full force of the modern industrial mindset that holds up efficiency and production above all else. Agricultural corporations exercise a huge amount of power in our country. They spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year lobbying politicians in government.

If you don’t think that impacts farming, just take a look at the 2018 Farm Bill. Because of the close relationship between Big Ag and government, there are constantly new laws and regulations put in place that make it hard for small farms and rural businesses like ours to survive.

Corporate Cookie Cutter

The most obvious of this type of policy threatening the local food movement and farms like ours is the recent push to implement food safety regulations on a widespread basis. A few years ago, Congress passed a federal “Food Safety Modernization Act” and pushed the GAPS (Good Agricultural Practices) program to address what seems like a constant stream of outbreaks of diseases from giant industrial food operations around the country.

It’s no secret that huge farms produce huge problems. But to address these issues, these government programs have not only tried to regulate Big Ag, but are also trying to make those of us in the local food move-

ment comply with many of the same regulations as farms with hundreds or thousands of acres of vegetables.

As a result, recently we have been getting regular e-mails and mailings from state and university employees with subject lines like “GAPS Program: It’s not as scary as you think!” and “Food Safety Training Workshops: 18 sites statewide!”

Currently there is an exemption for farms like ours that sell directly to our customers and make less than \$500,000 in gross sales (we think this gross sales amount is a decent cutoff to define a small-scale farm that would be exempt). But this exemption feels like its hanging on by a thread. I am grateful that this exemption was put in place and for the work it took to make that happen. However, as the *Anvil* and others like the author Wendell Berry have tried to show us through the years, the industrialization of agriculture will keep pushing forward, and the local organic food movement is not immune to its attacks. If we don’t actively fight for exemptions for small farms, they will disappear—or will never get started in the first place.

But you may ask: why wouldn’t a farmer like me welcome food safety programs with open arms? Many reasons pop into my head, but let me just mention a few points.

First, small-scale organic farms are by nature more likely to prioritize food quality and safety and have built-in safeguards. If a small farm selling directly to customers fails to offer quality produce or makes people sick, it will quickly be out of business and the health impact will be negligible. Unlike industrial-style farms (both conventional and organic), small farms don’t have the option of hiring expensive lawyers to minimize the effects of a food contamination outbreak. Small farms have the privilege and responsibility of interacting face-to-face with many

Exemption, see page 21...

...Exemption, from page 20

of the people who eat their food. By staying small and being in direct contact with our customers, we have the opportunity to build their trust. When these customers know us and hold us accountable, a wonderful kind of community self-regulation takes place.

Secondly, one of the main competitive advantages of small-scale farms is that they have been traditionally exempt from a lot of regulation. This makes sense because small farms have to focus on their products' quality and safety in order to compete against larger farms, which tend to focus on speed and high production. If small farmers fail at quality and safety, they will quickly be out of business or they will not sell much produce.

Big farms, on the other hand, have a lot more investments, employees, and complex systems in place. These big farms have to focus on higher production to stay in business and have less incentive to focus on quality and safety. So it makes sense that larger farms should be regulated to make sure they are keeping their standards high. Of course, it is a lot of work to be heavily regulated and that is why we and many other small farms choose to not grow beyond a scale that puts us in that more complex and highly regulated agricultural world. There are many advantages to keeping things simple, small, and smart. If small farmers are required to be regulated like big farms, they lose their main competitive advantage

and are forced to keep bigger and bigger to stay in business.

Thirdly, this food safety issue brings up a bigger question — what is the local food movement really about? What is our vision for the future of farming in America and the future of our rural communities? Do we want to see a rural renaissance of many, many small independent organic farms? Or do we want to see just a few industrial-style organic farms? If we really do want to see more small farms springing up, we need to make sure, at the very least, that we are not doing things that will hinder or kill these farms. They are already going hard against the grain of our industrial ag economy, and unneeded regulations are the last thing these small farms need put in their way.

In the second-to-last issue of the *Anvil*, my dad wrote about the threat small-scale operations are always under from the government. "If there is one thing the governor and the state can do to promote a healthier, better-balanced economy, it would be to eliminate the laws and regulations that discriminate against just such small-scale activities, from farms to small factories," he wrote. "This they could do without abandoning the state's rightful role as a guarantor to



The Miller family (left to right): Hannah, Ruth, Paul, Anders, and Daniel. Not shown is Violet, who was born on Valentine's Day this year. (Photo by Robbie Gantt)

the public of safe and healthy products and workplaces."

The North Country Anvil stopped publishing in 1989, but words like that hammer home a message that is just as relevant today. □

Daniel and Hannah Miller own and operate Easy Yoke Farm near Zumbro Falls in southeastern Minnesota. They are recipients of the John Kinsman Beginning Farmer Food Sovereignty Prize.

Farm Transitions

Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse

Are you a beginning farmer looking to rent or purchase farmland in the Midwest? Or are you an established farmer/landowner in the Midwest who is seeking a beginning farmer to purchase or rent your land, or to work with in a partnership/employee situation? Then consider having your information circulated via the Land Stewardship Project's *Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse*. To fill out an online form and for more information, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/seekingfarmersseekinglandclearinghouse. You can also obtain forms by e-mailing LSP's Karen Stettler at stettler@landstewardshipproject.org or by calling her at 507-523-3366. For the latest listings, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/seekingfarmersseekinglandclearinghouse.

Minnesota Beginning Farmer Tax Credit Available

The Minnesota Beginning Farmer Tax Credit (see the No. 3, 2017, Land Stewardship Letter) went into effect in 2018. Under this initiative, there is now a Minnesota state tax credit for owners of agricultural assets—land, livestock, facilities, buildings or machinery used for farming—who agree to sell or rent those assets to a beginning farmer who is not a family member. There is also a Minnesota state tax credit available for beginning farmers who participate in a financial management program such as Farm Beginnings (see page 26).

For details on the Beginning Farmer Tax Credit initiative and to sign up for the Land Stewardship Project's Tax Credit Update List, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/beginningfarmentaxcredit.

More information is also available by contacting LSP's Karen Stettler at 507-523-3366 or stettler@landstewardshipproject.org.

From Crisis to Community

A Shared Threat Prompts a Shared Vision for a New Farm

By Brian DeVore

As the land auction progressed, it looked like the parcel was on its way to exchanging hands at a decent price. But the landowner grew increasingly anxious about the guy who was likely to get the highest bid—he was a well-known owner of large-scale hog operations in the region. If he was the buyer, it was clear the cropland, which sits atop the environmentally fragile karst geology that dominates this part of northeastern Iowa, would be the future home of a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO), or at the least, the millions of gallons of liquid manure that would be produced by one of these operations.

The landowner, unwilling to expose his neighbors to that fate, stepped up in front of the gathered crowd and told the auctioneer to halt the sale and take the parcel off the market. That selfless act temporarily saved a tightly-knit community in Winneshiek County from having to live with a CAFO in its midst for decades to come, and sent a strong

message that, given the failure of regulation, local zoning, or basic common sense to control the placement of a factory farm in an environmentally vulnerable area, some people were willing to utilize the ultimate governor: land ownership.

It also set in motion a series of events that resulted in neighbors coming together to support and launch an alternative approach to helping beginning farmers get access to land. This effort was based on the belief that there are ways of utilizing ag acres that contribute to a community's local economy and social structure, while protecting and improving the environment.

While many of the circumstances swirling around the development of Hidden Falls Land LLC and its offshoot, Humble Hands Harvest, are unique, this endeavor

could serve as a model for what can be accomplished when a group of neighbors get together and envision a different future for their community. It's also a good example of the importance of responding to a crisis, and then following up with a long-term plan once someone provides a little vision to fuel it. The key is to have in place the kind of farmer who can execute that vision.



Beginning farmers Emily Fagan (left) and Hannah Breckbill on the land that several members of their community teamed up to buy because of concerns a CAFO would occupy the property. "It was a crisis moment, so people were willing to buy the land without a vision," says Breckbill. (LSP Photo)

The Crisis

Steve McCargar describes the mood in this hilly community near the town of Decorah as "foreboding" after that halted auction in 2013—it was clear this wouldn't be the last time a CAFO operator would try to build in the area. Even though it's in Iowa, Winneshiek County is by no means a pork powerhouse. But it has become increasingly attractive to companies producing hogs in CAFOs further south and west of the region. In fact, the pork industry's recent interest in the region is because it traditionally has not housed massive CAFOs. Factory farm operators are seeking areas that are not plagued with the disease problems associated with raising thousands of hogs together in confinement buildings, going so far as northern Wisconsin to escape swine contagions.

"It's present, and it's encroaching," says McCargar one early spring day while sitting in his house on Hidden Falls Road. That house, where he lives with his wife, Heidi Swets, is less than a mile from where the 2013 auction was stopped.

That foreboding turned into outright panic in early 2014 when another landowner on Hidden Falls Road decided she was going to sell a parcel that was similar in size—around 34 acres—to the land the CAFO operator tried to buy the year before. This particular parcel is literally next door to McCargar and Swet's property, which sits on a wooded hillside that sweeps down to a major oxbow in the scenic Upper Iowa River. In this case, the land was owned by a woman whose husband had recently died, and she had made it clear she was going to put it up for public auction soon. A 12-acre parcel consisting of the farm's house and outbuildings was sold separately, but that left 22 acres that would be available just a mile from where the CAFO operator had unsuccessfully attempted to buy land the year before.

McCargar and some of his neighbors approached the widow and asked what it would take to buy her land outright and keep it off the open market. She set the price at \$5,500 an acre.

"We said, 'Don't auction the land, we'll buy it,'" McCargar recalls. "And she said, 'Really?'"

He could understand the woman's skepticism. "We're not rich people. We're not living a *Better Homes and Gardens* lifestyle," he says with a laugh.

They had six weeks to raise over \$120,000. McCargar quickly set about talking to people on and near Hidden Falls Road about protecting this parcel of land from industrialized agriculture. He also approached the community at large. One night, he made an announcement about the idea to purchase the 22 acres at a meeting of the Peace and Justice Center, a nonprofit in Decorah that works on environmental justice issues, among other things.

It turns out McCargar is particularly well suited for raising money. Soon after moving to the region from Michigan in the early 1980s, he got involved with the Oneota Community Food Co-op in Decorah and co-managed it for 25 years; through that

Crisis to Community, see page 23...

work he garnered a lot of capital fundraising experience. As a result, people from throughout the community, not just residents in the Hidden Falls Road area, agreed to help buy the land.

"We just felt this would destroy the quality of life for everybody in our neighborhood for miles around, not just on our road," says McCargar.

The newly formed Hidden Falls Land LLC ended up selling 44 shares to 15 people, with each share worth half-an-acre, or \$2,750.

Immediate crisis averted. Now what?

The Vision

That 22 acres had been row-cropped for decades, and the new owners, who were mostly in their 60s and 70s, weren't interested in exposing its hilly, worn-out soil to intensive corn and soybean production by renting it out to a crop farmer. With the assistance of an attorney, the LLC developed a restricted covenant that outlined in writing what would not be allowed on the property—CAFOs, pesticides, GMOs, and sewage sludge were on top of the no-go list.

For some people, putting such restrictions on a piece of rural property in the Midwest would mean, for all intents and purposes, banning a working farm. One serious consideration was to "retire" it by renting the land to the federal government via the Conservation Reserve Program. The land is adjacent to an Iowa Department of Natural Resources wildlife area and near the Upper Iowa River, making it attractive as a place to be idled for environmental purposes.

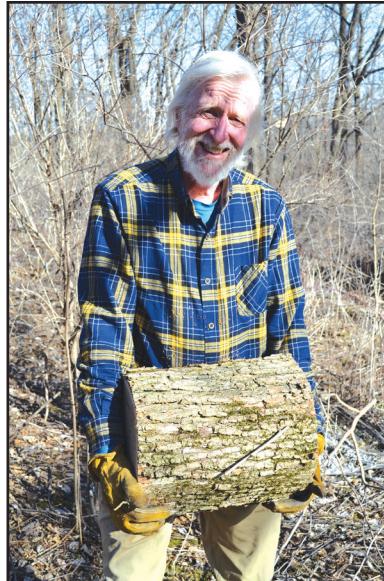
But the youngest shareholder in the LLC had a different vision for the land. Hannah Breckbill, who was not yet 30 at the time, felt that parcel could be a working landscape, a place where food is produced in a way that benefits the local environment and economy. To her, it was not an either-or choice.

"It was a crisis moment, so people were willing to buy the land without a vision," says Breckbill. "Then I found myself over the next several years really supplying the vision and saying, 'We can really do something different.'"

Breckbill had plenty of credibility to back up her argument that converting the land to a working, sustainable farm was viable. After getting a mathematics degree, she took the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course (*see page 26*) in Minnesota during the winter of 2010-2011. She then worked on a series of vegetable operations, including one in Texas, as well

as on the Decorah-area farm of the late Chris Blanchard, who was known widely for his innovative business management and marketing strategies. During the 2013 and 2014 growing seasons, Breckbill raised vegetables on land provided by Eric and Lisa Klein, Farm Beginnings graduates who raise pasture-raised livestock near Elgin in southeastern Minnesota.

But of all the places she had farmed in, the area that attracted her most was northeastern Iowa's Winneshiek County. Breckbill had made lots of connections with farmers and non-farmers alike while raising vegetables and working at Seed Savers Exchange near Decorah. Even while farming on the Kleins' land, Breckbill had spent a lot



"I definitely think it's a model that could be used," says Steve McCargar of the process he and other members of the community used to save a parcel of land and help launch a new farming operation. (LSP Photo)

of time in northeastern Iowa among people of varying ages who cared about land stewardship and sustainable food production. So it was no surprise that in 2014 she found herself holding two shares in Hidden Falls Land LLC.

In 2015, Breckbill moved back to Decorah and raised vegetables on land fruit and vegetable growers Perry-O and David Sliwa were farming near Hidden Falls Road at the time. While she was farming there, Breckbill made it clear that the 22 acres the LLC owned was a great place to have a diversified fruit, vegetable, and pasture-based livestock operation, and that a farmer like her was a prime candidate to manage it. The parcel has a south slope for sun exposure and well-drained, if somewhat worn-out soil.

Breckbill was tiring of farming on rented and borrowed land, and she felt that 22 acres would be a good home base for her Humble Hands Harvest enterprise, which had up until then been a bit transient. Members of the LLC were open to hearing Breckbill out, but at first, not all of them were completely convinced of the viability of her plan.

"Kind of the idea was 'Oh, so you own farmland and then you rent it out and you make your little bit of rental income.' And I was like, 'Yeah, I want to grow vegetables and I want to graze animals and I want to plant trees,'" Breckbill recalls. "And all of that is so outside the normal way things are done."

Breckbill's vision found a receptive audience in the Sliwas, who were original Hidden Falls Land LLC shareholders. David says it was key that the person offering up a different vision for the land had already proven her farming chops, as well as had a commitment to living in the neighborhood long term and being an active member of the community. Besides seeing Breckbill's skills firsthand on their own land, the Sliwas had visited her when she farmed on the Klein operation. They are also familiar with the training the Farm Beginnings Program provides.

"We had experience with farming over several years and we knew what it took to have a successful operation," says David. "And when we saw it, we recognized it."

It doesn't hurt that Breckbill has developed an ability to share her vision for the future of a rural community partly through her involvement with LSP's Organizing Leadership Cohort, which works with members to help them develop the skills to be leaders in their communities (*for more on the Leadership Cohort, see the No. 4, 2017, Land Stewardship Letter*).

"It takes a Hannah," says David. "It just seemed like her vision for the land captivated my interest and our interest."

But he is quick to point out that this isn't just about one farmer carrying the day. The Sliwas, as both growers and major players in the local farmers' market and food co-op, have seen the regenerative agriculture movement grow over the past several decades. Decorah itself is home to several small- and medium-sized farms that supply the local market. David and Perry-O remember attending the MOSES Organic Conference in Wisconsin three decades ago when it attracted around 50 attendees. When they returned this year, there were over 3,000 participants in the conference, and many of the attendees were young farmers.

"Our involvement with Hannah and

Crisis to Community, see page 24...

Farm Transitions

...Crisis to Community, from page 23

that land is just an extension of that feeling that young folks might need a little help in getting started," says David. "Young folks are looking for access and older folks have resources that might make that possible."

While talking to LLC members about the future of that 22-acre parcel, Breckbill showed she was serious by buying three more shares with money she had set aside through matched savings accounts available through LSP's Journeyperson Course and the Practical Farmers of Iowa. LLC shareholders agreed that no one could speculate on the land by selling shares for more than they had purchased them for. "Which is basically like them holding a no-interest mortgage for me," says Breckbill.

All of the shareholders were eventually won over by Breckbill's argument, and over the past few years have been gradually selling, and in some cases donating, shares to her and Emily Fagan, a second cousin of Hannah's who recently joined the operation. The land was in hay for three years, which meant that in 2017 it was able to be certified organic. That year, Hannah moved onto the property, erected a yurt, and started raising vegetables on two acres. For the first time since she launched her farming dream, Humble Hands Harvest (www.humblehandsharvest.com) had a permanent home.

The Future

On a blustery day in late March, Fagan and Breckbill take a break from preparing for the 2019 growing season to talk about their future plans on these 22 acres.

"This will be the first year we haven't had a major construction project going," says Fagan as she shows off a couple of high tunnels, a pole shed, the fenced-in garden and their wintering area for the flock of sheep they raise, as well as Breckbill's yurt and a large utility shed Fagan has fashioned into a home. They have also hooked the land up to electricity and drilled a water well.

Fagan, who is 27, joined Humble Hands as a partner in 2017 after getting a physics degree and working on farms in Oregon, Colorado, and Iowa. She has also bought shares from the Hidden Falls Land LLC.

They market their vegetables via a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model as well as through the Decorah Farmers' Market, and raise sheep and hogs on pasture for direct marketing. The two women have planted 300 nut trees of various varieties and

would like to add apple trees.

As of this spring, Breckbill and Fagan own 13 of the 22 acres. Some of the original shareholders, such as the Sliwas, are no longer an official part of the LLC, given they either sold or donated their shares to Humble Hands. McCargar says eventually, when all the shares are transferred, Hidden Falls Land LLC will be dissolved—its goal accomplished, it will have worked itself out of a job.

When the issue of future plans comes up, Breckbill, who is 31, isn't afraid to look far into the future at a time when she's ready to get out of farming herself. She and Fagan have made Humble Hands Harvest into a worker owned cooperative, and they have plans to bring other farming partners in



Fruit and vegetable producers Perry-O and David Sliwa felt strongly that Hannah Breckbill's vision for starting a farm in the community was viable. "We knew what it took to have a successful operation," says David. (LSP Photo)

to manage, for example, fruit production. Breckbill feels one thing that has gotten small- and medium-sized farms in trouble is that so many lack an exit strategy. Forming a cooperative that has a life beyond any individual farmer is a way to create a relay system of sorts, one that avoids the problems which arise when an individual farmer moves on or dies. Breckbill wants to create a situation where when she transitions off the land, the farm enterprise will remain, just the faces behind the food will be different.

"It's just taking a big picture view of how this land looks in 50 years and how I can ensure that it's used in a just way and in a regenerative way," she says.

In other words, it's a way to avoid having a community go into crisis mode when a CAFO owner shows up at a land auction.

Luck vs. Intentionality

Are the circumstances surrounding Hidden Falls Land LLC and Humble Hands Harvest too unique for this to be replicated elsewhere? It should be pointed out that many of the people involved with the Hidden Falls Land LLC moved to the Decorah area in the 1970s and 1980s, mostly looking for a way to live in sync with the natural environment in a rural setting. In addition, a thriving local food movement allows people to believe in a beginning farmer who is willing to try something that's not part of the conventional corn-bean-CAFO-machine.

Emily Fagan says a version of this initiative could work in any community where people care enough about its future to fight a negative influence like a CAFO, and where there are competent beginning farmers available who can provide a viable alternative.

"Vision is important — making people understand how much better it could be," she says. "But not just vision—you have to prove you can actually do the thing."

As he walks through his woodlot just a few hundred yards from Humble Hands Harvest, Steve McCargar talks about how most rural communities have groups of people of an older generation who have financial resources they could utilize to help beginning farmers gain access to land. The trick is to connect those two generations when a major threat to the community arrives on the scene.

"I definitely think it's a model that could be used," he says. "You'd have to have a group of people that are capable of coalescing around an idea like this and putting their resources into it, and then translating that into a transfer process for young people."

He acknowledges that not all communities will be able to respond quickly to a crisis situation. After all, what if that original landowner in 2013 had not stopped the auction?

"There was more luck than intentionality at the beginning," he says of the Hidden Falls collaborative effort. "Intentionality came after we raised the money, and then we had to figure out now that we've done this, what the hell are we going to do?"

Also, McCargar is frank when he says pooling resources in a neighborhood to buy land will only work on smaller parcels. When farmland is going for \$5,000 to \$8,000 per acre, it can add up to \$100,000 or more pretty quickly.

Perry-O Sliwa says the key to an arrangement like this working in a community is that there is some sort of intergenerational connection. In this case, Breckbill attends a neighborhood church and is involved in local music groups, bringing her into regular

Crisis to Community, see page 25...

contact with people like the Sliwas—Perry-O is 80 and David is 77. Breckbill and Fagan also invite members of the community onto the land on a regular basis to help with tasks like weeding and to share meals. Breckbill is not afraid to ask for help, and she makes it clear she sees this access to land as a significant gift to Humble Hands Harvest. Perry-O, for her part, feels in many ways she and other older residents in the area are on the receiving end of something quite nice as well.

"It just seemed like it was a gift to us to find a use for that land that aligned with our values," she says. "It's definitely a community I want to grow old in."

In the end, any kind of shared experience can help build community. While having lunch in Fagan's maintenance-shed-turned-house, Breckbill recalls a conversation she had while visiting an octogenarian in the neighborhood. The older farmer talked about paying \$100 an acre for their farm in 1955, and how back then they were told that was too much to pay for land and they would never be financially successful as farmers.

"Here we are paying over \$5,000 an

acre," interjects Fagan.

"Right," adds Breckbill, "but we have that shared experience of, 'Oh wow, we're both trying to do ridiculous things.'" □

Give it a Listen

Episode 227 of the Land Stewardship Project's *Ear to the Ground* podcast features original members of Hidden Falls Land LLC talking about how they reacted to a crisis by creating an opportunity for a new farm in the community: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1201.

Land Stewardship Project 2019 Field Day Season Begins

The Land Stewardship Project field day season is here. At press time, here were the events that were scheduled in the region:

→ **July 13 — Soil Health Field Day on Grazing,**

Bedtke Farm, 1 p.m.-3 p.m., Altura, Minn. Contact: Liana Nichols, LSP, 507-523-3366, linichols@landstewardshipproject.org.

→ **July 18—Farming in Karst Country: How No-Till, Cover Cropping & Intensive Rotational Grazing Can Improve Soil Health & Underground Streams,** Niagra Cave, 3:30 p.m.-6:30 p.m., Harmony, Minn. Contact: Shona Snater, LSP, 507-523-3366, Shona Snater, ssnater@landstewardshipproject.org.

→ **July 28—Getting Started with Permaculture & Regenerative Agriculture,** Nettle Valley Farm, 1 p.m.-4 p.m., Spring Grove, Minn. Contact: Annelie Livingston-Anderson, 507-523-3366, annelie@landstewardshipproject.org.

→ **Aug. or Sept. — Three consecutive days of soil health workshops on cover crops interseeded into corn on three different farms,** Byron, Ridgeway & Preston, Minn. Contact: Doug Nopar, LSP, 507-523-3366, dnopar@landstewardshipproject.org.

→ **Sept. 15—Workshop/Field Day on On-Farm Events,** A to Z Produce & Bakery, 1 p.m.-4 p.m., Stockholm, Wis. Contact: Annelie Livingston-Anderson, 507-523-3366, annelie@landstewardshipproject.org. □



Hallie Anderson of 10th Street Farm and Market kicked off the Farm Beginnings field day season in April. Anderson (right) explained how the farm, which is located outside of Afton, Minn., utilizes weekly planning, innovative tools, and efficient work systems to consistently produce profits on a limited number of acres. The field day was co-sponsored by the Minnesota Food Association. (LSP Photo)

For the latest field days and workshops, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/farmbeginningscalendar.



During an LSP Soil Builders' Network field day in May, Art and Jean Thicke described the benefits of utilizing managed rotational grazing for 35 years on their southeastern Minnesota farm. "I don't add fertility, my cows are my fertility," said Art. "There are a lot of advantages to grazing—it's good for the soil, it's good for the animals." (LSP Photo)

Applications Open for 2019-2020 FB Course

Minnesota-Wisconsin Region Class to Begin in Fall 2019

The Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings Program is accepting applications for its 2019-2020 class session. The class will be held at the Menomonie Market Food Co-op in western Wisconsin.

LSP's Farm Beginnings program is marking its second decade of providing firsthand training in low-cost, sustainable methods of farm management. The course is for people just getting started in farming, as well as established farmers looking to make changes in their operations. Farm Beginnings participants learn goal setting, financial and enterprise planning, and innovative marketing techniques.

This 12-month course provides training

and hands-on learning opportunities in the form of nine classroom sessions, as well as

Farm Beginnings in Other Regions

Besides Minnesota and Wisconsin, Farm Beginnings classes have been held in Illinois, Nebraska, and North Dakota. Local community-based organizations have also launched Farm Beginnings courses in South Dakota, Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, New York, and Maine.

For information on Farm Beginnings courses in other parts of the country, see the Farm Beginnings Collaborative website at www.farmbeginningscollaborative.org. More information is also available by contacting LSP's Amy Bacigalupo at 320-269-2105 or amyb@landstewardshipproject.org.

farm tours, field days, workshops, and access to an extensive farmer network. Classes are led by farmers and other agricultural professionals from the region. The classes, which meet on Saturdays beginning in the fall of 2019, run until March 2020, followed by an on-farm education component that includes farm tours and various

skills sessions.

Over the years, more than 800 people have graduated from the Minnesota-Wisconsin region Farm Beginnings course. Graduates are involved in a wide-range of agricultural enterprises, including grass-based livestock, organic vegetables, Community Supported Agriculture, and specialty products.

The Farm Beginnings class fee is \$1,500, which covers one "farm unit"—either one farmer or two farming partners who are on the same farm. A \$200 deposit is required with an application and will be put toward the final fee. Payment plans are available, as well as a limited number of scholarships.

Completion of the course fulfills the educational requirements needed for Farm Service Agency loans and the Minnesota Beginning Farmer Tax Credit (*see page 21*).

For application materials or more information, see www.farmbeginnings.org. You can also get details from LSP's Annelie Livingston-Anderson at 507-523-3366 or annelie@landstewardshipproject.org. □

LSP's Farm Dreams Can Help You Figure Out if Farming is in Your Future

Farm Dreams is an entry level, four-hour, exploratory Land Stewardship Project workshop designed to help people who are seeking practical, common sense information on whether farming is the next step for them. This is a great workshop to attend if you are considering farming as a career and are not

sure where to start. Farm Dreams is a good prerequisite for LSP's Farm Beginnings course (*see above*).

LSP holds Farm Dreams workshops at locations throughout the Minnesota-Wisconsin region over the course of a year. The cost is \$20 for LSP members and \$40 for non-members. The next class will be

held in August in Menomonie, Wis.; more details will be forthcoming.

For more information, see the **Farm Dreams** page at www.farmbeginnings.org. Details are also available by contacting LSP's Annelie Livingston-Anderson at 507-523-3366 or by e-mailing her at annelie@landstewardshipproject.org. □

Runnin' Down a Dream

During a Land Stewardship Project Farm Dreams workshop in Minneapolis on April 26, aspiring farmers clarified what motivates them to farm, got their visions on paper, inventoried their strengths and training needs, and got perspective from an experienced farmer.

If you would like to be notified when our next Farm Dreams workshop is scheduled, contact Annelie Livingston-Anderson at annelie@landstewardshipproject.org or 507-523-3366. (*Photo by Annelie Livingston-Anderson*)





LAND
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PROJECT

Membership Update

Tvedt Honored for Soil Health Work

Land Stewardship Project member Curt Tvedt was recently awarded the Environmental Achievement Award. The award has been given out since 1992 through a partnership between the Olmsted County Environmental Resources Department and Rochester Public Works in southeastern Minnesota. The award "honors community members, businesses and organizations that have made a significant contribution to environmental quality in Olmsted County," according to its sponsors. Tvedt was the only farmer to be honored with the Environmental Achievement Award this year.

Tvedt, who farms near Byron in southeastern Minnesota,



Curt Tvedt (left) explaining his use of rye as a cover crop during a Land Stewardship Project field day on his farm. (LSP Photo)

is a member of LSP's Soil Builders' Network. During the past few years, he has been experimenting with cover crops and no-till. As a result, he has seen his soil's organic matter increase, resulting in better water infiltration and less runoff.

Tvedt frequently hosts field days, gives presentations at LSP workshops, and serves as a mentor to other farmers who belong to the Soil Builders' Network. A recent LSP video features Tvedt talking about how he plants "green" into cover crops: www.landstewardshipproject.org/lspsoilbuilders/soilbuildervideos. For more on the Soil Builders' Network, see page 18. □

Ford & Riddle Recognized by MOSES

Two Land Stewardship Project members were recently recognized for their contributions to the organic farming movement. Joyce Ford and Jim Riddle were named the 2019 Organic Farmers of the Year during the annual MOSES Organic Farming Conference, held in La Crosse, Wis., in February.

Ford and Riddle, who farm near Winona in southeastern Minnesota, have worked at the local, state, and national levels to promote organic agriculture. They helped shape the country's founding organic standards and Riddle served on the USDA National Organic Standards Board and supported research on organic practices while working for the University of Minnesota and the Ceres Trust.

Ford served two terms on the MOSES board of directors and was on the board of the Organic Growers and Buyers Association. She was on the steering committee of the Minnesota Healthy Food Charter, and serves on a committee for the International



Joyce Ford and Jim Riddle at the MOSES Organic Conference. (Photo by Laurie Schneider, MOSES)

Organic Accreditation Service. Ford also co-wrote the Organic Trade Association's manual, *Good Organic Retail Practices*.

Ford and Riddle ran the International Organic Inspectors Association for its first eight years and worked diligently to standardize the organic certification process. They have long been involved with LSP's work, and currently own and operate Blue Fruit Farm, an organic fruit operation. □

LSP Launches 'Sowers' Social Media Initiative

A special social media initiative called "LSP Sowers" was launched this spring by the Land Stewardship Project. Part of this initiative's goal is to form a group of LSP members who want to help cultivate the growth of LSP's message across three key social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Social media is a rapidly growing platform where an increasing number of people are getting their news and creating their opinions. The LSP Sowers initiative will train members to communicate on social media with an intentional purpose: shifting how people across the region learn about and understand issues. We will also provide support to members in their social media endeavors.

"If we want to be successful in achieving progress, it is essential we build power this way," says Amanda Madison, LSP's base building and communications organizer. "Our work will be grounded in the LSP narrative, a values-centered way of talking about our vision, the reasons we just aren't there yet, and how we can make it happen together. LSP Sowers will bring our narrative to social media, equipped with the knowledge of how each platform works and how to be most effective."

To join this initiative and learn more about trainings and webinars related to it, contact Madison at 612-722-6377 or amadison@landstewardshipproject.org. The group's Facebook page is at www.facebook.com/groups/LSPsowers. □



Get Current With *LIVE WIRE*

Sign up for the *LIVE-WIRE* e-letter to get monthly updates from the Land Stewardship Project sent straight to your inbox. Details are at www.landstewardshipproject.org/signup. □



LAND
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Membership Update

Go Public With Your LSP Support

There are now numerous fun ways you can show your support for the Land Stewardship Project. LSP has available for purchase t-shirts (\$20), caps (\$20), window decals (\$3), tote bags (\$15) and, marking the return of a classic, "Let's Stop Treating our Soil Like Dirt" bumper stickers (\$3).

All of these items can be ordered from our online store at www.landstewardshipproject.org/store. Some items may also be available from our offices in Lewiston (507-523-3366), Montevideo (320-269-2105) or Minneapolis (612-722-6377), as well as at Land Stewardship Project events and meetings. □



T-shirt



Window Decal



Cap



Tote Bag



Bumper Sticker

Support LSP in Your Workplace

The Land Stewardship Project is a proud member of the Minnesota Environmental Fund, which is a coalition of environmental organizations in Minnesota that offers workplace giving as an option in making our communities better places to live. Together, member organizations of the Minnesota Environmental Fund work to:

- promote the sustainability of our rural communities and family farms;
- protect Minnesotans from health hazards;
- educate citizens and our youth on conservation efforts;
- preserve wilderness areas, parks, wetlands, and wildlife habitat.

You can support LSP in your workplace by giving through the Minnesota Environmental Fund. Options include giving a designated amount through payroll deduction, or a single gift. You may also choose to give to the entire coalition or specify the organization of your choice within the coalition, such as the Land Stewardship Project.

If your employer does not provide this opportunity to give through the Minnesota Environmental Fund, ask the person in charge of workplace giving to include it. For details, contact LSP's Amelia Shoptaugh at amelias@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377.



MINNESOTA
Environmental Fund

In Memory & in Honor...

The Land Stewardship Project is grateful to have received the following gifts made to honor and remember loved ones and friends:

In Memory of Don Maronde

- ◆ Jim & Lee Ann VanDerPol
- ◆ Virginia Homme

In Memory of John Handeen

- ◆ Audrey Arner & Richard Handeen

In Memory of Roger Ahrndt

- ◆ Jean Hindson

In Memory of Ron Seitz

- ◆ Mary & Chris Loetscher

In Honor of David Cloutier

- ◆ Nicole Adams Blume

In Honor of Henry Bergerson

- ◆ James Bovino

In Memory of Dean Harrington

- ◆ Doug Nopar & Joann Thomas

In Memory of Richard Schollgeredes

- ◆ David & Kathleen Christenson

In Memory of Bruce Halvorson

- ◆ Anthony & Nancy Hilleren

In Honor of Monica Kahout

- ◆ Alissa Carney & Wade Kahout

In Memory of Doug Gunnink

- ◆ Jennifer & Mike Rupprecht

For details on donating to the Land Stewardship Project in the name of someone, contact Mike McMahon at 612-722-6377 or mcmahon@landstewardshipproject.org. Donations can be made online at www.landstewardshipproject.org/home/donate.

In Honor of Rob & Melissa Gordon

- ◆ Dale Hadler

In Honor of Lars Negastad's Birthday

- ◆ Jeff Berg
- ◆ Bryon & Sara Gunsch
- ◆ Josh & Danielle Hill
- ◆ Christopher & Sara Stensaas

In Memory of Wilmer Boeder

- ◆ Loretta & Martin Jaus

In Memory of Leatrice McEvilly

- ◆ Michael & Diane Fields

In Memory of Mark & Katie McManus

- ◆ Richard & Marjorie McManus

Volunteer for the Land Stewardship Project

Volunteers are key to the Land Stewardship Project's work. If you would like to volunteer in one of our offices, for an event or at a meeting, contact:

• Montevideo, Minnesota

Terry VanDerPol, 320-269-2105
tlvdp@landstewardshipproject.org

• Lewiston, Minnesota

Karen Benson, 507-523-3366
karenb@landstewardshipproject.org

• Minneapolis, Minnesota

Clara Sanders Marcus, 612-722-6377
cmarcus@landstewardshipproject.org □

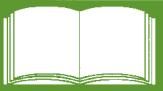
Membership Questions?

If you have questions about the status of your Land Stewardship Project membership, give us a call at 612-722-6377, or e-mail Clara Sanders Marcus at cmarcus@landstewardshipproject.org. To renew, mail in the envelope included with this *Land Stewardship Letter*, or see www.landstewardshipproject.org/home/donate. □

Breakfast Volunteers



The Land Stewardship Project would like to thank the many volunteers who made our 14th Annual Family Farm Breakfast and Day at the Capitol (see page 10) a success. Volunteers helped serve food, sign-in attendees, clean-up afterwards, and more. For details on volunteering for LSP, see the blurb above for who to contact in our various offices. (LSP Photo)



Storm Lake

A Chronicle of Change, Resilience, and Hope from a Heartland Newspaper

By Art Cullen
2018; 336 pages
Penguin Random House
www.penguinrandomhouse.com

Reviewed by Dana Jackson

In the beginning of *Storm Lake*, Art Cullen postures that he doesn't take things seriously, especially himself. But he does. When asked to write a book a week after he won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in the *Storm Lake Times*, he responded that he could never write more than 700 words, the length of his weekly newspaper column. But at the urging of his older brother John, founder and publisher of the *Storm Lake Times*, he did write a 300 page-plus book, which tells how the small-town newspaper "interprets" Storm Lake, Iowa, in the context of industrial agriculture, soil loss, polluted water, and immigrant labor, with a bit of hope thrown in.

Cullen's narrative voice reminds me of the stage manager fondly describing Grover's Corners in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. But underneath pride of place in the description of Iowa geology, geography, and human settlement are the facts: early European settlers evicted the Ioway and Dakota with gun and plow, and their descendants have eroded fertile farm soil into lakes and streams. Storm Lake is not Grover's Corners.

This is a book about transformation of the Iowa landscape from small diversified farms and thriving towns to "a vast field of corn and soy, corn and soy, soy and corn, dotted by hog houses and turkey barns" and empty Main Streets. It's about agribusiness corporations and the purple state's politicians, in particular the notorious U.S. Rep. Steve King, who bosses the whole system with cowardly acquiescence from Iowa State University. It's about immigrant laborers from all over the world, Mexicans in particular,

their humanity and dignity and hard work exploited by corporate meat processors.

The *Storm Lake Times* distinguishes itself from the chain newspapers in most small towns by being devoted to "building a community," as well as being profitable. After growing up in Storm Lake, Cullen eagerly left, ambitious to become a great reporter in Minneapolis. But 10 years later he was a stuck link in a chain newspaper, bored and unhappy. At the invitation of his brother, he left the *Mason City Globe Gazette* and settled back in Storm Lake to work as editor of the *Times*, which enabled him "to love a place and be its chronicler," while producing 1,404 columns and a Pulitzer Prize. Despite tough financial times for print journalism, devoted staff and family, especially his wife Dolores and the children of both Cullen brothers, enable the *Times* to survive.

What brought fame to the *Storm Lake Times* was reporting on the lawsuit filed by the Des Moines Water Works against the drainage districts in Buena Vista, Calhoun, and Sac counties for being agents of pollution in the Raccoon River. Agricultural runoff has always been considered "nonpoint source" pollution, exempt under the federal Clean Water Act. But Bill Stowe, who was the chief executive officer of the Des Moines Water Works before he died in

April, maintained that drainage tiles in the three counties were point sources for the nitrate that cost the Water Works millions of dollars to remove. Supervisors in the three counties refused to name donors to the \$1.4 million Agribusiness Council slush fund used to pay the big

city lawyers who defended them against the lawsuit. The *Times'* investigation revealed that the Farm Bureau, Iowa Corn Growers Association, Monsanto, and other agribusiness interests footed the bills "because the ag supply chain was at risk."

"Farmers and landowners are woven into that supply chain in a ritual of efficiency: fertilize; spray herbicides and pesticides; plant corn genetically designed to resist drought or rootworms; spray Roundup over beans that are resistant to it and, increasingly, weeds that have adapted to resist it. Feed

crops to hogs in Iowa that are contracted in advance with the packing company...Ship some of the corn and raw pork to Mexico for further processing...Ship Mexicans to Storm Lake to slaughter the hogs after the Anglos drain out, and ship our soil down to the gulf. It is the cycle of agribusiness," writes Cullen.

And agribusiness won. The Iowa Supreme Court ruled drainage districts to be immune from money damages, and a federal court dismissed the claim that drainage districts are subject to the Clean Water Act. Republicans in the Iowa Legislature took

revenge against critics of corporate agriculture by zeroing out funding for the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, causing the loss of \$3 million in matching funds for research on farming practices to protect water quality.

Cullen writes how climate change will intensify the damage caused by industrial agriculture, but concludes in the chapter "We Can't Go On Like This," that people will re-learn how to live with the land and its limits, because they must. For example, his 88-year-old father-in-law used the Conservation

Reserve Program to plant prairie instead of corn on 125 acres of bottomland. Cullen describes other smaller-scale farmers who, unable to profit growing low-priced corn, have abandoned the broken industrial model to diversify with livestock and cover crops.

The columnist turns lyrical in the last chapter, inspired by how he and the Latino neighbors on his street come together over music they both enjoy. He sees Mexican immigrants as kin to the indigenous Ioway, resettling the land, adapting to it, showing the way.

"Ioway blood courses up and down the Mississippi and into Mexico, and the mestizo carries it back up to Storm Lake today...Like the Mississippi, that flow is relentless and cannot be bounded. You can bend it only for a while. It takes its course," the author writes.

To Cullen, song is the music of place. "That's what the song is about, that river that guides us or wind that draws us or spirit that binds us." □

Former Land Stewardship Project associate director Dana Jackson co-edited the 2002 book, The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems.

STORM LAKE



A Chronicle of Change, Resilience, and Hope from a Heartland Newspaper

ART CULLEN

The small-town newspaper "interprets" Storm Lake, Iowa, in the context of industrial agriculture, soil loss, polluted water, and immigrant labor, with a bit of hope thrown in.

• • •

Building the Agricultural City **A Handbook for Rural Renewal**

By Robert Wolf
2016; 103 pages
Ruskin Press
www.freeriverpress.org/agricultural-city-project

Reviewed by Brian DeVore

It's a little unsettling when an internationally respected economist takes a gander at an entire sector of society and comes to this somewhat hopeless conclusion: "There are powerful forces behind the relative and in some cases absolute decline of rural America — and the truth is that nobody knows how to reverse those forces." The economist, Paul Krugman, wrote those words recently in the *New York Times*.

I thought about Krugman's words while reading Robert Wolf's book, *Building the Agricultural City: A Handbook for Rural Renewal*. Wolf, a writer, publisher, and big picture thinker living in northeastern Iowa, wouldn't be surprised that a big city economist doesn't get how to help rural America.

"We who live in rural America must realize that no one is going to solve our problems for us," Wolf writes. "If we are actively going to create our own future, instead of waiting passively for it to happen, we must first decide the kind of future we want."

That means envisioning a future that is the opposite of our current economic system: increasing centralization dominated by monopolies. Whether it's energy, food or people, our centralized economy's interest

in rural communities is limited to how much can be extracted from them.

Wolf makes the argument for tackling what ails our rural communities, as well as our cities, by practicing "regionalism" on a grand scale. He proposes building regional nodes where rural and urban communities are no longer separated, but are part of a "bioregion" that is defined more by topography than arbitrary governmental boundaries. In such a system, agriculture would serve as a kind of glue for binding cities, villages, towns, and farms together. The result would be an "agricultural city."

Wolf sees regionalism as the only sound way to reconstruct society with a "human face" and to create the kind of sustainable economic activity that fits with a local community's ecological imitations. The influx of factory farms into communities that don't want them is an example of a centralized economy driving a centralized regulatory approach that treats rural land as a source of extraction.

"...a sustainable economy within each region will respond to the availability of its resources, rather than impose an agricultural or manufacturing system that has no place within it," writes Wolf.

This means the creation of communities that are more self-reliant in terms of food production, energy generation, and manufacturing. Wolf is not proposing that rural communities withdraw into solitary fiefdoms which are cut off from the rest of the world. Trade will take place, it just won't be the driver of this more self-reliant economy.

Some of the tools the author lays out for

creating these agricultural cities include community-based agriculture, land trusts, micro-lending circles, local currencies, community development banks, worker-owned cooperatives, and regional energy districts. He cites as a latter example northeastern Iowa's Winneshiek Energy District, which was modeled on the Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) system and which focuses on local, renewable energy projects. Just as SWCDs deal with local soil and water needs and concerns, energy districts can address local energy needs and concerns.

Wolf sees the Driftless Region—that rugged topography that covers parts of southeastern Minnesota, southwestern Wisconsin, Northeastern Iowa, and northwestern Illinois—as a prime candidate for being bioregionalized. As he points out, there are already tiny pockets of self-reliance popping up—farms that market most of their food locally, the Winneshiek Energy District, and local arts programs are just a few examples. In some ways, the people of the region have already taken the first step in creating bioregionalism—there have been films, books, and even bumper stickers celebrating the "Driftless."

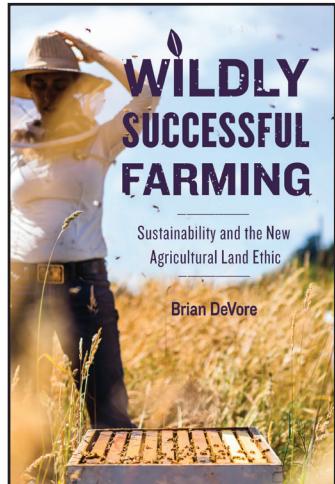
In other words, they are creating a common identity, and as Wolf makes clear, that helps define what makes a region special and thus worth saving—as well as reviving. □

Land Stewardship Letter editor Brian DeVore is the author of *Wildly Successful Farming: Sustainability and the New Agricultural Land Ethic*.

Wildly Successful Farming Book Available

In October, the University of Wisconsin Press released *Wildly Successful Farming*:

Sustainability and the New Agricultural Land Ethic, a book written by Land Stewardship Letter editor Brian DeVore. This book tells the stories of farmers across the Midwest who are balancing viable food production with environmental sustainability and a "passion for all things wild." They are using innovative techniques and strategies to develop their "wildly successful" farms as working ecosystems. Several Land



Stewardship Project farmer-members are featured in *Wildly Successful Farming*.

The book has been lauded for telling the stories of ecological agrarians in an engaging manner that offers hope for the future of farming and the land.

• • •

"An interpretation I gained from the stories...is this: a primary measure of success for these farmers is intrinsic—a deep sense of fulfillment and belief that they are doing the right things for their land and for future generations."

— Gary Gadbury, writing in *The Practical Farmer*

"Most Americans have forgotten that the success of agriculture depends on the wild world it so often displaces. These farmers remind us that those two vital elements need not be mutually exclusive—indeed, the success of food production depends on a healthy natural world."

— Lisa M. Hamilton, author of *Deeply Rooted*

Get a Copy of the Book

To order a copy of *Wildly Successful Farming*, see www.uwpress.wisc.edu or call 1-800-621-2736. Copies can also be ordered through local independent book stores. See page 32 for details on a July 12 book event in Amery, Wis.



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STEWARDSHIP CALENDAR

→ **JUNE 18—Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Pasture Walk**, 11 a.m.-2 p.m., Roger & Michelle Benrud farm, Goodhue, Minn. Contact: Bonnie Haugen, 507-421-7170, bonnie@dga-national.org

→ **JUNE 22—LSP-CURE BioBlitz**, Ortonville, Minn. Contact: Robin Moore, LSP, 320-269-2105, rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org, www.cureriver.org/2019-bioblitz

→ **JULY 12—Wildly Successful Farming Book Event with Brian DeVore**, 7 p.m.-8:30 p.m., Farm Table Foundation, Amery, Wis. Contact: www.farmtablefoundation.org, 715-268-4500

→ **JULY 13—LSP Grazing & Soil Health Field Day**, Bedtke Farm, 1 p.m.-3 p.m., Altura, Minn. Contact: Liana Nichols, LSP, 507-523-3366, lnichols@landstewardshipproject.org

→ **JULY 16—Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Pasture Walk**, 11 a.m.-2 p.m., Kevin & Faith Chamberlain farm, Hastings, Minn. Contact: Bonnie Haugen, 507-421-7170, bonnie@dga-national.org

→ **JULY 18—LSP Soil Health Field Day: Farming in Karst Country: How No-Till, Cover Cropping & Intensive Rotational Grazing Can Improve Soil Health & Underground Streams**, Niagra Cave, 3:30 p.m.-6:30 p.m., Harmony, Minn. Contact: Shona Snater, LSP, 507-523-3366, ssnater@landstewardshipproject.org

→ **JULY 25—LSP 2019 Summer Potluck-Cookout**, 5:30 p.m.-8:30 p.m., 821 E. 35th St., Minneapolis, Minn. Contact: Elizabeth Makarewicz, 612-722-6377, emakarewicz@landstewardshipproject.org

→ **JULY 28—LSP Farm Beginnings Field Day on Getting Started with Permaculture & Regenerative Agriculture**, Nettle Valley Farm, 1 p.m.-4 p.m., Spring Grove, Minn. Contact: Annelie

Livingston-Anderson, 507-523-3366, annelie@landstewardshipproject.org

→ **AUGUST—LSP Farm Dreams Class, Menomonie, Wis.** (*details to be announced; page 26*)

→ **AUG. 1—LSP Farm Beginnings Course Early Bird Discount Deadline** (*page 26*)
→ **AUGUST or SEPTEMBER—Three consecutive days of soil health workshops on cover crops interseeded into corn on three different farms**, Byron, Ridgeway & Preston, Minn. Contact: Doug Nopar, LSP, 507-523-3366, dNOPAR@landstewardship-project.org

→ **AUG. 13-15—Soil Health Academy: Regenerative Farming & Ranching**, Stoney Creek Farm, Redwood Falls, Minn. (*page 18*)
→ **SEPT. 1—LSP Farm Beginnings Course**

Final Application Deadline (*page 26*)

→ **SEPT. 15—LSP Farm Beginnings Field Day on On-Farm Events**, A to Z Produce & Bakery, 1 p.m.-4 p.m., Stockholm, Wis. Contact: Annelie Livingston-Anderson, 507-523-3366, annelie@landstewardshipproject.org

→ **SEPT. 17—Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Pasture Walk**, 11 a.m.-2 p.m., Arlene Hershey farm, St. Charles, Minn. Contact: Bonnie Haugen, 507-421-7170, bonnie@dga-national.org
→ **OCT. 17-19—Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference**, St. Paul, Minn. Contact: www.mosesorganic.org/events/wisa-conference, 715-778-5775

→ **NOV. 19-20—Green Lands Blue Waters Continuous Living Cover Conference**, Minneapolis, Minn. Contact: www.greenlandsbluetwaters.org, 612-625-3709

Prairie BioBlitz June 22 in Western MN



The Land Stewardship Project and Clean Up the River Environment (CURE) are teaming up on Saturday, June 22, to put on a Tallgrass Prairie BioBlitz at Big Stone Lake State Park in Ortonville, Minn. This will be a day of learning, monitoring, and prairie exploration.

For more information and to register, see www.cureriver.org/2019-bioblitz. Details are also available by contacting LSP's Robin Moore at 320-269-2105 or rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org. (Photo by Rebecca Wasserman-Olin)