

The Land Stewardship



LAND
STEWARDSHIP
PROJECT

38 Years of Keeping the Land & People Together

Letter

Volume 38

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A farm transition power team (page 22).

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—The Unsustainability of Racism—

—Legislative Wrap-up —

—Meat Processing as a Community Resource—

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—Removing the Spectre of Land Speculation—

—American Harvest, Farming While Black—



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One Disruption Away

We Need to Acknowledge the Razor's Edge that Many of Us are Walking

By Robin Moore

I got a call from a colleague recently asking how I was dealing with the corona virus pandemic, and I said I was feeling grateful. This is in stark contrast to where I was only six years ago when I was one disruption away from my entire fragile system falling apart. I am offering my story to show what these struggles look like in a rural area, how many of us move in and out of these situations without anyone around us knowing, and how close so many of us are to falling apart. I am writing this to remind myself, and everyone else, how close any of us can get to falling apart.

To be clear, I am grateful to still feel safe right now. Currently, I have a job at the Land Stewardship Project, with benefits and paid time off and a board and management that see the bigger picture. I am grateful to live in a rural area where costs are low and primary activities outside of working for LSP—biking, collecting firewood, and going for long walks—haven't been interrupted. I am lucky to be healthy and to have a healthy family, and am grateful to be financially secure right now. I am also white, have been to college, speak the language, and understand how to function in the systems around me—most of the time.

This is set against the recent memory of being so poor that I was relying on nettles as a major source of nutrients and skipping as many meals as possible to save money, mostly to make sure that I could pay for gas to get to paying work. Guess what, I was farming! I'm not trying to compare my situation to the current farm crisis. My farming didn't resemble what a lot of small and mid-sized operations are doing—I was growing organic flowers for a cut flower market, worked as a hired hand for a local conventional farmer, was the primary help at a couple of local vineyards (pruning all winter and managing the canopy and grounds in the summer), and had a variety of other side jobs, from blacksmithing to substitute teaching.

I sometimes had healthcare, but that was

never stable. With multiple meager income streams and being single with no children, MinnesotaCare was very easy to lose, what with shifting requirements and bungled red tape. The poverty was real, and even being fiercely self-sufficient, thrifty beyond logic, and modest in all consumption, I wasn't making it.

A few points of honesty and clarification: I was able to live so close to the edge for so long because I benefited from several things: I didn't have kids, I lived on another family's farm in a trailer and did not pay rent, I could barter for meat, the utilities were in that family's name and I reimbursed them when I could (usually after a tax return), I heated with wood and had access to wood, I didn't have much student loan debt, and I have my own family who would take me in if I needed it.

On the other side: I was so poor because my agricultural and crafted products were continually undervalued, because my labor was really undervalued, and because the "support" systems out there are structured to discourage

use and made to shake people off rather than help them get to a point of self-sufficiency. Also, I was single and did not own anything but my car, so loans were out of the question for any of my ventures.

Once, while on my way to visit family for the holidays (my mom sent me gas money), I stayed overnight at a friend's house in Minneapolis to break up the drive. My car was ticketed while parked for, I'm not joking, a dirty license plate. I live on a gravel road. The ticket was for \$80, which I did not have. On top of being terrified of the entire situation, I could not afford to drive back to the Twin Cities to contest the ticket. So I ignored it.

Fast forward six months and I am pulled

over for a burnt-out taillight, and find out that my license had been revoked. The police officer, who knew me and my car, told me that if he caught me driving I would go to jail. This was a big problem, there are no buses in rural America, and my workplaces were spread over a 60-mile radius—how was I going to get to work?

I drove a lot of back roads, caught rides with the neighbors, and rode my bike as much as I could. My sister came out to help drive me for a spell. I borrowed money from my parents to pay the ticket and fines and court fees, I lost weight and sleep with the stress and anxiety about getting caught, going to jail, making enough money to pay for gas and food. Farming and blacksmithing were taking a toll on my body that I could no longer afford. I started looking for a way out, and after 18 years of farming I took this job at LSP. It almost broke me to admit that I had failed.

My point is that for so many of us, one major disruption, like a ticket for a dirty license plate, is all it takes to knock the whole structure of our lives apart, and this pandemic is an epic disruption. Remove one source of income and the car, the gas, the heat, the electricity, the water, the house... all of them are at risk. When I was that close to collapse, I didn't talk about it, I didn't even really have the time or energy to even think about asking for help. I couldn't step back and see the bigger picture of my situation, I was just focused on keeping it all held together.

How many of us, how many of our neighbors, are in a similar situation? We need to ask these questions, offer support, and acknowledge the edge that many of us, both rural and urban, are walking. I want to use this feeling of gratitude to keep my eyes open, to help build networks of support, and to keep our lives intact as uncertainty deals its blows. There's no shame in eating nettles, or in admitting we need help. Let's be there for each other both in the community we know and in the society we build. □

Land Stewardship Project organizer Robin Moore works with non-operating landowners who are seeking to get conservation farming practices established on their farms. She is based out of LSP's office in Montevideo, Minn.

• • •
There's no shame in admitting we need help.
• • •

COVID-19 & the Farm Crisis

The Land Stewardship Project has added a COVID-19 section to its Farm Crisis web page: www.landstewardshipproject.org/farmcrisis. Information on emergency loans and assistance for livestock producers and processors is linked there. That page also has numerous helpful resources for farmers grappling with stress related to economic, emotional, or weather issues. For more on newly available farm crisis resources, including assistance for farmers facing possible foreclosure, see page 11.

Agriculture's Geography of Hope

A Quarter-Century Ago, a Surprising Booklet Emerged from a Government Agency

It would be difficult to imagine a publication like *America's Private Land*, *A Geography of Hope* being produced by a branch of the federal government today. That it was released in 1996 by an agency housed within the United States Department of Agriculture is even more astounding, given the authors' acknowledgement that industrialized, monocultural farming systems have caused significant problems when it comes to the health of our landscape, and changes are needed if we are to head off ecological catastrophe. To top it off, it quotes Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, and Wallace Stegner, writers who were never shy about critiquing the philosophy that farmland, and all land for that matter, is there for the taking, and that humans have an innate right to do with it what they will.

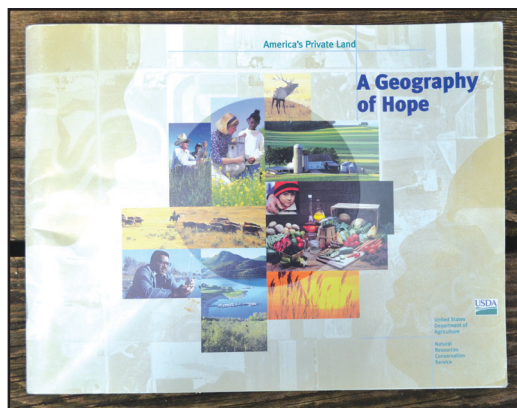
But when the 80-page booklet was published by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), *A Geography of Hope* represented not just a report card on the negative impacts of farming and ranching when it comes to our soil, water, and wildlife — it was also seen as an inspiring argument for the positive role diversified agricultural systems could play in developing a landscape that is ecologically and economically viable. So inspiring, in fact, that when then-Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman read a draft of the document, it brought tears to his eyes.

One of the reasons *A Geography of Hope* was not your typical, dry government document was that it was the brainchild of Paul Johnson, an Iowa farmer and former state legislator who has long promoted the idea that conservation of our natural resources and food production are not mutually exclusive. Before becoming the head of the NRCS in 1994, Johnson studied forestry and farmed near the Upper Iowa River in northeastern Iowa. During his tenure in the Iowa Legislature, he was instrumental in establishing Iowa State University's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the creation of a groundwater protection law that is seen as a national model.

Throughout his career, Johnson has adhered to a core philosophy that if we are to see conservation agriculture become more commonplace, it will require a "social compact" between farmers and the rest of

society. It wasn't just about enforcing certain rules or putting in place specific programs — care of the land had to become seen as the right thing to do, and society had to figure out a way to give farmers the emotional, and economical, support to do that.

He brought that philosophy with him to Washington, D.C. As a dairy and sheep



farmer and someone who had run for office based on his farming background, he had the agricultural credentials. But Johnson was not afraid to wear his environmental colors. In his D.C. office, he displayed a picture of Rachel Carson, the author of the seminal environmental book, *Silent Spring*. "I put her up there and within two days somebody came over and said, 'You should take that picture down,' recalls Johnson. " 'And I said, 'No way, leave it up there.' "

Johnson is a student of conservation history and knows the power of words. In 1994, the "Soil Conservation Service" became the "Natural Resources Conservation Service," a name that Johnson felt better reflected the holistic view agency staff should take when it came to working with landowners. He also pushed staff to look beyond just controlling erosion with specific structures and practices, and to consider the overall health of the soil resource. In many ways, the buzz around soil health that permeates the NRCS and much of agriculture today can trace its roots to Johnson's work two decades ago.

And he played a key role in the creation of the conservation title of the 1996 Farm Bill. Any farmer who has used Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds to put in a rotational grazing system or a season-

extending high tunnel has Johnson to thank.

But *A Geography of Hope* may be his most public legacy. Johnson felt such a publication was needed not only to justify the NRCS's existence as a stand-alone agency (there were threats to make it part of the Farm Service Agency at the time), but to highlight the key role private agricultural lands play in the health of the overall landscape. As the publication points out, half of the United States is in cropland, pasture, or rangeland. That meant (and still means) care of 50% of the country is the hands of less than 2% of its citizens.

Johnson got the title of the publication from Stegner, who had written that the preservation of the nation's last tracts of wildlands represented a "geography of hope."

"Stegner was right... Yet today we understand that narrowly circumscribed areas of natural beauty and protected land alone cannot provide the quality of environment that people need and want," Johnson wrote in the foreword to the booklet. "We must also recognize the needs of America's private land and private landowners for us to truly have a geography of hope."

Through maps, graphics, and writing that veers from the matter-of-fact to downright lyrical, *Geography of Hope* lays out the environmental problems facing private lands that have been exposed to intensive tillage, too many chemical inputs, and overapplication of manure from CAFOs. But then it goes on to, through case studies and big picture examples, describe the potential sustainable farming systems have for correcting these problems. Johnson feels strongly that farming should produce more than food and fiber — it should generate ecological health.

His audience was policymakers (every member of Congress got a copy, as well as then-President Bill Clinton). But Johnson also saw *A Geography of Hope* speaking to the farmers who were in a position to put in place effective conservation practices. After all, he wanted them to be proud of the role they had played, and could play in the future, when it came to land stewardship.

Johnson now lives back on the farm he and his wife Pat own in northeastern Iowa. He's been slowed by a tractor accident, but is still an outspoken proponent of ag conservation. As the 25th anniversary of the publication of *A Geography of Hope* approaches, the *Land Stewardship Letter's* Brian DeVore sat down with Johnson to talk about why developing a social compact between farmers and society in general is more important than ever. Page 5 features excerpts of Johnson's comments.

To read *America's Private Land*, *A Geography of Hope*, see www.landstewardship-project.org/posts/1302. □

Preaching the Gospel of Conservation

Paul Johnson on Social Compacts, Soil Health, & Thanking Farmers

Not a One-Trick Pony

"A *Geography of Hope* made it clear farming is really not single function. It should be multi-functional. A good farm also farms water, wildlife, biodiversity, and carbon. We added sections about the aesthetics of the land, too. If you don't do all those things, you're not a good farmer.

"You know, we've pushed sustainable agriculture, but I think multi-functional agriculture would have been a better way to put it. We should do it today, we should really have a major effort that says if you're a good farmer, you don't just farm corn and soybeans or rice or cotton. First of all, a good farmer has to farm water. Iowa gets 32 inches of precipitation a year and it all falls on farmland. And if farmers aren't doing a good job, we're not going to have clear water.

"And we talked about soil conservation in relation to erosion. But if we had called it the 'Water Conservation Service' instead of the 'Soil Conservation Service,' I think we'd have had more soil conservation. You've got to treat your soil right if you're going to have good water, and you don't do that the way we're doing it right now.

"...People need to understand that much of our land is not healthy being farmed the way we are farming it right now. You look at soil — soil health is defined by the many functions of soil. And soil isn't just keeping the surface from running off, but soil's a buffer, it's a filter, it's a place where there's a lot of very important life. And soil conservation has got to be all of those things, and not just one. That defines soil health, I think."

A Conservation Crisis

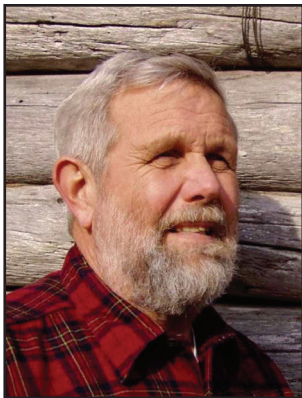
"Look, we've had 10,000 years of agriculture, trying to domesticate land. And in the last 50 years, we have done it. Today, there isn't a single thing that grows in our corn and soybean fields but corn and soybeans. Iowa has 26 million of our 36 million acres in corn and soybeans, and there is not another living thing allowed to live in it. And even things that we don't know about in the soil are being destroyed.

"And this is a crisis. Not only that, but in the last 30 years, we've decoupled animals from land, we've decoupled people from animals. And we're about to decouple land

from people. Around here, probably a third of our land, at least, is not farmed by the people who own it. Between here and 10 miles north of us we've got three farmers farming all the land. And they just have a bunch of big equipment and the owners contract with them and they put in the crops and take out the crops."

Breaking the Program Fixation

"I think we end up focusing too much on a few government programs and not enough on preaching the gospel of conservation. In all of my speeches, I brought up Aldo Leopold or somebody like that and it got to the point where people were telling me, 'Paul, you've got to start talking about the programs and how much money farmers could get from them.' And I just couldn't do that, because we really need to remind farmers of their responsibilities.



Paul Johnson

"We have this idea of democracy being focused on liberty, but liberty without responsibility is not a healthy way. And we're always talking about liberty and you have the rights to do these things. But you also have responsibilities. You can't have a good democracy without that. I don't think we preach that enough.

"And I think that farmers have been told that conservation is about preventing soil erosion so much, and they

haven't been challenged to do other things. But when farmers do get into other things, they like 'em. So, we need to talk about those things. Getting back to functional ideas again in agriculture."

The Conservation of Hope

"Leopold said it well, I think, when he said, 'Conservation born out of fear will not get you there, but it should be viewed as a positive act.' And farmers should stop seeing it as, 'I've got to do this' and say, 'Well, I do this.'

"It always bothered me that farmers would be so worried about an endangered species on their farm. They should be proud

of an endangered species. And we should have good programs to help them so they can support that habitat and be proud. We just have to flip it around somehow. We have to work with the farm community, and at the same time we have to work with the public."

Colorful Carpet

"I think the future of agriculture is going to depend on a social compact between farmers and the public. It's important that the public understands that the health of the land depends on agriculture and ranching.

Leopold put it well in his essay "The Farmer as a Conservationist." He wrote that conservation is harmony between people and land. When land does well for the farmer, a farmer does well by the land. They both end up better.

"But it's not going to get better if society doesn't understand much of the health of

the land around them and even the beauty of the land is dependent on the farmer, and the farmer weaves that carpet on which America stands. Should the farmer just weave a gray carpet or add some color to it as well?"

Thanking Farmers

"And it's about reminding farmers, and challenging them, and thanking them too. Between here and Des Moines, I've taken that trip a hundred times or more, and I've watched farmers put in new buffers and other conservation measures. And there's one farm in particular where I really liked what I saw when I drove by.

"And one day I said, 'I'm going to stop and say thank you to these people because it's just beautiful what they've done.' And so I went and it was an older woman working in her garden, and I went to her and I said, 'I've gone by here and I've watched you put in these conservation measures, and watched it develop and I want to say thank you.' And she started to cry. She said, 'Nobody's ever done that.' " □

Give it a Listen

On episode 242 of the Land Stewardship Project's *Ear to the Ground* podcast, Paul Johnson talks about forging a social compact between farmers and society to build an ecologically healthy landscape: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/1302.

Myth Buster Box

An Ongoing Series on Ag Myths & Ways of Deflating Them

→ Myth: Abusive Work Conditions are ‘Essential’ to Heading off a Meat Famine

→ Fact:

On April 27, meat giant Tyson Foods took out a full-page advertisement in major newspapers that carried an alarming message. “The food supply is breaking,” it said. The ad went on: “We have a responsibility to feed our country...Our plants must remain operational so that we can supply food to our families in America.”

Tyson was arguing that packing plants were “essential” and had to remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic. Infections have run rampant through packing facilities, including several owned by Tyson. In early spring, panic buying by grocery store customers had caused meat cases to look sparse, with some retailers even limiting purchases.

Tyson’s letter was effective. Two days after it ran, President Donald Trump signed an executive order declaring meatpacking plants as “essential infrastructure” and requiring them to remain open. Worker safety experts said the order would prevent local health officials from closing plants they determined were pandemic vectors and could also undermine efforts to, for example, put more distance between workers on the production line — something meat companies have long resisted.

Throughout the pandemic, Tyson, along with fellow meat giants like Smithfield and JBS, have argued that instituting certain safety measures in their facilities would threaten to starve Americans of protein.

Plenty of Meat...for Export

But we were never in danger of running out of meat. It turns out that when that newspaper ad was published, there was plenty of meat in cold storage. An even bigger indicator that Tyson’s Chicken Little proclamation was baseless is that a lot of meat was going overseas earlier this year. In fact, data compiled by the food chain analyst Panjiva and the USDA shows that in April, Tyson and Smithfield exported 1,289 tons and 9,170 tons of pork, respectively, to China. The USDA reported that overall U.S. pork exports to mainland China in April reached the highest monthly total since the agency began tracking this information two decades ago.

The *New York Times* reported that about 40% of the April pork exports were whole carcasses; whole carcasses are more profit-

able to ship. The poultry giant Mountaire grew its chicken exports to China and Hong Kong by 23% and 14%, in April and May, respectively, according to Panjiva.

So much for supplying “food to our families in America.” Another popular myth being circulated by Big Meat is that worker safety is its top priority. According to an ongoing tally that the *Food and Environmental Reporting Network* is keeping, as of late August over 490 meatpacking plants had confirmed cases of COVID-19; 41,167 meat workers had tested positive, with 193 dying from the virus.

In July, a coalition of organizations filed a civil rights complaint with the USDA alleging Tyson and JBS have engaged in racial discrimination in the way they have handled COVID-19 at their packing plants. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently reported that nearly 90% of infected meatpacking workers are people of color.

One of the groups filing the complaint is the HEAL Food Alliance; the Land Stewardship Project is a member-organization of the Alliance. According to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, corporations that receive federal assistance are required to comply with civil rights laws. The USDA awarded Tyson \$275 million from 2019 to 2020 and JBS USA and its subsidiary Pilgrim’s Pride \$193 million during the same period. But when JBS and Tyson packing plants became hotspots for COVID-19, company officials declined to adopt CDC recommendations for keeping workers at least six-feet-apart, charges the complaint.

It’s become clearer than ever that enforcement of safety procedures in packing plants are needed, as well as reforms such as the slowing down of line speeds. In April, the USDA granted waivers to 15 poultry plants, allowing them to increase line speeds from 140 birds per minute to 175. Faster line speeds cause increased injuries and require workers to stand closer together — a recipe for disaster in the age of COVID-19.

What is also needed is public investment in a different model of meat processing. As mega-packing operations have taken over, local “locker” plants have diminished. These are the small-town, independent plants that serve farmers who are direct-marketing to consumers, retailers, restaurants, and co-ops. Many smaller plants can’t afford to upgrade in order to meet qualifications for marketing

meat as packaged, separate cuts, something an increasing number of customers are demanding.

For the small locker plants that remain, farmers are reporting waiting times to get their animals processed stretching to a year or more. A recent survey of meat-producing farmers conducted by a team representing the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and numerous Minnesota groups, including LSP, found lack of small-scale processing capacity is hamstringing the local food movement. This is especially frustrating considering that almost 65% of the 111 farmers responding to the survey said demand for their product had gone up since the pandemic hit. As one farmer put it: “We have beef, we have customers, we need more local processing.” Over half of the respondents said they would raise more livestock if more processing was available. More animals integrated into cropping operations across the Midwest is key to creating a widespread sustainable farming system.

During the past legislative session, LSP helped secure \$100,000 in grant money for smaller Minnesota meat and poultry processors to expand their capacity. That’s a start, but more is needed, including state and federal regulation reform that makes it easier for small meat processors to upgrade and ship across state lines. Other creative ideas are also being discussed, such as making meat processors community-owned resources — LSP farmer-members LeeAnn and Jim VanDerPol propose such an idea on page 12.

Tyson and its Big Meat colleagues are right — the food supply is broken. What they won’t admit is that fixing it requires departing from a system based on putting employees, local farmers, communities, and other “essentials” at risk simply to plump up corporate profits.

More Information

- A *New York Times* article on the Panjiva analysis of meat exports is at <https://nyti.ms/2OFF5Ce>.

- The Minnesota Department of Agriculture has numerous resources for farmers who are interested in connecting with a meat processing plant. See www.mda.state.mn.us/food-feed/meat-poultry-egg-inspection, or call Jim Ostlie at 320-842-6910 or Courtney VanDerMey at 651-201-6135.



Land Stewardship Project Staff Changes

Mike McMahon has wrapped up a 22-year career with the Land Stewardship Project, during which he played a key role in building its membership base and advancing the organization's work via individual giving.

McMahon joined LSP in 1998 as a policy organizer and worked extensively on the farmer-led campaign to challenge the national pork checkoff program. In 2007, he took over as LSP's membership coordinator. In subsequent years, building on the work of his predecessor, Cathy Eberhart, McMahon further modernized the organization's system for recruiting and communicating with members. Through the work of LSP's Individual Giving and Membership team, McMahon helped grow significantly the organization's membership base and foundation of financial resources. Working with former executive director Mark Schultz and LSP's board of directors, McMahon spearheaded the development of the organization's most recent five-year plan: *Vision for the Future: Stewardship, Justice, Democracy, Health, Community* (see page 17).

During the past several months, McMahon served with Amy Bacigalupo as co-managing director at LSP. McMahon and Bacigalupo served keys role in helping the organization transition to its new executive director, Jess Anna Glover.

McMahon has joined the staff of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, a longtime LSP ally that works on economic, racial, and environmental justice issues.

Barb Sogn-Frank has departed LSP

after working for two years as a Policy Program organizer. Since joining the staff in 2018, Sogn-Frank had worked with local citizens in south-eastern and west-central Minnesota who are fighting large-scale factory livestock farms in their communities. Sogn-Frank



Barb Sogn-Frank

also worked on farm crisis and state policy issues.

Amanda Madison has stepped down as a digital and communications organizer for LSP. Since joining the staff in 2018, Madison worked with program directors and staff to assist them in reaching membership base-building goals. She also helped members develop leadership roles in social media and launched a narrative development initiative.



Amanda Madison

Amy Bacigalupo and **Karen Stettler** were recently named co-directors of LSP's Farm Beginnings Program. Both have been long-time members of the Farm Beginnings team — Bacigalupo has directed the program for the past several years, and Stettler works on issues related to transitioning farmland to the next generation, among other things. Bacigalupo can be reached at 320-269-2105, amyb@landstewardship-project.org; Stettler is at 507-523-3366, stettler@landstew-



Amy Bacigalupo

ardshipproject.org.

Farm Beginnings provides a range of training initiatives, including the Farm Dreams class, the Farm Beginnings course, and the Journeyperson course (see pages 27 and 32).

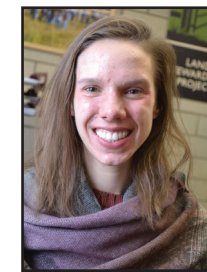
Jessica Kochick has joined LSP's Policy and Organizing team as a federal policy organizer. She had previously served as an assistant with the program, and has had previous experience as a teacher and union organizer. Through her new position, Kochick is working on issues related to corporate consolidation and climate change, among others. She is based in LSP's Twin Cities office and can be reached at 612-722-6377 or jkochick@landstewardship-project.org.



Karen Stettler

Emily Minge has joined LSP's staff as an organizer in its Policy and Organizing Program as well as with the Land Stewardship Action Fund, the organization's sister organization that focuses on building power through electoral politics (see page 30). Minge

has participated in an LSP Organizing and Social Change Cohort, and recently helped



Emily Minge

facilitate the latest iteration of that initiative (see page 9). As an LSP intern, Minge had previously helped organize two Family Farm Breakfast and Day at the Capitol events.

She is based in LSP's Twin Cities office and can be reached at 612-722-6377 or eminge@

landstewardshipproject.org.

Connor Dunn has joined LSP's Soil Health Program team. Dunn has a bachelor's degree in environmental science from Iowa State University and has assisted with hazelnut and agroforestry research for various institutions. He has also worked with wildlife



Connor Dunn

restoration and for the Renature Foundation in Indonesia.

At LSP, Dunn is working with crop and livestock farmers who want to build soil health profitably. He is based in LSP's Lewiston, Minn., office and can be contacted at cdunn@landstewardship-project.org or 507-523-3366.

Maya Edstrom has been serving an internship with LSP's Farm Beginnings Program. Edstrom is a junior at Scripps College, where she is majoring in environmental analysis and minoring in studio art. She has served an internship with the Scripps Dean of Students Office and worked for a landscaping company. Edstrom has also participated in a 10-day Yellowstone Wildlife Ecology trip.

Through her LSP internship, Edstrom has been helping coordinate Farm Beginnings online farm tours/skill shares (see page 32). □



Maya Edstrom



Jessica Kochick

2020 State Legislature

Making Our Voices Heard in Saint Paul

LSP Members Successfully Push for Response to Farm Crisis

Amanda Koehler

The past few months have been harder than ever for thousands of Minnesotans. Our communities were already facing a serious farm crisis, inaccessible and unaffordable healthcare, the increasing impacts of climate change, corporate consolidation across our economy,

→ More than 100 members from 66 communities across the state met with their legislators remotely to lobby for LSP's most urgent legislative priorities, leading to legislative wins.

→ More than 580 LSP members and supporters attended powerful organizing meetings to take action on the farm crisis.

→ Over 4,000 member and supporter contacts were made with legislators and



Land Stewardship Project members gathered in Mankato, Minn., in February to discuss public policy options for dealing with the farm crisis. State Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen and Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison attended the meeting and listened to people's concerns. (LSP Photo)

and more. Now, on top of that, a pandemic has wreaked havoc on our healthcare system, farm and food system, and local and regional economies.

Yet, in the face of uncertain and unprecedented circumstances, Land Stewardship Project members and supporters pulled together during the regular session of the 2020 Minnesota Legislature to build and assert our collective power:

→ LSP members bravely told their personal stories from the front lines of this crisis by speaking to the media and testifying at the Legislature, elevating their voices on behalf of many.

the Governor's office.

→ More than 2,000 LSP members and supporters, primarily farmers, signed onto our Farm Crisis Petition, calling for the Governor, state legislators, the Attorney General, and the U.S. Congress to stand up for farmers and rural communities.

→ LSP members directly advocated with key state-level decision-makers, including Attorney General Keith Ellison, Commissioner of Agriculture Thom Petersen, and top advisers in Governor Tim Walz's office.

As a result of these efforts, LSP members and supporters — with notable farmer leadership — achieved tangible legislative wins that will keep farmers on the land in the face of compounding crises. Three Land Stewardship Project bills passed with unanimous or nearly unanimous support in the Legislature — support that is rare across all issue areas. We:



Extended deadlines in the Farmer-Lender Mediation Act through harvest (Dec. 1).

This gives farmers in mediation time to plant and harvest, understand new market conditions and emergency government assistance, and respond to the compounding crises. This bill passed 134-0 in the Minnesota House and 67-0 in the Minnesota Senate, and was authored by Rep. Todd Lippert (DFL-Northfield) and Sen. Mike Goggin (GOP-Red Wing).



Secured \$175,000 to establish a new grant program to assist farmers in mediation with the cost of restructuring a loan. Grants will cover up to 50% of the origination fee.

This bill was incorporated into the Omnibus Agriculture Finance Bill and passed 133-1 in the Minnesota House and 67-0 in the Senate. The original bill was authored by Rep. Lippert and Sen. Goggin.



Secured an additional \$60,000 for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Farm Advocates Program.

This program works with legal advisers to help keep farmers on the land by letting them know their rights when faced with foreclosure, assisting in mediation and negotiations with lenders, and providing critical guides and resources. This bill was incorporated into the Omnibus Agriculture Finance Bill and passed 133-1 in the Minnesota House and 67-0 in the Minnesota Senate. The original bill was authored by Rep. Jeff Brand (DFL-St. Peter) and Sen. Gary Dahms (GOP-Redwood Falls).

See pages 10 and 11 for more information on how the above bills impact crisis support available to farmers.

Legislature, see page 9...



Helped secure \$100,000 in grant money for smaller meat and poultry processors to expand their capacity in the wake of temporary closure of other large processors; and \$100,000 in grants for farmers and value-added food processors whose operations were affected by COVID-19.

For more on the meat processing issue, see pages 6 and 12.

Bold Action Together

We know that the progress that was made this legislative session was because of the work LSP members did together. We started with being told that our bills were “long shots” and ended up with unprecedented support in the House and Senate. We know what is possible when we come together and make our voices heard — and it can’t stop here. The critical legislation we achieved together this session represents largely short-term solutions. Right now, we must build on what we accomplished in order to achieve long-term, systemic changes.

Where the Legislature Fell Short

Our Legislature failed to take bold action on many of the systems that are failing Minnesotans:



There was no movement on building a high-quality, affordable, and accessible healthcare system for all Minnesotans. The MinnesotaCare Buy-In bill, which would allow Minnesotans, regardless

of their income, to “buy into” MinnesotaCare, did not receive a hearing; neither did our bill to allow farmers in mediation, regardless of their income level, to qualify for MinnesotaCare. While a public health crisis brings society to its knees, leaders on all sides are failing to act on healthcare.



There was no pause placed on the expansion of the mega-dairy industry (dairies over 1,000 animal units). Because of the work of LSP members and legislative allies,

moratorium bills were introduced in the House and Senate. Although we sparked a conversation, it isn’t enough. These mega-dairies depress the price of milk for small and medium-sized dairies, putting them out of business while polluting our air and water. More work lies ahead if we are to stop consolidation from driving most of our producers off the land. We need more state leaders to put farmers and rural communities above corporate interests.



Despite the effects of climate change becoming increasingly common and severe, our Legislature did not take bold action on this crisis.

As farmers and rural communities experience unprecedented floods, unpredictable weather, and a changing economy, we need our state to respond with solutions that match the scale of what we are facing. COVID-19 has taught us that our economy is neither nimble nor resilient to crises, and we must be prepared as the climate crisis continues to take hold.

Bridging the Distance

We may be physically distant, but we can shift the public narrative and move decision-making bodies when we assert our collective power as people who want to take bold steps to secure a fair, just, and sustainable future for our communities.

Farmers must start listening to each other, rather than agribusiness, whose interest is not the interest of farmers or their rural communities. Farmers and allies must be in solidarity together — farmer, farmworker, rural, urban — to work to advance our collective interest. We must understand what connects public health and fair working conditions with economic justice for farmers, workers at processing facilities, and all Minnesotans.

When we come together across geography, class, race, gender, religion, political party, citizenship status, ability, and more, we have the power to achieve a vision that centers around all people and the world we live in. □

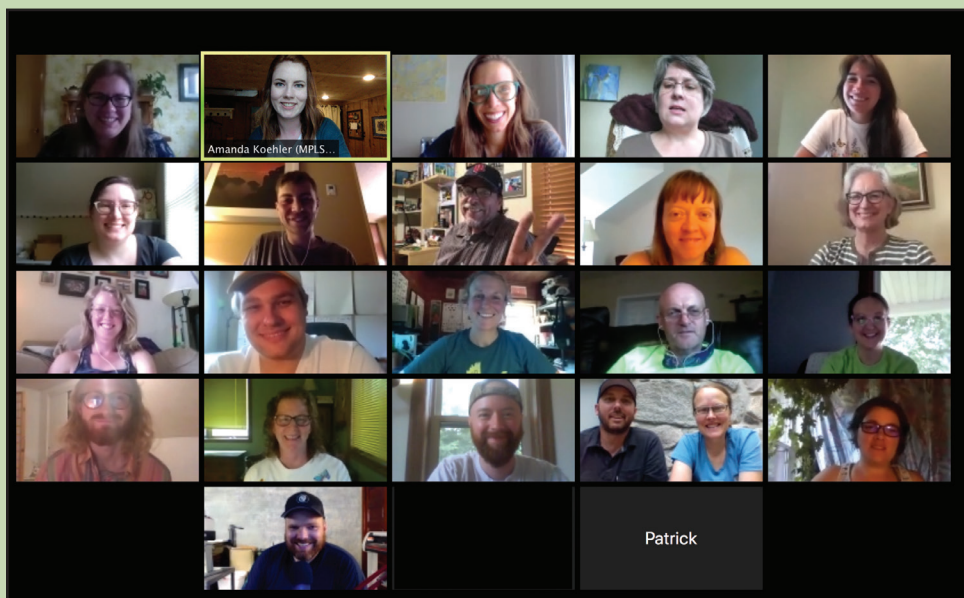
*Land Stewardship Project organizer
Amanda Koehler can be reached at
akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org or
612-722-6377.*

Latest LSP Organizing & Social Change Cohort Convened

This summer, the Land Stewardship convened its third annual — and first virtual — Organizing and Social Change Cohort. Through this cohort, 20 LSP members from across Minnesota and Iowa were trained to be community organizers, wrestled with power and structural oppression, and were equipped to build the power we need to transform the farm, food, and healthcare systems together.

Participants were trained to build organizing skills, such as running effective lobby meetings, having intentional one-to-one meetings with neighbors, and digging to the root of an issue. They also discussed how to change the story about the biggest challenges our communities face.

For more information on the Organizing and Social Change Cohort, contact LSP’s Amanda Koehler at akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377.



Shocks to the System Undermining Ag & Communities

Farmer Statement: We Need to Build a More Resilient System Together

Note: These Land Stewardship Project farmer-members from Minnesota recently authored this statement on the farm crisis: Kathleen and Allen Deutz, livestock and crop farmers, Marshall; Laura Frerichs, produce farmer, Hutchinson; Laurie Driessen, livestock and crop farmer, Canby; John Snyder, livestock and crop farmer, Forestville; Beth Slocum, livestock farmer, Welch; Jim Nichols, crop farmer and former Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner, Lake Benton; Jon and Ruth Jovaag, livestock and crop farmers, Austin; Bonnie and Vance Haugen, dairy farmers, Canton; Leon Plaetz, beef and crop farmer, Wabasso; Anna Racer and Peter Skold, vegetable and livestock farmers, Webster; Ted Winter, crop farmer, Fulda; Sue and Ken Griebel, dairy farmers, New Ulm; Angie and Nate Walter, dairy farmers, Villard; Tom Nuessmeier, livestock and crop farmer and LSP organizer, Saint Peter; Paul Sobocinski, livestock farmer and LSP organizer, Wabasso.

Even before the pandemic struck earlier this year, Midwestern farmers were experiencing very difficult times. Low commodity prices due to trade disruption, high land costs, and consolidation of the dairy industry in the face of declining demand have driven Minnesota farmers to the brink, and in the case of nearly 300 family dairy farmers last year, over the brink, into bankruptcy.

Then came COVID-19. The first shock to agriculture came as schools, restaurants, hotels, and institutional cafeterias closed. Half-pint milk cartons destined for schools could not be readily switched to gallon jugs for retail markets. But the cows kept producing, and milk was dumped.

As a result of closed institutional and restaurant markets, sales of vegetables and other produce disappeared, literally overnight. In fact, farmers up and down the food system saw prices plunge, yet consumers did not see lower food prices. The price of processed beef almost doubled this spring and beef packers saw their profit margins reach historic highs, according to USDA statistics. It doesn't make sense, and is a prime example of just how highly concentrated corporate power has become in our food and farm system — even the basic laws of supply and demand don't apply anymore.

The next shock from COVID-19 came as the virus spread through the workforces of numerous large meat processors in Minnesota and nearby states. As hundreds of workers came down sick and dozens started dying, the plants shut down. Farmers lost their markets overnight. With no place to go, pigs and poultry were euthanized. Meanwhile, demand at food shelves exploded as people were thrown out of work by the pandemic.

Farmers working on thin margins already faced insolvency. Many of us mobilized, came together, and proposed immediate

emergency measures to prevent a repeat of the 1980s farm crisis when panicked lenders forced farmers to pay up immediately, forcing many off their land and out of farming, permanently harming rural communities.

In a matter of weeks this spring, the Minnesota Legislature (*see page 8*) heard our voices and passed three crucial farm crisis measures nearly unanimously (there was a single dissenting vote):

→ Farm foreclosures were delayed through harvest (Dec. 1) for farmers exercising their right to mediation of farm debt over \$15,000. This will give time for crops to mature, markets to rebound, COVID-19 outbreaks to be managed, and federal support to be delivered.

→ Additional funds were provided to increase the availability of Farm Advocates. These Minnesota Department of Agriculture employees work directly with farmers in trouble to guide them to available assistance and financial mediation with lenders. They provide an experienced shoulder to lean on through all kinds of trouble, and are a critical resource, especially during a crisis.

→ A grant program under the Rural Finance Authority of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture was created and funded to share the cost of fees associated with transitioning loans to government-backed loan guarantees through the Farm Service Agency.

Senator Mike Goggin (R-Red Wing) and Representative Todd Lippert (D-Northfield), as chief authors of legislation related to mediation extension and loan restructuring grants, deserve our thanks for exercising their leadership. As Senate and

House agriculture leaders, Senators Torrey Westrom (R-Elbow Lake) and Bill Weber (R-Luverne), along with Representatives Jeanne Poppe (D-Austin) and Rod Hamilton (R-Mountain Lake), recognized the need for urgent action and guided these temporary, emergency measures forward. But these measures alone are not enough.

As the examples we cite here make clear, the pandemic has shown that our existing food production, processing, and distribution systems are not resilient and do not function well when under stress:

→ Our livelihoods as farmers are dependent upon access to food processing facilities where safe working conditions, paid sick leave, and affordable healthcare are guaranteed for workers — many of whom are people of color, immigrants, and refugees. Food workers and farmers are in this together. When workers get sick, people suffer, our farms suffer, and we depend upon government aid to rescue us — which we do not like to do.

→ Concentration of food production in large facilities controlled by a handful of corporations risks massive disruption to supplies when a disease causes shutdowns. The disease can be human, or, as we experienced a few years ago with avian flu, livestock-based. Government steps in to supply aid to large corporations and producers, but what about the small producer who is told to “just stop raising pigs for a while” as the market glut of confinement hogs is churned through the system?

We can and need to do better.

We are proud to be raising good food to feed our neighbors. We live in one of the world's most productive agricultural regions. Let's work together to find ways to develop a strong, resilient food production and delivery system that provides farmers a fair price at the farm gate, and that provides food workers fair wages and safe working environments. Economic justice for farmers and food workers is essential if we are to raise, process, and deliver a reliable supply of safe, affordable, and healthy food for all. Please step forward to join us in building a more resilient food system. □

For more on how you can join in the fight for fair prices for farmers, competitive markets, support for small processing plants, and economic justice for processing plant workers, contact LSP's Paul Sobocinski at 507-342-2323 or sobopaul@landstewardshipproject.org. See page 11 for details on new farm crisis resources available to farmers.

Farmers: Be Aware of Your Rights Under Loan Guarantee Fee, Other Changes

2020 Legislation Includes New Farm Crisis Resources

Building a Fight Back Together

The Land Stewardship Project recognizes that this is a time of compounding crises for farmers and rural communities. There are systemic forces in the food system that are pushing out small to mid-sized producers who are the backbone of rural communities, and threatening our communities' access to land and clean water. On top of that, we are in the midst of an economic crisis that has had significant impacts on farm markets and has increased the immediacy of those risks. During this last legislative session (see page 8), Land Stewardship Project members came together to help pass numerous bills into law, including two that immediately help farmers experiencing financial stress ride out this economic crisis. We are sharing information on these and other changes here so that you are aware of the new resources made available and the extension of existing rights that you have.

Extending Farmer-Lender Mediation

As part of the response to the COVID-19 economic crisis, The Minnesota Legislature passed a bill brought forward by the Land Stewardship Project to extend the time frame for the right to farmer-lender mediation from 90 days to 150 days, or Dec. 1, 2020, whichever is later. This bill also expands eligibility requirements to include farmers who initiate mediation under the Farmer-Lender Mediation Act. These changes would be effective retroactive to the original date of enactment of the original COVID-19 response act that passed the Legislature on April 16, 2020. The Farmer-Lender Mediation Act requires a bank or other creditor to offer mediation to an eligible farmer before enforcing a debt against agricultural property such as land, livestock, or crops. Specifically, the act applies to foreclosure, repossession, cancellation of a contract for deed, and execution of a court order or judgement.

Loan Guarantee Fee Grant for USDA Restructuring Farm Loans

As part of this year's farm appropriations bill, the Legislature set aside money for fiscal year 2020 until Dec. 1 to start a Loan Guarantee Fee Grant for the USDA Restructuring Farm Loans Program as a supple-

ment to the debt restructuring loan program backed by the USDA.

This program mandates that the Minnesota Department of Agriculture provide grants to eligible farmers that cover 50% of the fee for a loan guarantee for a USDA Restructured Farm Loan so that farmers can keep their focus on just getting their debt restructured, and not add more on top of it. To be eligible, farmers must have a net worth of less than \$800,000, be partici-

Minnesota Farm Advocates

- Bruce Lubitz, Perham, 218-346-4866
- Connie Dykes, Lake City, 651-345-5149
- Dave Elliason, Isle, 320-676-3559
- David Hesse, Comfrey, 507-877-3012
- Dan Hunz, Waverly, 763-772-6687
- Ruth Ann Karty, Clarkfield, 320-669-7135
- George Bosselman, Fosston, 218-200-9432
- Steve Zenk, Danube, 320-894-2517
- Wayne Pike, Rochester, 507-251-1937
- Robert Stommes, Saint Cloud, 320-443-5355

To find an advocate near you, see www.mda.state.mn.us/about/commissionersoffice/farmadvocates. The advocate hotline is 1-800-967-2474.

pating in farmer-lender mediation or have received a mediation notice pursuant to the Farmer-Lender Mediation Act, and have been approved for a debt restructuring loan guaranteed by the USDA. To apply for the grant program, farmers must contact the Rural Finance Authority at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Additional Resources Available for Dairy Farmers

The COVID-19 Food Assistance Program for dairy producers has been activated and is being offered through local Farm Service Agency offices. This federal funding came as part of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and provides an extra payment for milk production of \$4.71 per hundredweight for the months of January, February, and March. Also, federal Commodity Credit Corporation funds of up to \$1.47 a hundredweight are potentially offered for the months of April, May, and June. You need to contact your local Farm Service Agency office to take advantage of this program. You can find more information on this funding online at www.farmers.gov/coronavirus.

Contact Your Local Farm Advocate

If you are experiencing financial stress, are receiving collection letters from creditors, and want to make sure that you can take advantage of these new rules, your first call should be to your local Minnesota Farm Advocate. They are the people who can quickly and efficiently help you navigate this process. The sidebar to the left has the numbers and locations of all the Farm Advocates in Minnesota. You can also find that information on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's website: www.mda.state.mn.us/about/commissionersoffice/farm.

If a creditor is not honoring the new extension of mediation that you have a right to, you need to call your local Farm Advocate right away. If you are willing to share information about how the mediation extension is not being honored, letting LSP know that this is happening is also extremely helpful for our advocacy work going forward. ☐

Moving Forward with Our Fight Back

It would not have been possible to pass the farm crisis policy changes described above without people pulling together during the Land Stewardship Project's farm crisis meetings, our members working together to lobby their local officials, and, in general, farmers organizing so that we could move forward together. These are emergency measures that everyone now has a right to, but we still need to address the root causes of the farm crisis. And we can only do that if we continue to come together and move forward together. We at the Land Stewardship Project want to invite you to join us in this fight back today. Find more information at www.landstewardshipproject.org, or contact one of the LSP organizers listed below:

- Jessica Kochick — jkochick@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-722-6377
- Tom Nuessmeier — tomn@landstewardshipproject.org, 507-995-3541
- Matthew Sheets — msheets@landstewardshipproject.org
- Paul Sobocinski — sobopaul@landstewardshipproject.org, 507-342-2323

Processing Plants as Community Resources

COVID-19 Shows Just how Vulnerable Consolidated, Corporate Meatpacking is

By Jim & LeeAnn VanDerPol

Many small and medium-size farms are trying to survive by selling meats directly to retail customers and restaurants. The idea shows promise as a way to revitalize an economy otherwise in the shadow of huge agricultural enterprises. We need slaughterhouses; several good, new up-to-date buildings should be placed throughout Minnesota to serve the growing number of farm meat-marketing businesses (*see sidebar*). These should be incubators of new business, attracting people who wish to operate meat processing businesses and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to build new businesses.

These incubators must feature handling along the humane lines suggested by animal scientist Temple Grandin, the “livestock whisperer.” This will keep the adrenaline down in the animals, make the work easier, and win the approval of many customers who tend to be easily conflicted by the idea of animal slaughter. They must be of a size and quality to compare favorably with Big Meat. They must be, as much as possible, pleasant places to work and safe workplaces, above all else. Pay must be adequate. The several that slaughter hogs should be capable of handling perhaps 500 to 1,000-head per week.

Lines should be discouraged in favor of teamwork. Line speeds, if lines are used, must be under strict state control. They should feature some in-house further processing, but they need to have slaughter capacity in excess of their processing — processing can proceed separately from slaughter and it is another worthwhile human activity we should encourage, scattered about in rural Minnesota.

Care must be taken to supplement, not replace, current private capacity. But our small processing capacity is getting old and shutting down. State officials could visit the facilities operated by the Lorentz brothers in Cannon Falls, Minn., to see a good example of what could happen. It is badly needed economic development. This is not cheap processing. It is good processing. The time is right.

The state should build and retain ownership of these abattoirs. These state-owned

abattoirs could be built with bonding funds. The meat processor associations can run apprentice programs in them that should encourage those who desire to and are able to operate processing to come forward. The facilities could be leased to operators. There should be a close working relationship with meat science experts at the University of Minnesota and the Agricultural Utilization Research Institute. The state’s retaining of ownership could guarantee that certain standards of humane slaughter and good work conditions are maintained as a minimum.

This would:

- enable badly needed access to quality processing for farmer-marketers;
- serve as an incubator and boost for people wanting to enter processing;
- build business-based prosperity in central and western Minnesota;
- allow for a much wider variety of farms, increasing numbers of viable farms, especially small farms;
- encourage farms that want to market directly or through relationships to people in rural and urban areas;
- increase urban understanding of rural issues, and rural understanding of urban issues, by highlighting the communication skills that go with closely held marketing businesses;

- diversify agriculture and farming, potentially increasing the possibility of better care of the Earth;
- encourage development of small processing businesses, holding out the possibility of “family heirloom” sausages that people would drive out from the Twin Cities to buy;
- stabilize and support rural schools;
- stabilize and support main street businesses.

Currently, we have a food supply controlled by giant companies that are increasingly crippled by the COVID-19 pandemic. We must not reconcile ourselves to one meat plant or one cannery or one fresh vegetable warehouse system controlling as much as 5% of the product flow, which is the situation we had when Smithfield’s pork plant in Sioux Falls, S. Dak., became a COVID-19 hotspot. It is dangerous. We really don’t yet know how dangerous.

The best way to come out in a different place is to make a different first step, a step for people, communities, and livestock. Rural Minnesota needs it. Individual farmers and others have already done the difficult work of developing the ideas of direct marketing, consumer connection, and creating relationships in business. The idea is growing. The time is now for the state to throw its shoulder to the wheel. We urge action. □

LeeAnn and Jim VanDerPol, along with their family, own and operate Pastures A Plenty Farm in Kerkhoven in western Minnesota. The farm raises hogs and other livestock and markets direct to consumers.

Survey: Lack of Processing Hobbles Local Meat Production

A survey of Minnesota livestock producers shows that the state has a growing local meat industry, but lack of small-scale processing capacity is threatening to undermine it.

This survey was developed by a team of farmers and staff from the Land Stewardship Project, the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, the Minnesota Farmers Union, the Minnesota Farmers’ Market Association, Renewing the Countryside, and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. It was sent to participating groups’ members in mid-May.

Survey results, largely from farmers who direct market their livestock to consumers, restaurants, and food cooperatives, confirmed what agriculture groups and others have known for a long time: farmers are

experiencing a shortage of local livestock processing, made worse by COVID-19 plant closures, and this is limiting their farm businesses.

Well over half of the 111 survey respondents reported that there were too few livestock processing operations to meet farmers’ needs. Even before the pandemic, processing was inadequate, according to 64% of the respondents. A majority of respondents, 54%, indicated that they would raise more livestock if there was more processing available.

What’s particularly frustrating about the backlog in local processing is that 65% of the survey respondents have seen an increase in demand for their products.

More on the survey is at www.misa.umn.edu/resources/local-food-sales-resources/livestock/livestock-processing.

Racism is Not Sustainable

LSP's Statement on the Police Killing of George Floyd

We at the Land Stewardship Project were shocked, saddened, and outraged at the news that a Black man died while in police custody on May 25, three blocks from LSP's Minneapolis office. Video footage shows a Minneapolis police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck for several minutes after he was apprehended for allegedly committing a non-violent offense. Other officers assisted in restraining Floyd and another stood by watching. Despite Floyd's protests that he could not breathe, the police officer continued to press down on his neck and he eventually became unresponsive. He was later pronounced dead.

This is yet another sickening example of how deadly racism is in America. The role of police officers and other public servants is to make our communities safer for everyone, no matter the color of their skin. Unfortunately, racism is ingrained in all of our institutions, and it has yet again claimed a victim.

Our thoughts are with George Floyd's family



This mural honors George Floyd and other people of color who have died at the hands of the police in recent years. Racist violence is a clear violation of LSP's strongly held values that every person has value that cannot be earned or taken away. (LSP Photo)

and the community. In this case, the local community where this occurred includes a neighborhood where LSP staff and members live and work. This tragedy has brought close to home irrefutable

facts: racism is in direct opposition to healthy communities, racism is real and deadly, racism is present in Minnesota and across the country.

Part of the Land Stewardship Project's mission is to develop healthy communities for everyone, no exceptions. Racist violence is a clear violation of our strongly held values that every person has value that cannot be earned or taken away. At the core of LSP's work is our drive to create a society

based on sustainability. Racism, along with the violence it spawns, is not sustainable. To see someone's life held in such disregard is unacceptable and harms us all. We must continue to demand changes and call for accountability.

We join our allies in calling for the officers involved in this deadly incident to be held accountable. We also demand accountability from the Minneapolis Police Department and all of our institutions which, directly or indirectly, create the environment where such tragedies are all too commonplace.

We need change and we need justice now. Getting that justice begins with standing together to express outrage and to push for change. ☐

LSP & Racial Justice

To learn more about the Land Stewardship Project's work related to racial justice, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/about/racialjustice, or call 612-722-6377.

Time to Level the Farming Playing Fields

Report Outlines the Challenges & Opportunities for People of Color in Ag

Farming offers a powerful path to build community wealth and resilience to challenges such as water pollution, droughts and floods, and lack of access to healthy food. However, U.S. agriculture — particularly the pursuit of sustainable agriculture — is rife with obstacles for Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC), including immigrants, migrants, and refugees. That's the conclusion of "Leveling the Fields: Creating Farming Opportunities for Black People, Indigenous People, and Other People of Color," a report published by the HEAL Food Alliance and the Union Of Concerned Scientists (UCS) in May. The Land Stewardship Project is an ally of HEAL and UCS.

The report outlines how these obstacles include difficulty securing capital, credit, land, infrastructure, and information. For these groups, such challenges are compounded by long-standing structural and institutional racism. HEAL and UCS reviewed opportunities for governments, the private

sector, philanthropies, and others to contribute to simultaneously building socioeconomic equity and sustainability in U.S. food systems. To begin overcoming the history of racist policies and exclusion, it is the report's recommendation that solutions be developed by and with — rather than for — Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color.

A few highlights from the report:

- BIPOC represent nearly a quarter of the U.S. population, they operate less than 5% of the nation's farms, and cultivate less than 1% of its farmland.
- A majority of the estimated 2.4 million farmworkers in the U.S. are people of color who do not own or operate farms of their own.
- BIPOC have less access to, ownership and control of key resources related to infrastructure and information for successful, sustainable farms.
- Black and indigenous farmers in partic-

ular have lower net cash incomes and fewer direct-to-consumer sales compared with their white counterparts.

- Black and indigenous farmers receive a disproportionately small share of USDA loans.
- Institutions can help create opportunities for people of color in farming firmly rooted in the farmers' lived experiences and leadership.
- Addressing injustice and increasing food system resilience go hand-in-hand.
- A truly sustainable food system must be both science-based and equitable.
- Also needed are continual learning and cultural shifts within institutions that have benefited from centuries of discrimination.

Read the Report

You can read "Leveling the Playing Fields" at www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/blog/1298.

Where Do We Go After George Floyd?

Standing on the Sidelines in the Racial Justice Debate Should Not be an Option

Note: In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd three blocks from the Land Stewardship Project's Minneapolis office on May 25 (see page 13), individuals, communities, states, and entire nations have struggled with coming to terms with yet one more deadly result of systemic racism.

Four months later, how to address one of the most troubling, and unsustainable, issues of our time is still dominating discussions at home, on the streets, in legislatures, and in communities large and small, urban and rural. Clara Sanders Marcus, membership coordinator and social equity organizer at LSP, recently interviewed three people about how they are grappling with this issue — an LSP staffer, member, and ally. Below is a summary of the stories they told Clara.

As they make clear here, there is no one magic solution to ending systemic racism. But their reflections provide a glimpse at how important it is to start with individual action, learn from others, and then figure out how to join a wider community working for structural, long-term change.

By Clara Sanders Marcus

Buildings Can Be Replaced — Lives Cannot

At the end of every fiscal year, the Land Stewardship Project's Membership and Individual Giving Program sends a series of e-mails to potential members, asking them to join LSP. You may have received similar e-mails as a member, including a recent one from membership director Megan Smith, which included the following language:

"...The brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers and the events that unfolded on the streets of Minneapolis ignited a global movement to dismantle systemic racism and unchecked power. Now, emerging from the collective expressions of pain, righteous anger, and grief is a groundswell for transformational change."

In the last days of June, Megan received a response from someone that read:

"Really??? Megan what is your address? How about I come block your driveway and prevent you from leaving, destroy your property, and then burn your house down and tell you I was just expressing my pain, my righteous anger?"

While it's not unusual to get one or two of these sorts of negative responses from an e-mail or letter to new supporters, this one hit home for Megan — she lives three blocks from the Third Precinct building in

south Minneapolis that burned the night of May 28.

"My first reaction was this person must be lashing out at me to win some made-up argument they thought we were having. It wasn't until later, after sharing the e-mail with others, that I realized how threatening this note was," recalls Megan.

Megan consulted with other staff and chose not to respond to the e-mail. But she did think about what she would say if she had.

"If I had chosen to respond, I would have let them know I did have my street blocked off. My husband's music studio a few blocks away was badly burned. We had cinders from the burnt buildings all over our yard. We could not be outside due to the smell of burning buildings and tear gas that had filled the neighborhood each night. I thought about telling them about the threats of white supremacists planting incendiary devices at businesses and in alleys night-after-night. I thought about telling them about how I could hear the flash grenades, helicopters, sirens, and gunfire all out my window while I worried about keeping my two small children safe. I thought about telling them about the surreal experience of Hummers and armed military patrolling our neighborhoods each night."

That was Megan's personal experience of that last week of May. But she also tried to look outside of her own reality as a white woman for deeper understanding of the context of her experience.

"I wanted to tell the writer of that e-mail that even though I was scared and worried

about the safety of our family, I knew that it was just a fraction of the fear and worry that people with different skin color or less privilege than me have to live with on a daily basis," she says. "The week of protests and uprisings was a call to action for changes in our society, so everyone can live safe and healthy lives."

Many people, members and non-members alike, responded positively to the language around racial justice in Megan's e-mail. But she feels that this particular negative response is an example of where some people in our communities are at when it comes to reckoning with racism in our society.

"It's a reminder that we — white people — have a lot of work to do," says Megan, adding that she's been giving a lot of thought to what that means for her both personally and professionally.

"George Floyd's murder and the events afterwards have reinforced for me the need for me to use the privilege I have as a middle-class white woman to stand up against the systemic injustices in our society. It has also shown me that I always need to be educating myself about how racism and other forms of oppression are showing up in our communities and dedicating my time, resources, and energy into dismantling those systems and building new systems that benefit all people."

In her role as membership director, Megan wants to be sure that LSP is explicit about how racial, gender, and economic justice are critical to building a truly just and sustainable farm and food system.

"Without one we cannot have the other," says Megan. "We need to keep leading with our values and be guided by our mission as we stand up to injustices against marginalized people. I think as a primarily white and both rural and urban organization, LSP's role in this social justice movement is to continue to learn from, be led by, and listen to our allied organizations led by people of color. Then we need to bring what we learn, hear, and see back to our programming, our fundraising, our communications, our meetings, even our kitchen tables."

Even as she witnessed so much burning and destruction, Megan is clear on where the



Megan Smith

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focus should be.

“Buildings and property can be rebuilt and replaced. Lives cannot. I wish everyone could understand that what was happening in the Twin Cities was not just the result of George Floyd’s murder by cops. It was a culmination of decades and generations of oppression and violence by police, and of neglected and under-resourced communities.”

Use the ‘Aha Moment’ as a Starting Point

LSP member Aimee Haag has also been seeking to keep the focus on justice. Aimee and her partner, Andy Temple, live in Litchfield in west-central Minnesota, where they have a small auto mechanic shop, assembly business, and vegetable farm. Aimee also works as the farm-to-school liaison for the school district.

Aimee and Andy became LSP members not only because of the beginning farming resources and land access resources the organization has available, but also because the organization is trying to have big conversations in rural spaces on issues like healthcare and racial justice.

“Taking care of our place, whether land or people,” says Aimee, “that’s our ethos.” And for Aimee, taking care of land and people means that racial justice is always at stake.

Aimee grew up in nearby Hutchinson, where her experience was far from racially diverse. “I’ve always had an open mind and an open heart, but not a completely open understanding of the issues that faced other communities,” she says.

But two years ago, she went to a national Young Farmers Coalition convergence as a delegate. The main theme of the convergence was racial justice, and as she sat listening to a panel of farmers of color, she had her world absolutely rocked.

“For the first time it was thrown in my face how severe and harsh their experience is, not just as farmers,” says Aimee. She sat there in tears, feeling she didn’t have the tools to handle such a realization, and immediately called LSP staffer and farmer Nick Olson. Nick encouraged her, saying that it is hard, but she was now on a trajectory. She was awake, fired up, and had to remember that this is a journey, he said.

“It suddenly wasn’t enough to have an open mind and know that injustice exists. I realized I have to continue to push forward for justice when I have the energy and mental capacity,” says Aimee. “I have to learn more, listen more, and accept the

power that I do have as a white middle class woman in rural Minnesota, even if I didn’t ask for that power.”

The week of George Floyd’s murder, Aimee was having chaotic dreams and, even though she felt paralyzed, knew she had to try to process this in community. When Hutchinson had a virtual vigil a week after the murder, Aimee doubted there would be more than 15 people on the call. In fact, over 90 people joined the call with less than a 24-hour notice. “It’s easy to think that you are alone in this, in wanting justice and peace, but there are people that are on the train, and there are more getting on board every week.”

Aimee worked with other LSP members and several recent high school graduates to convene an in-person vigil in Litchfield a month after George Floyd was killed. They worked to create a space where people could show up; maybe not know what to do, but start growing the conversation around racial justice and share ideas and struggles and thoughts.

“For me, it was a necessary piece of the processing, to recognize my place in all that,” says Aimee. “Here we are in



LSP members Aimee Haag (left) and Jenna Sandoe spoke during a George Floyd vigil held in Litchfield, Minn., in late June. (Photo by Brent Schacherer, Hutchinson Leader)

rural Minnesota, where we are so connected to the issue of racial justice, but it feels so far away.”

She knows that it isn’t far away at all, but it’s challenging to find ways to talk about it. “I think that for a lot of people, when they hear ‘white privilege’ or ‘patriarchy’ or ‘white supremacy,’ they feel bad and get defensive — ‘I didn’t do that!’” she says.

But the past two or three months have felt a little different, like there is less defensiveness, and Aimee thinks that because of COVID-19, people are having more time to process issues like racial injustice privately. “There’s more awareness that we need to trust the experience of other people and let them speak, and we need to do what they need us to do,” she says.

If there is one thing Aimee hopes LSP members can take away from her story, it’s to embrace the “aha” moment. It can be easy to feel shame about having taken so long to wake up to injustice, and it can also be easy to flare up in action at an intense moment and then go back to exactly the way things were before. It’s not “okay” for George Floyd’s murder to be your “aha” moment, says Aimee, since there is nothing “okay” about being blind to injustice. But at the same time, “aha” moments happen to almost all of us, and it’s important to make sure that the moment is the starting point of a continuous journey.

For Aimee, this work feels like sprinting and recovering. There will be days where she’s totally plugged in, and there are days when she has to pause, process, learn, and reframe. She’s reading Black voices, leveraging her consumer power, and working hard to understand that place she occupies in white supremacy and how to actively resist it. She’s grateful for emerging groups that are speaking out at Hutchinson City



A memorial has been erected by members of the community at the intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in south Minneapolis, the spot where George Floyd died in police custody on Memorial Day. It is visited daily by people from across the country. (LSP Photo)

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Council meetings, and she hopes to grow in her involvement in such broader community spaces.

"I think back to conversations I've had, thinking I was saying the right things, but now realizing I wasn't," Aimee says. "It's been such a journey. But we also can't wait to say the exact right thing at the exact right time. Try to show up in your own imperfect way. Continue to be awake."

Linking Racism & a Broken Food & Farm System

Zoe Hollomon is the organizer for the Twin Cities chapter of the Good Food Purchasing Program, a national initiative that encourages large institutions to direct their buying power in a way that focuses around five values: local economy, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare, and nutrition. LSP was a founding member of the Twin Cities coalition and serves as its fiscal sponsor.

Zoe also lives within a half-mile of George Floyd's murder. Three days after the killing, Zoe started working with community groups and some of the Black-led organizations leading the local uprising efforts to provide emergency food and health supply distribution to 20 different sites around the Twin Cities.

"Communities of color that were already experiencing a lack of economic investment, access to health and medical services, and access to whole-some, natural food had lost additional places to buy food and address their basic needs," says Zoe. "Many people were out of work due to the pandemic and were in dire straits. We were organizing grassroots mutual aid services before most of the city or hunger relief organizations came online."

The community was on edge in the wake of the killing, she says.

"There was a lot of fear: of the police, who had just killed another unarmed Black person, and of white supremacists, who came from other cities and states and were setting explosives and fires in buildings, attacking our food and supply distribution sites, leaving death threats for those who put up Black Lives Matter signs, placing accelerants behind houses, in dumpsters, and under cars," says Zoe. "We had no public safety or fire protection, so many blocks



Zoe Hollomon (back row, in gray sweater) is shown here with a gathering of the Midwest Farmers of Color Collective, a group working for racial justice and the development of food and farming systems that honor communities. In a region where the majority of land and agricultural resources are controlled by white farmers and policymakers, it is critical for Black and brown farmers to have spaces to build social connections with each other, and to organize for economic and political power. For more information and to support MFCC, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/midwestfarmersofcolor. (Photo courtesy MFCC)

started organizing walking patrols and mutual aid services to keep people safe. Under the curfew order, state police were attacking protesters, members of the media, kids, people standing in their own doorways... they were applying brute force to an already scary situation."

She adds, "It was a horrible and very stressful time. But activists and local residents were coming together to help our own communities get by: farmers donating produce, restaurants serving as supply donation drop-off points, people transporting groceries and medicine, volunteer counselors and

healers providing trauma care, people doing COVID safety training. I wish the media had shown more of that, but they didn't."

The weeks and months since have been full of anguish and pain.

"As a Black queer woman, I feel the fear for my family, friends, and loved ones who have been in direct danger at the hands of police," says Zoe. "I worry that no justice will come for George Floyd or any of us, despite our pain, despite our organizing. Police violence against Black and brown people has been sanctioned and excused for so long, it's like a reminder that the majority of white

people in this country are okay with it."

For Zoe, police brutality, systemic racism, and food systems work are all intertwined. One of her current organizing efforts includes the Midwest Farmers of Color Collective (MFCC), which, in a region where the majority of land and agricultural resources are controlled by white farmers and policymakers, is creating a space for farmers of color to deepen social connections with each other and to organize for economic and political power.

This past fall, Zoe walked LSP's Racial Justice Cohort through a "Racial Equity in Food Systems" training, a political education experience looking at 500 years of policies pertaining to land, immigration, labor, voting rights, health, and farming policies in the United States.

"Seeing it all together, you begin to see the patterns and the intentionality of all the ways that communities of color have been subjugated while others were lifted up," explains Zoe. "We can only ever hope to create equity and fairness if we acknowledge what has been taken. If we look past the sentiments and see what the actual history shows us."

She adds, "Essentially, a very small group of white industrialists and national leaders decided that they could ensure their wealth and dominance if they could have endless access to cheap labor. They created

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"It's really hard to deal with the fact that much of our ability to change things in this country is up to white people looking at a reality they don't want to admit is true."

— Zoe Hollomon
• • •

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racism — and many other “-isms” — in order to justify and systematize a hierarchy that would help subjugate labor, and this country’s food and agricultural system has operated on that principle since its inception. It’s part of the DNA of many of our systems.”

Racism was and still is an intentional, powerful tool in dividing people who share similar socioeconomic circumstances. Similarly, big business interests have used policy as a tool for dividing urban and rural communities that once had mutually beneficial economic relationships.

“One of the terrible things that has happened since giant food corporations have taken over farming is that the symbiosis that used to exist in our regional economies between rural food production and urban markets has been severed,” says Zoe.

A lot of intention has gone into the destruction of local food systems, to the point of making the system and the people who work in it invisible. There must be a mutual relationship between the people who live in cities and our local farmers, especially as we think about how to make our regions more resilient in times of crisis, according to Zoe.

Before she moved to the Twin Cities, Zoe worked at an organization in Buffalo, N.Y., that focused on bringing youth and families of color, immigrants, and other people living in a neglected urban core together with struggling local farmers from nearby rural areas.

“We were struggling with closing grocery stores and people having to buy food at corner stores, when nearby we had such a bounty of incredible food from these amazing small farms,” says Zoe. “We brought our youth out there to pick cherries and carrots and garlic and learn where food came from — not a store, but the ground. We created great community events, helped find distribution sites for CSAs, and facilitated conversations around how the food system has been taken away from the people by corporations, and about the necessity of coming together to plan for a food system that serves people. We advocated for regional food system planning and informed city and state policy.”

Building connections between cities and rural areas is important work for organizations like LSP. It’s vital for racial diversity and justice, and for developing the kinds of relationships between LSP and organizations led by people of color that leads to strong links, accountability, and an opportunity to make sure our work is relevant.

A key foundation for these connections

and relationships is a deep analysis and understanding of how both our food system and our system of policing are rooted in the idea that white lives are of higher value than non-white lives. Today’s police system grew out of mercenaries and slave patrols who were paid to protect white landowners’ interests, says Zoe.

“The same intentional forces that are responsible for the extraction and exploitation of people in our industrial food system — whether it’s farmers, meat processing plant workers, or other food chain workers — have also allowed our police and penal system to exploit and kill people of color,” she says. “It’s the same underlying motivations, it’s actually at the root of U.S. dominant culture.”

And this is where the need for “aha” moments like Aimee’s emerges, no matter how belated or humbling they are.

“If white people are still questioning whether or not racism exists, then they are not going to work together with oppressed people of color to overcome it,” says Zoe. “I have a white friend who was trying to get her family members to understand how racial injustice is still happening every day, and it made me think...it must be really nice to be able to stand on the sidelines and contemplate whether or not racial injustice still exists, instead of being a person of color who has to encounter and deal with it physically, emotionally, and mentally every day. It’s really hard to deal with the fact that much of our ability to change things in this country is up to white people looking at a reality they don’t want to admit is true.”

Zoe has seen a lot of white people trying to process their feelings around racial injustice, just like Megan and Aimee are doing. LSP members helped spearhead demonstrations in the Minnesota communities of Marshall, Alexandria, and Montevideo, as well as other small towns such as Amery, Wis., and several are starting up conversation circles to begin reckoning with white supremacy.

“I think that’s really important,” says Zoe. “Racial equity work has to happen at

the personal level in your own spirit and mind, and then you can move to the larger concentric circles of your community or organization, and then to society.”

But there is pushback, especially when it comes to significant policy changes.

“Some people think the idea of defunding the police is ‘crazy,’ but are not investigating how ‘crazy’ it is that a state-sanctioned group of people can kill Black and brown people and not be prosecuted,” says Zoe.

“We have been conditioned away from abolition as achievable, when in reality that is what we should all have, freedom to not be exploited by others. We’ve been fed a romantic story that liberation is what our country’s history is about, but in reality, America is built on stolen land and stolen labor.”

And now, she says, we are at a point where people are not believing and not admitting that what they have had is privilege. “Or maybe they understand they have privilege but are unwilling to return or restore what their ancestors set up, to give land back to Black and brown people, or to work with us to dismantle the structures that not only keep some people down but lift other people up.”

As both Megan and Aimee reflected, each white person’s experience of privilege brings the personal responsibility of anti-racist work very close. That’s why it is so important to actively work against the policies and structures that perpetuate racial injustices. That’s why it’s important for organizations and individuals to participate in racial equity training and actively work to repair and restore what’s been taken. Racial justice work is not just a box to check — it’s essential for having a positive impact on the future.

“This COVID-19 pandemic has a lot to teach us about the state of racism in this country,” says Zoe. “We will never be a strong country if so many of our people are sick or unable to live freely and independently. We have to take individual responsibility and collective responsibility to prevent an unacceptable future.” □

LSP’s Vision for the Future & Racial Justice

The Land Stewardship Project’s current long-range plan, *Vision for the Future*, outlines steps the organization will take during the next five years to promote a more sustainable, regenerative, and just food and farm system. One area the plan addresses is the dismantling of racism, patriarchy, and economic injustice. A digital copy of the long-range plan is at www.landstewardshipproject.org/about/longrangeplan. Paper copies are available by contacting one of LSP’s offices: Lewiston (507-523-3366), Montevideo (320-269-2105), or Minneapolis (612-722-6377).



Eyes on the Underground Acres

Unearthing the Links Between Soil Health, Farm Profits & Water Quality

By Brian DeVore

Building soil health may be about bugs, bacteria, and biology, but justifying farming practices that nurture such a natural process often comes down to a human-generated gauge of success: how much money does it put (or keep) in the bank? On a sunny day in late June, Martin Larsen addresses that question while standing in a 20-acre field planted to oats near the southeastern Minnesota community of Byron. He is hosting an online field day on no-till small grains that's being sponsored by the Land Stewardship Project and Practical Farmers of Iowa, and one couldn't have picked a better example of how to add diversity to a corn-soybean rotation. The thigh-high oats are thriving, and Larsen is clearly pleased as he shares aerial drone footage showing acre-after-acre of verdant growth. Over the years, he's been seeking a viable third crop to diversify his row crop rotation. Larsen has raised a few acres of oats here and there in the past, and the success he's having this year with this and other fields planted to the crop on a larger scale excites him. These are food-grade oats, meaning there is a good market for the grain. In addition, there is a market for the straw as an erosion-controlling ground cover on construction sites.

Another bonus is that the oats are serving as a nurse crop to a seeding of clover, which will fix nitrogen, further build soil, and serve as a source of forage for livestock.

As his young son, Rudy, plays in the background, Larsen describes the economic benefits of this planting: reduced input costs, multiple markets for the crop, disruption of weed and pest cycles.

"But also remember that the oat crop will give other value," he adds, going on to make the case for future financials. "Of course, there's the soil health benefit."

Over time, small grain rotations diversify

the soil biome with their dense root structure, building the kind of organic matter that reduces the need for purchased fertilizer. Indeed, research and on-farm experience is increasingly showing that when small grains like oats or rye are rotated into a row crop system, corn and soybean yields increase.

"So when we look at the financials of oats, look ahead and look at the whole systems approach," Larsen says. The farmer also encourages the online audience to consider another benefit of building soil health with a rotation that gets more roots in



Martin Larsen examines a formation called flowstone in Spring Valley Caverns in southeastern Minnesota. Such formations are indications of how surface water constantly makes it way underground in the karst region, where it often becomes drinking water. (LSP Photo)

the ground more months of the year. Toward the end of his presentation, he flashes a slide showing how much nitrate-nitrogen was discharged from tile drainage outlets in the area thus far in the 2020 growing season. Nitrogen is a key corn fertilizer, and keeping it from escaping fields and making its way into ground and surface water is a major challenge in places like southeastern Minnesota.

The chart shows that the corn and soybean ground that's had cover crops integrated into it is consistently producing nitrate-nitrogen runoff well below 10 parts per million, the Environmental Protection Agency's safe drinking water standard. But a line in the graphic tracking nitrogen loss

in a cornfield that's not had the benefits of cover crops or a small grains rotation rises higher and higher as the growing season progresses, finally peaking at around 12 or 13 parts per million in early June.

"That cover crop was really able to hold that nitrate concentration down," Larsen says. "This is just a slide about other things I'm passionate about, and reasons I'm doing this."

As he hints at, Martin Larsen is passionate about a lot of things: agronomy, conservation, geology, hydrology, farming, and, perhaps most interesting of them all, cave exploration; Larsen spends up to 500 hours a year crawling around in Minnesota's underground wilderness.

But as this recent field day makes clear, the place where all these passions converge is rooted in the soil itself. As a result, during the past few years Larsen has become a point of connection himself. Through his various explorations below and above

ground, he's helping farmers and non-farmers see the positive role agriculture can play in creating a healthier landscape that is economically and ecologically more resilient.

Beneath the Roots

"The science connected to water, and then it connected to farming, and then it connected to caving," says Larsen of why he got involved with caving around seven years ago. Not coincidentally, it was at about that time he started using no-till and cover cropping techniques on the 700 acres of land he farms.

As Larsen explains these linkages, he's scrambling around in the dark of southeastern Minnesota's Spring Valley Caverns, a five-mile-plus labyrinth of claustrophobic passages and crawl spaces, rooms with vaulted ceilings, and pits that drop to dark depths. He trains his headlamp at water dripping from a cave ceiling and explains that just a few days ago this moisture may have been precipitation that had fallen onto a hayfield 45 vertical feet from this spot. It's a striking reminder of just how dynamic the Swiss cheese-like limestone karst geology that dominates this region is.

Spend any time with the fifth-generation farmer, especially in a cavern, and it becomes clear that caving isn't just a hobby — it's a thrilling way to make direct

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connections between land use on the surface and water quality below. He describes being in caverns so shallow that the rumble of a county road could be heard overhead; other times he has rappelled into pits that have their true depth obscured by water pooled at the bottom. Larsen likes to show a photo at presentations of a well pipe emerging from a cave ceiling—a graphic indication of the intimate connection between the land's surface and our aquifers. In the age of Google Earth, exploring unmapped regions is increasingly less of an option. But Larsen has found a way to push into the unknown very close to home.

"The thrill of caving is to find an unexplored new passage. When you are the person that is first entering that passage, your light is the very first light, and your eyes are the very first eyes to ever see that passage," Larsen says excitedly as he makes his way through the narrow passageways of Spring Valley Caverns like some sort of subterranean rock climber. "You're exposing yourself to a certain level of risk, doing things that we as humans aren't really meant to do. It's really an eye opener to a part of Minnesota that truly very few of us have seen."

Sometimes what one sees and experiences isn't always pleasant, or safe.

Larsen and other cavers in southeastern Minnesota and northeastern Iowa have had to fight their way through mountains of foam created by liquid manure and other organic pollutants. They have experienced cave floors that resembled, as Larsen calls them, "satanic slip and slides" because of all the eroded, muddy soil covering them.

He has also taken samples of cave drips that show nitrate levels well above drinking water standards. That's a concern, given that in southeastern Minnesota, the majority of drinking water is drawn from what's flowing through these caverns and the rest of the karst geology that makes up this hollow land. And climate change has altered the volume and timing of water moving through the system. Larsen and his caving companions have had a few close calls where massive storms filled caverns to the ceiling soon after they had emerged from underground.

Like any adventurer, Larsen has a high

tolerance for discomfort, like the time he was rappelling down a pit that had never been explored and ended up in a place where "bodies aren't supposed to be." After being stopped by water, he started to ascend, and ended up getting stuck in a crevice.

"It took me one inch at a time to get up and out of that crevice, for over an hour," recalls Larsen. "There's nothing normal about it."

In a way, Larsen says, caving isn't unlike researching and implementing farming techniques that create economic and environmental resiliency on the surface. There are rewards, as well as risks, involved with regenerative agriculture.

On Larsen's own farm, cover cropping and no-till have helped build his soil's health, reducing erosion while breaking up weed and pest cycles, and thus reducing his reliance on chemicals. Water is infiltrating the soil better, an important consideration at a time when climate change is inundating



During an LSP Soil Builders' Network field day, Larsen talks about how cover cropping has made his corn and soybean fields more resilient while creating a healthier water cycle. "One of the only things we've found that moves the bar on nitrate leaching below row crops is to introduce a cover crop," he says. (LSP Photo)

fields with extreme rainfall events.

Larsen's day jobs on the surface world put him in a position to have a positive impact on the quality and quantity of water making its way through the karst in torrents and trickles. Besides being a farmer, Larsen is a feedlot technician for the Olmsted County Soil and Water Conservation District. He is also a member of the Land Stewardship Project's Soil Builders' Network, which is bringing hundreds of farmers from around the region together around building healthier soil in a financially viable way.

Farmers, scientists, environmentalists, and soil health experts say Larsen's ability

to combine his firsthand observations and practical experience with the latest research is a significant resource, and a model that should be replicated throughout the state.

"Every county should have two or three of him," says Jeff Green, a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) groundwater hydrologist who works with Larsen. "I don't know how you describe Martin—a hydraulic Renaissance Man? I'm not quite sure. He does caving, which is exploration, learning more. But he's also taking that information and getting people to make changes with it."

Dark Business

Larsen got interested in caving partly as a result of dye tracing work he was doing with Green. This kind of research consists of dropping fluorescent dyes into sinkholes or "blind valleys"—areas where perennial streams drop out of sight and continue their journey underground—to determine

groundwater movement. Green and other hydrologists have used this technique to gather extensive data on karst groundwater, creating, for example, one of the most extensive springshed maps in the country. But from the time that dye enters the ground to the time it exits in a spring or well—sometimes hours, days, months, or even a year later—there is a mysterious period where a lot is unknown about its movements.

Larsen feels caving can help him fill in some missing puzzle pieces when it comes to the movement of water. He and other cavers in the area have worked with hydrologists at the DNR and the University of Minnesota to help track water movement. They have also worked with Larry Edwards, an internationally known geochemist who has done cutting edge work on using water-formed cave formations to gauge

changes in the climate over the millennia.

Larsen has a business degree from Winona State University and admits to not paying much attention in geology class. But he has a natural scientific curiosity and a drive to learn more about the relationship between the natural environment and farming, as well as other land uses. There are times when his thrill-seeking, ability to put up with physical discomfort, and scientific curiosity intersect, like the time he and some companions spent 16 hours in Tyson Creek Cave crawling on

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their stomachs through water in a passage-way that was never more than 24 inches high. After two-thirds of a mile, they came to a spot where the water was flowing in two directions.

"This is the first time to my knowledge that we have ever discovered this in the state of Minnesota, where we actually encountered a place in a cave where you physically can look at the water choosing two different paths, and likely, two different springsheds," says Larsen.

A Messenger to the Surface World

When it comes to karst and groundwater quality, Larsen, and others, have some bad news. As more land has been converted from perennial systems like hay and pasture to annual row crops like corn and soybeans, nitrate levels in groundwater have gone up. Earlier this year, the Environmental Working Group released an analysis of public records showing that one in eight Minnesotans are drinking nitrate-tainted tap water. Hastings, Minn., had to spend \$5 million on a reverse osmosis system that can take nitrates out of the water, and other communities have had to abandon wells that were polluted by fertilizer runoff.

Not only is a crop like corn reliant on nitrogen fertilizer, but annual row crops like corn and soybeans only cover the land around a third of the year, leaving bare soil vulnerable to leaking nutrients and other contaminants into groundwater. Couple that with a changing climate that is producing extreme rainfalls more often, and it's a recipe for disaster.

"That's showing up in more than one location—that we're getting an increase in volume of water *and* concentration of pollutants," says Larsen. "So it's pumping the room full of gas, and now with climate change, you're igniting it."

Research at the Olmsted County Soil and Water Conservation District Soil Health Farm shows that as precipitation amounts increased 42 percent from 2017 to 2019, nitrate concentrations in the water beneath the

root zone of the crops growing in the plots increased 44 percent.

To top it off, water can infiltrate karst rock in some surprising ways, making its way through pores too small to see with the naked eye. In Spring Valley Caverns, Larsen shines his headlamp on the ceiling of a low, narrow passage. The rock appears to be an impenetrable mass, but it's weeping water like a rung-out sponge.



Cavers examine the joints and cracks that allow surface water to flow into a cavern in southeastern Minnesota. Climate change has caused more water to flow through such caverns, and Martin Larsen says it's increasingly contaminated with farm chemicals and manure. (Photo by Martin Larsen)

Larsen says what troubles him the most is that widely accepted "best managed practices," also known as BMPs, don't seem to be addressing the problem adequately.

"We know now that even with the right rate, the right amount, and the right timing, we're not getting water that's drinkable below our row crops," he says of BMPs such as highly calibrated applications of fertilizer and precision planting. "And as a farmer, that really speaks to me. We need to do something better than status quo."

The good news is Larsen is part of a growing group of farmers in the region who are going beyond the status quo and building the soil's ability to hang on to nitrates and other nutrients before they make it into cracks, crevices, joints, and eventually, our aquifers. One soil building method that is showing particular promise is integrating covers crops like small grains and brassicas into corn and soybean systems. Studies across the country show that cover cropping

not only dramatically reduces erosion and surface runoff, but builds the soil's ability to better manage water and nutrients by increasing organic matter. Having living roots in the soil year-round is a key to creating fields that are more resilient, particularly under extreme weather conditions.

Larsen is certainly proving that on the land he farms. He's also excited about research he and others recently conducted at the Olmsted County Soil Health Farm showing the positive impacts of cover cropping. Plots grown without cover crops had nitrate concentrations in the water escaping the root zone of 13.14 parts per million. Cover cropping reduced those levels to 8.84 parts per million.

The DNR's Green says it's key that people like Larsen can offer farmers a comprehensive look at ways they can protect groundwater. Sinkholes may be the most evident, and dramatic, threat to aquifers in karst country. Manure, pesticides, bacteria, and even pharmaceuticals can make their way through these gaping holes, especially during intense rain events.

But day-in and day-out, the biggest threat to karst groundwater is nitrate runoff from farm fields. And it often takes a more indirect, hard-to-control route—down through the soil profile. In fact, groundwater research at Big Spring in northeastern Iowa shows that the vast majority of the nitrate contamination is coming from water carrying it through the soil column and into the bedrock.

When Ron Pagel was growing up on his family's farm near Eyota in southeastern Minnesota, he was always mindful of the threat direct runoff posed to water in the area. There was a spring that was some 300 feet away from an area near the barn where they wintered cattle. Not only did runoff from the feedlot threaten to make it into the spring, but also a stream that runs through the farm and eventually empties into the Root River.

"It was no secret where heavy rains were going from that feedlot," says Pagel. Today, the farmer — he has a small dairy and a cow-calf beef herd, along with 434 acres of crops — has a manure storage unit in place to not only keep that waste out of the water, but to create a situation where he can collect the manure and use it as a source of soil-building fertility. Pagel credits Larsen for helping him through the process.

As a feedlot technician, Larsen helped

Underground, see page 21...

with the engineering, as well with getting state, county, and federal cost-share funds to help with construction. That's important, particularly when prices for commodities like milk are in the dumps.

But just as importantly, Larsen has helped farmers like Pagel control the indirect runoff that trickles down through the karst. Pagel's family has been planting cover crops for the past half-dozen-years. Not only do the covers contribute to soil health, but they serve as a cheap source of grazing forage for his cattle.

"All my land has either hay on it or cover crops this year," says Pagel proudly. "Especially when you look at the forecast or watch the rain gauge fill up, like it seems to a lot these days, it's nice to know you have the land covered, soaking it up."

Pagel and other farmers who work with Larsen say it's key that he not only knows how water behaves beneath the surface, but also speaks the language of economics. Larsen formerly worked in agronomy sales, and knows that farmers, especially these days, are constantly having to mind their bottom line. He also knows the power of communicating clearly and in an engaging manner about the agronomic benefits of building soil health.

For example, Larsen likes to tell the story of Bear Spring, which flows out of the ground not too far from where he farms. During a 24-hour period in June 2018, 1,520 pounds of nitrogen was discharged from the spring, according to water monitoring. Larsen calculates \$35 worth of nitrogen fertilizer was being flushed out of that spring per hour. Now, multiply that by the thousands of springs that are present in southeastern Minnesota alone.

"Money is coming out of that spring," he says. "And it's a lot because it doesn't stop."

All of a sudden, the \$30 per-acre investment a farmer might make when planting cover crops looks pretty good.

Having someone who can communicate about the big-picture, long-term benefits of building soil health is key to expanding practices like cover cropping and managed rotational grazing in the region, says Shona Snater, who co-directs LSP's Soil Builders' Network. People like Larsen are a critical link in helping farmers transition from trying a new practice to actually making it a routine part of their operations. That's especially important when a farmer enters the second or third year of a new practice, and runs into problems.

"They can come to an event and learn how to get started, but if they don't have a support group or technical support, some-

one who they can turn to when problems come up, then they aren't going to be able to maintain that practice in the long-term," Snater says.

Larsen's twin messages about the vulnerability of our groundwater and proactive steps we can take to protect it can resonate beyond the farming community. Deirdre Flesche once saw the farmer give a presentation on karst geology and soil health during an LSP event at Niagara Cave, a commercial cavern near Harmony, Minn. She came away alarmed and energized.

"I was shocked that he could smell manure in the caves," says Flesche, who serves



Larsen has been experimenting with interseeding cover crops into his row crops to get a jump-start on off-season growth. (Photo by Liana Nichols)

on the Lake City Environmental Commission, which advises officials in that community on issues like energy conservation.

After seeing Larsen's presentation, Flesche began working to get the Commission to address water quality concerns as well. She feels farmers as well as non-farmers must be more aware of how quickly and dramatically their land use decisions on everything from fields to lawns can impact the groundwater.

"If we're going to be able to protect the water supply, we need to be aware of how this water moves through the karst," she says. "I don't think people have a clue how vulnerable our water is."

Larsen is working hard to provide some of those clues, and to show that he and other farmers can offer a viable alternative.

Give it a Listen

On episode 231 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast, farmer and caver Martin Larsen describes the connections between land use on the surface and water quality problems he sees underground: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1224.

Pushing Beyond the Unknown

Part of the allure of caving is to constantly push further. What's beyond that hole full of soil and rubble? Is that air whistling through a crack a harbinger of a huge gallery bristling with stalactites and stalagmites?

Innovative farming involves pushing for more as well. Larsen, an obsessive tinkerer, has built a planter that will allow him to better interseed cover crops in his corn before harvest, giving them a jump-start before winter. He posted pictures of the tricked-out seeder on his Facebook page and was flooded with questions and comments from other farmers who are working to find creative ways to build healthier, more resilient soil.

Whoever he's talking to, Larsen is willing to admit that when he started changing the way he farmed, he was nervous and made (and is still making) mistakes. But his passion for groping around in the dark and seeing firsthand how land use above impacts water quality below gave him an extra incentive to get past that initial trial-and-error stage. To him, the stakes are too high to do otherwise.

"The scarring of the farming landscape really troubles me, so it's pushed me to change the way that I farm. That's our mentality, as humans and as farmers, to adapt, to learn the new way to do it that works better," he says. "We can talk about what happens in the cave. We can talk about what happens in the water. But we have to get back to accountability to our farms and to our soils, and to keeping them viable." □

Join the Soil Builders' Network

Join the Land Stewardship Project's Soil Builders' Network to get regular updates on workshops, field days, and on-farm demonstrations, as well as the latest soil health and cover crop research. For more information on joining, see the Soil Builders web page at www.landstewardshipproject.org/lspsoilbuilders, or call 507-523-3366.

On the Soil Builders web page, you'll also find fact sheets, videos, podcasts, and other resources related to creating healthy soil profitably.

A Transition Power Team

A Farm Transfers Ownership & a Farmer Transfers into a New Role

What's that stuff in soil that's supposed to provide humans a sense of wellbeing? You know, like a protozoa-based version of Prozac? Emmalyn Kayser is trying to come up with the name on a recent March afternoon as she and Chris Burkhouse squat in a high tunnel and busily weeded spinach seeded the previous fall. It's 40 degrees outside and snow is piled up on this vegetable farm in Wisconsin's Saint Croix River Valley, but thanks to the wonders of the greenhouse effect, it's hovering around 80 degrees above the spinach beds; moisture drips from the hoop house's plastic, making for a muggy, July-like environment.

"Actinomycetes!" Kayser, who studied soil science in college, says excitedly. She explains that these are a type of bacteria that give freshly turned soil that intoxicating "earthy" smell. Kayser, 32, goes on to hypothesize that it's the aromatic earth that's making it possible for Burkhouse to enjoy what many people see as drudgery: weeding.

The 53-year-old Burkhouse responds that, for whatever reason, she in fact *does* like weeding, especially when she can focus on such a simple task and not have to worry about the other headaches of running a farm: marketing, bookkeeping, employee management. This is the first growing season in decades that she is not working the soil of Foxtail Farm as a co-owner.

"It's freeing, in a way," says Burkhouse. "It's like I get the best of all worlds. I get to be here, I get to help be a part of things and be a part of decision making on the side. But I'm not responsible for everything. I've been responsible for enough years."

In December, Kayser and her husband, Cody Fitzpatrick, officially took ownership of Foxtail Farm, a thriving Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation that over three decades has built up an extensive infrastructure and membership base. The story of this farm transition centers around several factors, including clear communication and good planning, with a large dollop of serendipity tossed in. But one of the reasons Foxtail's former owners were able to pull off this passing of the torch was that

by mentoring dozens of farmers over the decades, they had set themselves up to have the right folks on hand when it was time for a change. Just as importantly, the new owners who walked through that door actually had enough experience under their belts that a farm with extensive infrastructure in place was not as intimidating as it could have been for a typical beginning farmer. And one of the things that's easing the handoff is that Burkhouse is staying on as an employee and adviser for the time being, providing a linkage between the farm's past and its future.



Chris Burkhouse (right), shown here with Emmalyn Kayser, says switching from being a co-owner to an employee of Foxtail Farm has helped her transition out of three decades of being involved in the business side of producing vegetables. "It's freeing, in a way," she says. (LSP Photo)

"We're getting a jump-start with all of Chris's experience in a way that we can exercise trial and error in new ways," says Fitzpatrick. "I think there's going to be a lot of 'Hey Chris, what about this?' situations that we wouldn't have at our disposal if this was a strict buyer-seller relationship where the former owners go elsewhere."

Bucket Farming

Chris and Paul Burkhouse started a version of Foxtail in 1989, just across the Saint Croix River in Minnesota. In those years, they sold vegetables from a self-service roadside stand where people dropped money into a Kemps ice cream bucket. They eventually adopted the CSA model and began

growing their membership. In 2004, Foxtail was moved to a 62-acre patch of ground near the Wisconsin community of Osceola. The Burkhouses increased their CSA membership to around 320 and establishing four high tunnels, an extensive root cellar storage system, packing facilities, and a commercial kitchen. When cover crops were included, they had over 18 acres under cultivation.

In 2013, Foxtail switched from a traditional CSA model to providing "winter shares." That involved growing year-round utilizing the four high tunnels, and then storing and preserving the fruits of their labor, making deliveries to members from October through April, with an additional spring share. Chris says the winter model evened out the workload for them and their employees and gave members access to local, fresh vegetables at a time when that kind of food can be hard to find.

Throughout the years, one of the things that Paul and Chris emphasized was that they didn't want their farm to just raise vegetables — they also wanted it to produce new farmers. They've had an estimated 70-80 employees over the years, including several graduates of the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course (see page 32). Around two-dozen former employees stayed on the operation for a second or third year and, through an incubator arrangement, used Foxtail land and infrastructure to start their own enterprises while working part-time for the Burkhouses. Many of those second/third-year apprentices have since launched their own farms.

The Burkhouses took farmer training seriously, with Paul leading short courses and discussions on everything from the basics of the internal combustion engine to soil management. They did weekly walk-arounds assessing each vegetable plot — what needed to be done and why. They included staff in all aspects of the farm business, not only growing and harvesting produce, but also infrastructure management, marketing, and financing.

Part of the training involved making it clear that farming was not an easy career path. Chris and Paul would write down all the expenses involved, and ask questions like, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Our approach was to inform folks as much as possible about what they're getting into," says Chris. "There's going to be surprises, but you don't want the surprises to be overwhelming."

Power Team, see page 23...

Northern Exposure

By the time Kayser and Fitzpatrick came to work at Foxtail in 2018, they had experienced their share of farming surprises while raising vegetables in Alaska for 10 years. On the plus side, they had learned that when you raise vegetables in a somewhat remote place with such a short growing season, the local demand is significant. However, anytime you need something as simple as a screw, it can be a three-hour drive to obtain it.

They both grew up in Minneapolis and met in kindergarten. Kayser majored in agronomy and soil science in college, and Fitzpatrick studied music. She was passionate about food and the natural world, making raising vegetables in the interior of Alaska a perfect fit. They enjoyed the experience and learned a lot about using high tunnels and other structures to extend the season. However, Kayser and Fitzpatrick eventually decided they wanted to raise food closer to their home roots. Through the Good Food Jobs website (www.goodfoodjobs.com) the young couple learned that Foxtail, which is less than an hour's drive from the Twin Cities, had openings.

The Transition

Kayser and Fitzpatrick concede that when they started at Foxtail in September 2018, they thought it would simply be one more way to gain farming experience while living closer to their families in Minnesota. The Burkhouses, for their part, had always known they would eventually need to think about what would happen to the farm after they retired. They have a conservation easement on the land, and felt they owed it to their members, who had been very loyal over the years, to keep it a CSA operation. But talk of transitioning the farm was expedited in the winter of 2018-2019 when Paul made it clear he didn't want to farm anymore, and his and Chris's marriage ended.

Fortunately, they had already worked with Kayser and Fitzpatrick enough to know they might be a good fit for taking over the farm. Not only had they survived an extensive interview and application process (see sidebar), but they were competent utilizing season extension methods, got along well with the CSA members, and had ideas for how to expand the farm's enterprise offerings. Plus, they were young, but not so young that the idea of a farm with lots of infrastructure completely intimidated them.

Ironically, an operation with as much infrastructure as Foxtail's can be its own worst enemy when it comes to being attractive to a new generation of farmer. For one thing,

it's going to be more expensive to purchase equipment, buildings, and other aspects of a well-established operation. In addition, it may have infrastructure and enterprises that a new farmer doesn't need.

In the case of Kayser and Fitzpatrick, they had farmed with little infrastructure while in Alaska, and were ready to step into something more established.

"When Cody and I were weighing the pros and cons of this property, it was a ben-



Kayser and Fitzpatrick say having Burkhouse stay on after the sale has been key to a smooth transition. It creates a "power team" in a lot of ways, according to Kayser. (LSP Photo)

efit that it had all this infrastructure because we were already starting at 10, instead of really having to start from zero and build up to 10," says Kayser. Or, as Fitzpatrick puts it succinctly, "We want to grow food for people now."

During 2019, the older and younger farmers began drawing up detailed plans for the transition and meeting formally as much as

possible — something that can be difficult when you work together informally every day. Chris and Paul split the farm 50-50 and Kayser and Fitzpatrick obtained a beginning farmer loan through the USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). Obtaining beginning farmer loans through FSA can be a lengthy process, but they benefited from the fact that they were applying for the loan during the fall, not the winter, when many people are seeking operating loans and the offices are extra busy. The younger farmers also had the advantage that Paul and Chris were able to provide years of financial data showing their CSA model was viable. That's important, given that FSA offices are more accustomed to loaning money out for conventional crop and livestock operations.

"We had a track record that we were able to document and put forward that this can be done on this property, has been done on this property. It's generated this income over this many years. And so, with this plan, that's transferable," says Chris.

Kayser and Fitzpatrick say that getting numbers from Foxtail on everything from input costs to its average electricity bill also helped them present a solid business plan to the FSA.

When drawing up a purchase agreement, the two couples went through and identified what equipment and other infrastructure was needed on the farm for it to continue as a CSA for Kayser and Fitzpatrick, and therefore what should be included in the overall farm purchase. Chris and Paul held an equipment auction to pay off an operating loan they had, and through the auction the new farm owners purchased any equipment

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Prepping to Open that Door

Emmalyn Kayser likens the circumstances that allowed she and Cody Fitzpatrick to take over Foxtail Farm to approaching a closed door that was opened for them before they even knocked.

One reason it turned out to be the right door is that Chris and Paul Burkhouse spent decades mentoring beginning farmers. By the time Kayser and Fitzpatrick showed up, the older farmers knew what they were looking for when thinking about transitioning Foxtail to someone who could operate a local-food agricultural enterprise long into the future.

For one thing, they require people who work on the farm to have at least one year of vegetable production experience and to show a commitment to farming. Then there's the job interview.

"We had a set of interview questions that

kind of developed over time," says Chris. "What's the hardest thing you've ever done? Is it physical? Is it mental? Is it emotional? How do you deal with chaos? It starts a conversation."

Kayser remembers specifically the answer she gave to a question about what she would do if handed a list and left alone for the day with other farm employees.

"There was a moment of silence and I just went, 'Well, I would take the list and I would be in charge the rest of the day,'" she recalls with a laugh. "And that was very much the truth."

Burkhouse says all kidding aside, that was the right answer. "In that process of how Emmalyn answered, you get a sense of, 'Does the person know themselves?' for one thing. And then you can suss out things like, 'How do you work as a team and how do you handle conflict?'"

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they felt they needed.

In December 2019, Kayser and Fitzpatrick closed the deal on the FSA loan and became the new owners of Foxtail Farm.

On-Farm Mentor

But perhaps the most invaluable piece of “infrastructure” that came with the farm purchase is in human form. Chris has agreed to stay on as a salaried employee and adviser for at least a year. The arrangement is made easier by the fact that the farm has three separate housing units.

The new owners of Foxtail feel this part of the arrangement has been invaluable. Kayser says she and Fitzpatrick’s background in growing during the “shoulder seasons,” combined with Chris’s knowledge of what works best in local conditions, makes them a bit of a “power team.” They have been able to trade information both on the fly while doing field work, as well as in more formal sit-down meetings.

“I can just say, ‘Hey, I’m thinking this.’ And Chris will say, ‘That sounds cool, but this is what you should maybe think about too,’” says Kayser.

Maintaining a connection with Chris has also helped in transitioning the relationship between the new Foxtail owners and the farm’s CSA members, many of whom have been associated with the farm for years. Through a letter from Chris and Paul, members were informed of the transition; the response was overwhelmingly positive.

“And I think they were looking forward to seeing what else is going to happen, what’s new?” says Chris.

As it happens, changes *are* coming. The farm’s business model is being slightly modified from a full-on winter CSA to a more fall/early winter and early spring system. Kayser and Fitzpatrick would also like to look into utilizing the farm for agritourism and educational ventures related to health, wellness, and food. Chris likes that the new owners are thinking outside the box.

“We always thought, ‘There’s a lot of opportunity and potential for a number of different enterprises on this farm,’” she says.

It remains to be seen what will happen next year. For her part, Chris feels this period in-between where she is able to work on the farm as a non-owner has been

a “win-win” — she’s been able to keep her hands in the soil and practice the basics of food production, which is why she got into farming in the first place. She’s also been able to transition into a new life as someone who, after 31 years, no longer has a business interest in a vegetable enterprise.

Back in the high tunnel on that March day, Kayser jokes that if one of her ideas for the farm — converting to complete no-till — comes to fruition, there will be less exposed ground to expose Chris to all that feel-good soil life. Chris doesn’t seem worried. Exposed soil biome or no, there will be plenty of opportunities to feel good about where the farm is at, and where it’s headed.

“Our lives’ blood, sweat, and tears, both Paul and I’s, are definitely all over this farm,” she says. “And so, I feel especially rooted to this place, and knowing it’s in good hands makes me feel good, and makes me feel like this is the perfect move. ☐

Give it a Listen

Episode 241 of the Land Stewardship Project’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast features Chris Burkhouse, Emmalyn Kayser, and Cody Fitzpatrick talking about creating Foxtail Farm’s transition “power team”: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1299.

Removing the Spectre of Speculation

Linking Landowners & Farmers Through a Passion for Stewardship

One day last summer, Andy and Betsy Boone’s neighbor brought over his equipment and baled a cutting of hay for the beginning farmers. When it came time to pay up, the neighbor, Keith, proposed a fee for the job and then followed up with a quick question: “Is that a fair price? Because I just want you to succeed.” Andy shares this story on a sunny morning in late fall while he walks the 170-acre hilltop farm in northeastern Iowa where he and Betsy raise hogs, sheep, and chickens on pasture.

Later that day, sitting in a coffee shop a few miles north of the farm, the man who farmed and stewarded those 170 acres for almost four decades is visibly thrilled to hear Andy’s story.

“Really? That’s great. Oh, that’s wonderful,” Lyle Luzum says with a smile. “I want to thank Keith for being such a great neighbor to Andy and Betsy. That’s really important.”

Luzum has a vested interest in seeing the Boones succeed, so learning that a neighbor shares that enthusiasm is profoundly

satisfying to him. A few years ago, Lyle and his wife Sue made the farm available to the Boones via a nonprofit that focuses on getting more stewardship-minded farmers on the land. The Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT) relies on enthusiastic beginning farmers like the Boones who see opportunities in raising food for their communities on a small to moderate scale.

But just as importantly, it relies on landowners like the Luzums, who not only share that positive view of regenerative farming’s promise, but possess a vision of land ownership that may be a bit counter intuitive to most people involved in agriculture. Lyle, for example, sees the time he was on that farm as a temporary situation where he just happened to hold the deed, that piece of paper that tells society he’s the “owner.”

“But what you actually did is you used it while you were here for a living, for a livelihood, for life, and then you passed it on to somebody else,” he says. “To think you own it is folly — you don’t own it. So that’s the first step, is to think differently. That was a real revelation to me.”

Link in the Land Chain

To SILT’s executive director, Suzan Erem, such an enlightened attitude towards long term stewardship of the land and passing it on is key to the organization’s mission. Erem and a group of two-dozen leaders and experts involved in sustainable agriculture launched the organization in 2015 because they felt there needed to be a consistent mechanism for making sure landowners like the Luzums were connecting with farmers like the Boones. Too often, retiring farmers who are moving off the land and new agrarians who need access to that land are like ships passing in the night. They may be a good match, but the timing isn’t right, financing doesn’t work out, or they simply don’t know of each other’s existence.

Erem spent years researching various models for connecting sustainable farmers with stewardship-minded landowners. She also became a serious student of what regenerative practices were best for maintaining the ecological health of farmland. She came away from that research with two conclusions. For one, as farmers retire or simply go out of business, America is in the midst

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of a massive transfer of farmland ownership, particularly in the Midwest.

"When this huge land transfer is over, whoever comes out on top will decide the future of what agriculture and our landscape is going to be," Erem says.

If current trends continue, that future is not looking good. Over 80% of the nation's farmland is owned by people 55 or older, and roughly half of those people are 75 or older, according to a *National Public Radio* report. About half of Midwestern ag acres are owned by people who don't farm it, and much of it is in parcels that range from 40 to 160 acres in size. Those parcels are being snatched up by larger operations, which often tear out the fences, bulldoze the homes and outbuildings, and make a former farmstead into just one more crop field.

Given this trend, Erem also concluded that there is no time to find the farmers first, and then link them with landowners. It has to be done in reverse. First, secure farmland and put in place restrictions that prevent it from becoming just one more industrial ag operation, then find a farmer who will farm it in a regenerative way. Erem concedes that's a tall task, especially considering the price of farmland. And the clock is ticking.

There needs to be a way for making land affordable to beginning farmers who are ready to farm it today, not 10 years down the road. That requires removing farmland real estate speculation from the picture, she says.

Lowering the Price

SILT uses easements and land donations to protect agricultural acres and make them available to farmers who might otherwise not have access to land. An easement is a covenant attached to a deed that ensures in perpetuity land will be used in a certain way, no matter who owns or is renting it. In the case of the easements SILT uses, they make sure enrolled farms will not be future homes to, for example, tract housing, commercial development, chemical intensive cropping operations, or CAFOs. The SILT easements go a step further and also guarantee the farm will be managed utilizing regenerative practices. SILT staff monitor and enforce the easement; going to court if need be.

When landowners choose to attach such restrictions to their deed, it tends to lower

their farm's dollar value by as much as 40%. When they sell it, this discount can give new farmers a chance to buy land without competing with housing developers or conventional commodity farmers on price.

SILT also accepts donations of farms that have easements. Once an operation is donated, the organization rents it to a farmer utilizing a long-term lease which has a discounted rate based on how much the land's value has been reduced by the independently appraised easement. With decades of looming mortgage interest out of the picture, the beginning farmers on SILT-owned farms can plow capital into their operations. They won't ever own the land, but they can rent-



Andy and Betsy Boone, shown with their daughter, Milly (they also have a son, Paden), on Driftless Hills Farm, which they rent from SILT. They will never own the farm. "It doesn't bother me in the least, honestly," says Andy of the fact that they will be lifelong renters. (LSP Photo)

to-own the house and outbuildings without paying interest or ponying up a hefty down payment, allowing them to build equity in the long term. Meanwhile, the former landowners garner significant tax breaks, as well as piece of mind that they've helped launch the next generation of farmers.

Whether the farm is sold outright at the discounted price or donated to SILT, the organization will make sure whoever works those acres agrees to utilize a broad range of sustainable, regenerative methods: diverse rotations, pasture-based livestock production, and, in general, systems that build soil health, for example. They must also have a third-party certification put in place through programs such as USDA Certified Organic, Certified Naturally Grown, Food Alliance Approved, Animal Welfare Approved, or Certified Biodynamic.

Conservation easements are nothing new — several organizations around the country utilize them to protect natural habitat on

land. But SILT's use of easements may be one of the only examples in the Midwest of such a deed restriction being applied to working farmland that may not otherwise have an outstanding natural feature, like a wetland or a native prairie. It's a recognition that sustainable farming practices can benefit the ecosystem, as well as the community.

Erem says finding landowners willing to lower the value of their farms by up to 40% is not as difficult as one might think.

"Is it a needle in a haystack? Absolutely. But, I'm telling you they are there," she says. Interested landowners generally approach SILT with lots of questions. Each situation is unique, and the process of protecting a farm can take two years or longer, based on the landowner's needs.

"You want to sit with the idea for a while, because this is not something you get to take back," says Erem. "We really encourage landowners to take their time, to talk to the people they need to talk to, always to get the advice of their professionals. Because nobody likes a surprise, and nobody wants regret."

SILT sees education as part of its mission, and produces resources (see sidebar, page 26) for landowners seeking information about what sustainable practices are viable on working farmland. Erem says it's important to remind people that places like Iowa can produce more than corn and soybeans, and that there's a market for locally produced, direct-to-consumer food or specialty crops.

Since it was launched five years ago, SILT has enrolled nine farms for a total of 935 acres. They range in size from 22 to 170 acres and are located across Iowa. SILT uses existing resources such as the Land Stewardship Project's Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse (see page 27) to recruit farmers for parcels that need them. The beginning farmers currently running the operations represent a range of enterprises: grass-based livestock, small-scale vegetables, and organic grain, for example.

The Ownership Myth

As they approached their 70s a few years ago, Lyle and Sue Luzum started thinking about the future of their farm. They had been working the land since buying it from Lyle's parents in 1979, and their daughter, Stephanie, doesn't want to farm.

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Farm Transitions

...SILT, from page 25

Lyle put a lot of thought into the fact that he wanted to give a beginning, stewardship-minded farmer a chance. The farm is in the Driftless Region and is within a foot of being the highest point in Winneshiek County; to say the least, it's prone to erosion. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, Lyle's father put in contour strips and two-and-a-half miles of terraces. Lyle and Sue had always made sure the farm had a diverse, soil-building mix of row crops, small grains, and hay. They went no-till and certified it organic.

"We realized very quickly that if this farm goes to somebody who doesn't care about those things, those things will be quickly erased," says Lyle. "There's a lot of conservation history that we didn't want to see just torn up and put into corn and soybeans or a big CAFO."

But this isn't just about preserving a long-running legacy. Over the years, the Luzums had direct-marketed pasture-raised lamb and got involved in the local food movement. Through that experience, they saw potential for creative, hardworking beginning farmers to make a go of it financially on a relatively small farm like theirs.

Lyle is also motivated by the idea that he doesn't need to go to his grave knowing he sold the farm for the highest price. And that "highest price" can be, well, quite high. The Luzum farm, which has extensive outbuildings and other infrastructure, has been valued at about \$5,000-per-acre, putting the price tag for the entire operation in the \$1 million territory. Lyle finds that astounding — and a little bit ridiculous.

"It's a good farm, but it's not a \$5,000-an-acre farm," he says. "There's just something that doesn't feel morally right about me being the one that cashes in, when my ancestors worked their butts off to pass it on. There's nothing special about me — I just happened to be here at this moment."

Fortunately, the Luzums' daughter doesn't feel she's entitled to inherit a wind-fall either. So, in 2016 Lyle and Sue donated the farm to SILT and eventually moved to Decorah. The organization put the word out it was looking for farmers to rent it.

Regenerative Renting

Andy Boone, 34, grew up in Des Moines, and Betsy, 46, in Utah — they met in northern California where they both gained experience raising livestock on pasture. When

the Luzum farm became available, they were farming a few acres in southern Iowa and felt they needed more land to create a viable livestock enterprise and pursue direct marketing on a larger scale.

They learned about the Luzum farm through Practical Farmers of Iowa, and began the intense, months-long application process in the winter of 2018. It required a business plan with three years of cash flow projections. They also had to answer essay questions about why they wanted to farm and how they would handle everything from marketing and diversification...to failure.

"We spent like three weeks every night as soon as the kids went to bed, writing that stuff out and going through it," recalls Betsy.

The Boones were interviewed by members of the SILT Farmer Committee, which consists of farmer-members of the organization's board, as well as advisers. In the spring of 2018, their application was accepted, and by late fall they had moved onto the farm.

Last year was the Boones' first growing season on Driftless Hills Farm. Part of their attraction to the land is that local consumer markets for pastured meat are relatively accessible. They sell in the Decorah area and to a farmers' market in Minneapolis. The Boones have access to 70 acres of the farm — the rest is enrolled in a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) setaside contract that's three years into a 15-year lease. Betsy and Andy say not being able to farm all 170 acres allows them to grow into the operation; once the CRP contract expires, they may be ready to raise more livestock and expand. Besides being certified organic, the Boone operation is Animal Welfare Approved. In addition, their sheep enterprise is Certified Grassfed.

The beginning farmers are in the midst of a three-year probationary lease during which they need to show they are utilizing regenerative practices and are able to keep up on paying the discounted rent to SILT. After that trial period, a 20-year lease can be signed and they can start the rent-to-own arrangement on the house and outbuildings. In Iowa, 20 years is the longest lease period allowed, but it can be renewed in perpetuity. The Boones' children — they have a 5-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter — can inherit the lease if they choose to farm.

An added bonus to the arrangement is that the Luzums also donated their machin-

Give it a Listen

On episode 243 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast, retired farmer Lyle Luzum and beginning farmer Andy Boone describe how letting go of the "ownership myth" can benefit agriculture and local communities: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/1304.

ery. This has not only saved the Boones money, but it's giving them a chance to try different enterprises and decide what equipment they will need in the long-term. For example, with Lyle's help, they recently raised and harvested small grains, something the Boones hadn't considered doing before.

In order for an arrangement like this to work, it's not only the retiring farmer who must possess an unconventional view of land ownership. The Boones will never own the soil that Driftless Hills sits on. They say that's fine. They have heard farmers like Missouri grazier and author Greg Judy speak about the benefits of never owning land, but rather focusing on managing the enterprise that it is home to.

"It doesn't bother me in the least, honestly," says Andy of the fact

that they will be lifelong renters. Hanging in the house on Driftless Hills Farm are plaques honoring the Luzum conservation legacy. The Boones say that's humbling, and allows them to take the long view of stewarding this land.

"I want to do well, just in general. Because of the land trust, because of the Luzum family, and just because that's the way we've always farmed in a regenerative way," says Andy as he walks past the plaques and out of the house on his way to check the grazing paddocks. "Lyle's dad was into soil conservation before it was really a thing, you know? And that feels really cool to me." □



"To think you own it is folly — you don't own it," says retired farmer Lyle Luzum of the way he views farmland. (LSP Photo)

The Dirt on SILT

For more information on the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust and its new publication, "An Iowa Landowners Guide to Sustainable Food Crops," see <https://silt.org> or call 319-800-8108.

Farm Transition Tools

The Land Stewardship Project has developed numerous resources to help retiring farmers and beginning farmers with transitions to the next generation. Check them out at www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/farmtransitiontools. On that web page, you will also find information on the Minnesota Beginning Farmer Tax Credit, which provides an incentive to sell or rent land or other agricultural assets—machinery, buildings, facilities, livestock, etc.—to a beginning farmer. There is also a tax credit available for beginning farmers who participate in a financial management program like Farm Beginnings.

For more information on the Land Stewardship Project's farm transition work, contact Karen Stettler at 507-523-3366 or stettler@landstewardshipproject.org.

Is Farming in Your Future?

The desire to farm is powerful—sparked by love of food, the land, community, entrepreneurship, and more. But it is a complicated undertaking, and the list of questions to answer before diving in is long. If you are dreaming of farming and puzzled about how to get started, the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Dreams workshop is for you. Farm Dreams is a four-hour workshop designed to help people clarify what motivates them to farm, get their vision on paper, inventory their strengths and training needs, and get perspective from an experienced farmer. It's a good precursor to LSP's Farm Beginnings course (see page 32).

Farm Dreams participants will:

- Assess their resources, skills, and motivations for farming.
- Learn about important things to consider when starting to farm.
- Write down their farm vision.
- Develop an educational plan.
- Learn about training opportunities and support networks.
- Talk to an experienced farmer about their path into farming.

Farm Dreams classes are held periodically throughout the year in the Minnesota-Wisconsin region. For dates and to register for the class, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/farmdreams, or contact LSP's Annelie Livingston-Anderson at 507-523-3366, annelie@landstewardshipproject.org. □



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.

Seeking Farmland

◆ Aaron Curry is seeking to purchase a total of 6 acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact: Aaron Curry, 952-607-6953, nougan@gmail.com.

◆ Peter Yang is seeking to purchase 1-2 acres of farmland within *30-40 minutes of Saint Paul, Minn.* Contact: Peter Yang, 651-925-9700, plyyang8@gmail.com.

◆ Caitlyn Bell is seeking to purchase 25+ acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact: Caitlyn Bell, 608-201-3377, caitlynshannanbell@gmail.com.

◆ Alejandra Sanchez is seeking to rent 10 acres of farmland within *one hour of Minnesota's Twin Cities*. Contact: Alejandra Sanchez, 510-504-5721, awoolenforrest@gmail.com.

◆ Levana Little is seeking to rent 1-3 acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact:

Levana Little, 612-393-7249, l.m.mcneilly@gmail.com.

◆ Kahlyn Keilty-Lucas is seeking to purchase 5 acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact: 612-987-1038, kahlynkl@gmail.com.

◆ Eric Berge is seeking to purchase at least 5 acres of tillable farmland in *Minnesota or Wisconsin*. Contact: Eric Berge, 651-252-9661, rric.berge28@gmail.com.

◆ George Walker is seeking to purchase 80+/- acres of farmland in *Minnesota*. Contact: George Walker, 715-821-6775, george.g.walker@outlook.com.

◆ Shoua Lee is seeking to purchase 2-3 acres of farmland *within one hour of Minnesota's Twin Cities*. Contact: Shoua Lee, 651-230-9917, sualis21@gmail.com.

Farmland Available

◆ Valerie Haugen has for rent 10 acres of

farmland in *Minnesota's Scott County (near Lakeville)*. Contact: Brandon, 651-414-1301, brandonhaugen@gmail.com.

◆ Ed Lysne has for rent up to 5 acres of farmland in *Minnesota's Rice County, south of the Twin Cities*. Contact: Ed Lysne, 612-790-7873, edriclysne@gmail.com.

◆ Gordon Simon has for sale 5 to 53 acres of farmland in *western Wisconsin's Chippewa County*. Contact: Gordon Simon, 715-828-4698, gordysi@icloud.com.

◆ Patrick Lang has for sale 8.8 acres of farmland in *western Wisconsin's Dunn County*. Contact: Patrick Lang, 715-316-9068, hexagonprojectsfarm@gmail.com.

◆ Lori Cox has for rent, starting in 2021, a 10-acre u-pick fruit business in *Minnesota's Carver County*. Contact: Lori Cox, 425-241-2515, rootsreturn@gmail.com.



American Harvest God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland

By Marie Mutsuki Mockett
408 pages
Graywolf Press
www.graywolfpress.org

Reviewed by Dana Jackson

Most of us relate to the books we read through our own experience, or we start a book that way. That's why I wanted to read *American Harvest*.

For more than half my life, June meant wheat harvest. It was a season and a cultural backdrop. Summer was divided into two parts: before harvest and after harvest. Grain elevators and a flour mill dominated the economy of Abilene, Kans., where I grew up. Uncles and cousins had wheat farms, and although my father worked in town, he related daily weather forecasts to how the wheat crop would be affected, from planting to harvest. In my early teens, I helped my sister on the farm during wheat harvest, making cookies and sandwiches to take to the field, watching the kids. When my hot and dusty brother-in-law said, "I've got to go to Lincoln for a part," I knew the old combine had broken down, which meant cutting was delayed, and he was anxious to finish before it rained.

Equipment failures and rain-delayed harvests still cause farmers anxiety. But most family farm machinery has been replaced by monstrous combines operated by custom wheat harvesting companies that follow ripening grain on farms from Texas through Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, all the way into Idaho. Small wheat farms still exist, but they likely produce organic wheat or a specialty variety.

The subject of wheat harvest drew me to this book, but I soon learned it's a travelogue and a memoir that covers more topics than wheat. The author, Marie Mutsuki Mockett, is the daughter of a Japanese mother and a father from Nebraska, and has inherited a share of the 7,000-acre family wheat farm in Nebraska. Since childhood, when she and her father drove from their home in California to Nebraska for harvest, she has known and admired Eric Wolgemuth, owner of the company harvesting their wheat. She accepts his invitation/challenge to spend a summer following the wheat harvest with

him and his wife Emily, their crew of four young men (sons and nephews), and one young woman, all from small farms around Lancaster, Pa.

Marie is 37-years-old, but she's "8-years-old in farming years," the harvest crew tells her, because age 10 is about when farm children start driving tractors, and she can't drive a tractor. She's lived on both U.S. coasts, but travels the nation's heartland as if in a foreign country, learning the process of wheat harvest, appreciating the natural landscape, experiencing local culture (rodeos and stock car races, wild hog hunts, Native American pow wows), and trying to understand the Christian religion as practiced by the crew and the churches she attends with them. She struggles with the concept of hell and the Book of Revelations, but is drawn to Eric's interpretation of Christianity, which is simply to show love as Jesus did.

Mockett did her research about the American food system before the trip, so interspersed throughout the narrative is background information about farming practices and soil. The author also reviews controversies over genetically manipulated crops and organic food. She is disappointed that most of the harvest crew members are reluctant to engage in discussions about these broad subjects.

Marie joins Eric and the crew where the harvest starts, in Texas, in time to see them unload combines, grain carts, and tractors from flatbed trailers pulled by semis all the way from Pennsylvania. The trailers for eating and sleeping are parked at central locations, and she describes how they drive the huge equipment slowly down back roads from one farm's ripe wheat fields to the next through Texas and then Oklahoma. To my disappointment, she doesn't write about the wheat harvest in Kansas, as she takes a two-week break for an academic commitment, then re-joins the crew briefly in Colorado before it moves on to harvest wheat on her family's land in Nebraska.

So much land in rural America is controlled by absentee farm owners like Marie, and I've wondered if they feel any connection to their land, if it means more than a source of income. The author's attachment to the Nebraska farm is through memories of family being together in Kimball, the little town where her grandmother lived in a large, stately house, and in the wooden bunkhouse inside a large steel Quonset hut, built on the farm for family members to stay

in during harvest after her grandmother's death. She's glad to visit this place of good memories, but she knows she can't live there. The population of Kimball has shrunk; businesses are closed on Main Street and the high school her father attended is boarded up. Marie contemplates selling her share of the farm. But then she would lose the connection to family history, and her six-year-old son Evan would not inherit the land. She retains ownership of the farm because of ties to her family, not ties to the land itself.

As farms get larger and towns smaller, people in rural areas lose economic and political power, and resent the cities where the power is transferred. The author explores the "divide" between city and country, urban people and rural people. She knows she looks different, that her Japanese facial features stand out in totally white rural communities, but ethnic origin is not what

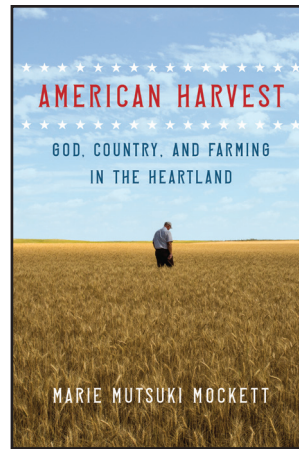
separates the writer from the young Pennsylvanians she is traveling with, although they are not free from racial and gender bias. Mockett is college-educated, reads voraciously, and is a published writer with many friends in the arts. She has lived in New York City and San Francisco and in Japan with her mother's family, who own a Buddhist temple. The young crew members have little experience beyond the farm, but they feel superior to city residents because farmers have the knowledge and skills to produce food that city people lack. Most of the crew are uncomfortable around

Marie because she has "an uncharted world" in her head and learns by asking lots of questions and reading different perspectives in books, while they have been conditioned to understand the world through work on the farm and their religious faith. She is "city" and they are "country."

On its face, *American Harvest* is an account of the summer Marie Mutsuki Mockett spent with a wheat cutting crew. But truthfully, it's more about her interior journey than the physical journey, the path of which can be found in 12 pages of bibliographic notes.

Don't take this journey with her unless you are willing to follow the breadcrumbs through a wide range of topics and issues and emotions, "an uncharted world." □

Former Land Stewardship Project associate director Dana Jackson is the co-editor of The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems (Island Press).



Farming While Black Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land

By Leah Penniman
368 pages
Chelsea Green Publishing
www.chelseagreen.com

Reviewed by Molly DeVore

Back in February, as I prepared to attend the MOSES Organic Farming Conference in La Crosse, Wis., I caught a news report about cases of something called “COVID-19” popping up in the U.S. At the time, this information was unnerving, but the idea of a pandemic still felt distant. As we now know, a lot has changed since then.

At the conference, I was particularly struck by the words of keynote speaker Leah Penniman, operator of Soul Fire Farm and author of *Farming While Black*. I remember being shocked by her speech — something, I as a white woman who for many years accepted the white-washed and rewritten version of history she was fed, should be used to by now. As Penniman stood in a room full of mostly white farmers and explained the Afro-Indigenous roots of all the regenerative farming practices we know today, I realized just how deep my miseducation had gone.

While I thought Penniman’s speech was eye-opening at the time, I now realize just how relevant her words are to the times we’ve come to live in since. This year began with people stocking up on rolls of toilet paper and cans of beans, fearing our supply chains would crumble. Now, Black people and other people of color across the country are educating white people on the reality that they have never been able to rely on or trust our traditional systems.

The pandemic and the protests that have emerged in the wake of George Floyd’s murder may, at first glance, not seem directly connected. In fact, the turmoil that has resulted sheds light on just how broken our current infrastructure is. It’s times like this that the basics of life — being able to feed our communities, for example — are critical. During Penniman’s keynote, she quoted civil rights activist and founder of the Freedom Farm Cooperative, Fannie Lou Hamer, who said, “If you have 400 quarts of greens and gumbo soup canned for the winter, nobody can push you around or tell you what to say or do.”

This emphasis on self-sufficiency in service of the greater good is expanded upon in Penniman’s *Farming While Black*, which emphasizes the importance of going outside of societal infrastructure to provide for your community.

Penniman’s very decision to start Soul Fire Farm in upstate New York in 2010 was motivated by the fact that she and her husband were raising two young children in an area dominated by a form of “food apartheid.” When her neighbors learned she had farming experience, they asked when she was going to start a farm to feed the community.

Over the past decade, Penniman and her team have used Afro-Indigenous agroforestry, silvopasturing, wildcrafting, and polyculture practices to regenerate 80 acres of mountainside land. They now produce fruits, medicinal plants, pasture-raised livestock, honey, mushrooms, vegetables, and preserves. The majority of their harvest goes to people living under food apartheid or those impacted by state violence. Penniman weaves her personal experience throughout the book, using what she has learned to set the stage for each chapter.

It is clear that her lived experience as a Black woman who has been able to find healing through farming is integral to the book. Penniman describes the devastating impacts of generations of violence occurring on the land through slavery, convict leasing, sharecropping and more. In addition, wealth gaps and systemic racism have disconnected Black communities from key farm and food systems.

Early on, Penniman describes the damage this disconnection

produces. “Black youth are well aware that the system does not value their lives,” she writes. As one young Black man said while visiting Soul Fire Farm, “Look, you’re going to die from the gun or you are going to die from bad food.”

This passage illustrates the many forms violence against Black communities can take and the often-unseen role food plays.

Later, the book delves even deeper into the intersection of food and systemic racism. Penniman writes that the forced shift away from traditional African diets has been a disaster, and that Black people are 10 times more likely to die from poor diets than from all forms of physical violence combined.

Using a writing style that is as straightforward, inspiring, and information-packed as her public presentations, Penniman’s goal with this richly illustrated book is to help Black farmers return to the land, addressing both the issue of access to healthy and culturally appropriate food and working to heal some of the past and present traumas that have occurred. Hence the subtitle of the book: *Soul Fire Farm’s Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*.

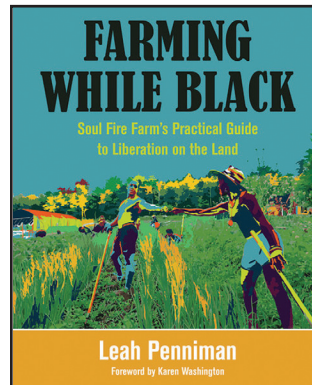
Despite the title of the book, the range of lessons included ensure that anyone with an interest in just, sustainable food systems will find it worthwhile. Penniman pairs hands-on skills with advice on how to enact structural change, making it clear that learning how to set up drip irrigation is just as important as learning how to decolonize farming practices. After all, the final chapter is titled, “White People Uprooting Racism.”

The book also looks at the complex relationship humans have with the land, intertwining both practical farming knowledge and traditional Afro-Indigenous spirituality. While some chapters lay out how to conduct soil tests, others include traditional Haitian songs used to honor the spirits of the land.

One passage that exemplifies the duality of the book discusses the importance of agroforestry for soil restoration: “Not only is the cooperation of the forest a profound guide for how we need to exist in human community, it’s also a practical survival strategy. We want our cultivated lands to be a part of that network with the native forests,” she writes.

These technical farming skills and guidance for how to respect and work with the land are invaluable. But some of Penniman’s best, and most timely, advice comes in her chapters on how to access the land and capital necessary to begin farming.

These chapters explain the large disparities between white and Black farmers — that Black households earn only 59 cents for every dollar of white median household income, that white neighborhoods have an average of four times as many supermarkets as predominantly Black neighborhoods, that Black people own only 1% of U.S. rural land, and that 80% of wealth is inherited and can often be traced back to slavery. It turns out several of the speakers at recent Black Lives Matter protests have discussed this idea of generational wealth. Vanessa McDowell, the CEO of the YWCA in Madison, Wis., spoke at one march about the lack of



• • •
**“To free ourselves, we must
feed ourselves.”**

— Leah Penniman
• • •

Farming While Black, see page 30...



...Farming While Black, from page 29

generational wealth in the Black community and how white people can go beyond just being allies and become “co-conspirators” by directing money to communities that lack this key resource.

“... generational wealth within the Black community basically doesn’t exist,” McDowell said. “White people just don’t understand it because they are so used to having money passed down to them.”

While McDowell’s comments focused on increasing home ownership in the Black

community to address gentrification, this notion of wealth redistribution is just as important when it comes to farming and agricultural land ownership.

Penniman describes her struggle to obtain land and how she had to settle for marginal acres on a mountainside. Over time, she and her family were able to build up the organic matter in that hardscrabble soil, but lack of generational wealth was a major hindrance. For too many Black farmers and other farmers of color, it’s an insurmountable barrier.

Early in *Farming While Black*, Penniman lays out the three essential ingredients for any beginning farmer: training, land, and material resources. Black farmers and other farmers of color have continued to have land, resources, and even cultural knowledge stolen from them. In an effort to address these barriers, Soul Fire Farm has created

a reparations map (<https://bit.ly/3jkGqfL>) where Black farmers and farmers of color can list what they need so that those with resources can connect with them.

This redistribution of wealth and resources within the farming community is essential and more relevant than ever. Because, as Penniman writes toward the end of her eye-opening book, “To free ourselves, we must feed ourselves.” □

Molly DeVore is a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studying journalism, environmental studies, and digital cinema production. She directs the urban agriculture program for the F.H. King student group and is the managing editor of the Badger Herald.



LAND
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PROJECT

Membership Update

Election Day is Nov. 3 — Are You Registered?

The date for casting ballots in the general election is **Tuesday, November 3**. Put democracy in action today by planning ahead and preparing to vote:

- To make sure you have a plan to vote, see <https://bit.ly/31yxflc>.
- To check your voter registration status and register to vote if you are not already, see <https://bit.ly/3aZPwDZ>.

→ Here in Minnesota, we can vote absentee in advance of Election Day by mail or in-person. To request an absentee ballot be sent to you so you can vote-by-

mail, see <https://bit.ly/3gxI4YS>.

→ Some cities and towns in Minnesota only use vote-by-mail. You can find out if you live in one of those places by using the Secretary of State’s Poll Finder at <https://bit.ly/3hx7c3p>.

→ Already voted by mail? Track the status of your mail-in ballot to ensure it has been accepted at <https://bit.ly/31BenSF>.

→ If you are not a Minnesota resident and need help registering to vote in your home state, e-mail Emily Minge at eminge@landstewardshipaction.org to receive the correct links.

Finally, check-in with people you know to ensure they’re registered to vote, have a plan to vote, and have the support they need to vote-by-mail. LSP’s sister organization, the Land Stewardship Action Fund (LSAF), has created a program — Land Stewardship: Democracy in Action — to help with having these conversations with your networks. See www.landstewardshipaction.org/take-action/sign-up for details on signing up.

For more information on LSAF, see www.landstewardshipaction.org, or contact Megan Jekot at 612-442-9899, mjekot@landstewardshipaction.org. □



Membership Questions?

If you have questions about your Land Stewardship Project membership, contact LSP’s membership coordinator, Clara Sanders Marcus, at 612-722-6377 or cmarcus@landstewardshipproject.org. To renew, mail in the envelope included with this *Land Stewardship Letter*, or see www.landstewardshipproject.org/home/donate.

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. □

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 Honor of Terry VanDerPol

- ◆ Hawk Creek Prairie Farm

In Honor of SSND Jubilee Classes of the Central Pacific Province Mankato Campus

- ◆ SSND/Kathleen Mary Kiemen

In Honor of Sam Glover for his work at Lawyerist

- ◆ Ari Kaplan

In Memory of Dean Harrington

- ◆ Bob Meyerson

In Memory of Karl “Bill” Gossman

- ◆ Janne Gossman & Family
- ◆ Arlene Quam
- ◆ Carolyn Lange Hatlestad
- ◆ Doris Gogelow
- ◆ Tracy Sheeley
- ◆ Nancy Johnson
- ◆ Marvin & Suzanne Napgezek
- ◆ City of New London

To donate to the Land Stewardship Project in the name of someone, contact Clara Sanders Marcus at 612-722-6377 or cmarcus@landstewardshipproject.org. Donations can be made online at www.landstewardshipproject.org/home/donate.

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.



Member Voices

When We Lose Farmers & Farms, We Lose Community

Land Stewardship Project member Chad Crowley farms with his wife, Melissa, near Nodine in southeastern Minnesota. They are in the process of taking over the operation of longtime dairy farmers Art and Jean Thicke. During an LSP farm crisis forum last winter in Preston, Minn., Crowley spoke about the impact the loss of independent family farms is having on his community:

"I used to be a volunteer firefighter with the Nodine Fire Department, and I've seen a lot of stuff in the small communities. One of the things I've seen is how there aren't volunteers anymore. Because there are fewer farms, there are fewer people living on the land. People have to get a job in town. They can't respond from town to a fire department call-out.

"We're losing community involvement as the farmers are moving off the land. On our ridge alone, at one time we had eight dairy farms. We're the last one. There's only one other farm on our ridge. It's a beef farm. That's it.



Chad Crowley: "It could go a long way if people reached out." (LSP Photo)

"When you have fewer farmers, who do I turn to? I can't go to my neighbor who works in town, and say, 'Oh my gosh, today I had this problem with a cow or I'm having this other farm problem.' Yes, he's sympathetic and will say, 'Oh I'm sorry to hear that.' But he doesn't understand it. So, I think it's making it harder and harder, mentally, for dairy

farmers and farmers in general, when you don't have people to be able to go to and find out that you aren't the only person in that situation, that other people are facing hard times.

"When you're dealing with farmers, myself included, sometimes we don't express ourselves very well when it comes to hardships. Or we don't go and look for where there's resources, or where we could turn.

"Maybe as a community we need to come together and realize that farmers are hurting, that maybe they're not going to come to you. But if you can see it, come to them. Reach out to them. Just ask them, 'How are you doing?' I'm not just talking financially. We all know now it's not the greatest. But just, 'How do you feel? How's your day going?' It could go a long way if people reached out." □

There are several excellent resources for farmers who are facing emotional, economic, or weather-related problems. See the sidebar below for more information.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week. The Lifeline is committed to improving crisis services and advancing suicide prevention by empowering individuals, advancing professional best practices, and building awareness. Call **1-800-273-8255**.

LSP Farm Crisis Resources

Feeling stressed or know someone who is? Check out LSP's list of hotlines, websites, and other resources at www.landstewardshipproject.org/farmcrisis.

See pages 10-11 for more on LSP's farm crisis work and details on new resources that have been made available to Minnesota farmers facing possible foreclosure and other issues.



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STEWARDSHIP CALENDAR

→ **ONGOING** — **We Are Water Exhibit, University of MN-Morris**, (runs until Oct. 19). Contact: www.wearewaterwcmn.com
 → **SEPT. 23** — **LSP Online Pasture Talk: Forage Potential in a Rotationally Grazed Pasture System**, 6:30 p.m. – 7:30 p.m. Contact: www.landstewardshipproject.org/events/foragegrazing, Alex Romano,

aromano@landstewardshipproject.org, 507-523-3366

→ **SEPT. 24** — **LSP Compost Check-in**, 7 p.m. – 8 p.m. Contact: www.landstewardshipproject.org/events/compost, Shona Snater, ssnater@landstewardshipproject.org, 507-523-3366

→ **NOVEMBER** — **LSP Farm Beginnings Classes Begin** (see below)

→ **JAN. 7-8** — **MN Organic Conf.**, Saint Cloud, Minn. Contact: www.mda.state.mn.us/environment-sustainability/minnesota-organ

ic-conference, Cassie Dahl, 651-201-6134

→ **JAN. 21-23** — **Grassworks Grazing Conf.**, Wisconsin Dells, Wis. Contact: www.grassworks.org, Heather Flashinski, grassworksheather@gmail.com, 715-289-4896

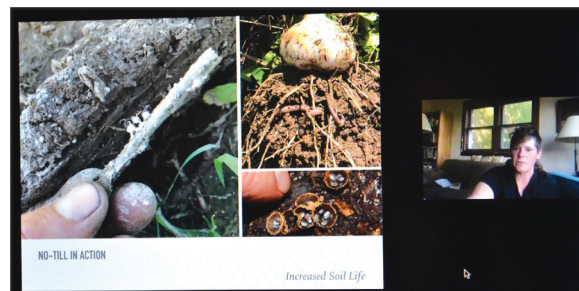
→ **FEB. 13** — **Sustainable Farming Association of MN Conf.**, St. Joseph, Minn. Contact: www.sfa-mn.org, 1-844-922-5573

→ **FEB. 25-27** — **MOSES Organic Farming Conf.**, La Crosse, Wis. Contact: www.mosesorganic.org/conference, 715-778-5775

LSP Online Field Days

In June, Les Macare and Els Dobrick of Racing Heart Farm hosted a Land Stewardship Project Farm Beginnings online field day (pictured) where they described their no-till vegetable operation in Colfax, Wis. In recent months, LSP has also offered online educational programs on rotational grazing, small grains, cover crops, and soil health. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of LSP's field days and workshops will be offered online until further notice. While not as optimal as actually visiting the farms, these events offer participants a chance to ask questions and share resources.

We are scheduling more events on an ongoing basis. For details on the latest LSP field days and workshops, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/home/upcomingevents. □



Applications Open for 2020-2021 LSP Farm Beginnings Course

The Land Stewardship Project's Minnesota-Wisconsin region Farm Beginnings Program is accepting applications for its 2020-2021 course. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the in-class portion of the course will be held online, beginning in November. Farm Beginnings is marking its second decade of providing firsthand training in low-cost, sustainable methods of farm management.

Over the years, more than 860 people have graduated from the Minnesota-Wisconsin region Farm Beginnings course. Graduates are involved in a wide-range of enterprises, including grass-based livestock, organic vegetables, Community Supported Agriculture, and specialty products.

The course is for people just getting start-

ed 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 regular classroom sessions, as well as farm tours, field days, workshops, and access to an extensive farmer network. Classes are led by farmers and other agricultural professionals. The classes will run until March 2021, followed by an on-farm component that includes farm tours and skills sessions.

The Farm Beginnings class fee is \$1,000, 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. LSP has reduced the usual \$1,500 tuition to \$1,000 as a result of the lower administrative costs associated with the online course.

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 (www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/beginningfarmertaxcredit).

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