

The Land Stewardship



LAND
STEWARDSHIP
PROJECT

32 Years of Keeping the Land & People Together

Letter

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“Being sustainable isn’t just one generation — it’s got to be handed down through.” (Pages 18-27)

—Crop Insurance’s Disastrous Consequences—

—Continuous Living Cover—

—CSA Farm Sign-Up—

—Good Fences Make Good Stewardship—

—Contract Grazing as a Land Stewardship Tool—

—MNsure Open Enrollment—

—Don’t Sell the Farm—

—The Ogallala Road, The Third Plate—



The *Land Stewardship Letter* is published by the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization. The Land Stewardship Project's mission is to foster an ethic of stewardship for farmland, to promote sustainable agriculture and to develop healthy communities. Members of the Land Stewardship Project receive this publication as a benefit. Annual membership dues are \$35.

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Ensuring a Disaster

A New LSP Report Shows that an Unaccountable Crop Insurance Program is Decimating our Land, Communities & Farms...& We Are All Footing the Bill

By Mark Schultz

A number of years back, the Land Stewardship Project began to survey the graduates of its nationally-recognized Farm Beginnings Program about what barriers they faced when trying to launch their farming operations. One challenge kept coming to the top of the list: affordable, long-term access to land. Whether for diversified livestock and crop farms, or for operations focusing on producing high-value fruits and vegetables, not having access to the land they need remains the number one barrier to their success. And these are the farmers who are helping to build up this nation's local/regional food system, one of the fastest growing sectors of the ag economy. U.S. Census of Agriculture data shows direct-to-consumer food sales grew twice as fast as total food sales during a recent 15-year period. If these innovative farmers can't access the land they need, one of the most positive developments we have seen in agriculture in recent decades will wither on the vine.

Meanwhile, LSP members and staff active in LSP's Policy and Organizing Program were witnessing an extremely negative development in U.S. agriculture. As a result of Congressional action, the USDA dramatically increased the amount of public dollars spent to subsidize federal crop insurance, with no limits placed on how much of a premium subsidy each producer could receive. As a result, crop insurance has become the number one recipient of tax dollars directed toward agriculture, while conservation, food assistance and other programs have been cut, sometimes drastically.

At the same time, across the Midwest farmers and rural residents have witnessed an unprecedented growth in the size and dominance of the largest farms, as houses, barns and other outbuildings are replaced by massive grain bins that sit on operations running 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 acres and more of corn and soybeans. The impact on access to land is being widely felt, as land prices and rental rates have spiraled to record levels, bid up by the largest operations.

The bottom line is that more farms than ever are being bought up by mega-operations, which proceed to bulldoze the buildings, trees, conservation structures and fencing. Once a farm has been eradicated, it becomes just one more field to be planted into corn or soybeans, rather than an independent business that supports a family and contributes to the community.

As an organization concerned with the long-term stewardship of America's farmlands and the health and vitality of family farms and rural communities across the Upper Midwest, LSP decided to take a closer look at the role the nation's biggest crop subsidy program is playing in shaping our landscape and communities.

Staff and volunteers hit the books and hit the road. We pored over USDA reports and gleaned county land records across Minnesota. We talked to farm policy experts. We visited farmers and neighbors in the countryside. What we discovered is summarized in three special "Crop Insurance: How a Safety Net Became a Farm Policy Disaster" white papers. As we describe on pages 10-13, our research shows that:

→ Federally subsidized crop insurance virtually guarantees large profits for corporate insurance companies whose interests powerfully shape the program.

→ Among farmers, the vast majority of the financial benefits of crop insurance are captured by a small minority of producers. The largest crop operations receive the lion's share of crop insurance premium subsidies and insurance payouts.

→ The manner in which crop insurance is structured and administered puts beginning farmers at a severe disadvantage by 1) inflating rental rates and land prices and 2) placing them in a position of being viewed by lenders as "high risk" producers.

→ Crop insurance is a major vehicle for using public funds to concentrate agricultural wealth in this country. This consolidation increases economic and environmental risk faced by many agricultural communities — decreasing access to land, degrading rural housing and farm

infrastructure, and causing long-term harm to our soil, water and wildlife.

In short, a program that started out simply as a way for farmers to ride out the droughts, floods, pest infestations and other hardships nature tosses their way has quietly been transformed into one of the biggest drivers of how farming is carried out in this country. The result is bad news for our communities, the land, our economy and our country. Major reform is required.

To be sure, it is important that America's farmers have access to affordable crop insurance. Crop insurance is an important risk management strategy that can protect a farm family in the case of natural disasters as well as provide a moderate level of income protection — a safety net in hard times that enables farmers to pay their expenses and get the next year's crop in.

But intense lobbying pressure from the insurance industry, agribusiness firms and commodity groups has transformed this safety net into a wasteful multi-billion dollar revenue stream for some of the nation's largest cropping operations, as well as the insurance companies that sell and service the policies. It funnels public dollars into private hands, producing a result that policy makers never dreamed of when crop insurance was created three-quarters of a century ago: fewer farms, concentrated wealth and diminishing opportunities for some of the most innovative beginning farmers we've seen in a generation. Ultimately, by prioritizing and facilitating short-term financial gain over long-term farm sustainability, the current federally subsidized crop insurance program makes it harder for America's farmers to grow food while building diversity and land stewardship into their operations.

Please take a few minutes and read these white papers, and see if you agree. And send us your thoughts and ideas. ☐

Mark Schultz is the Land Stewardship Project's Policy Program director as well as its associate director and director of programs. He can be reached at 612-722-6377 or marks@landstewardshipproject.org.

LSP's Crop Insurance Report

For more information on the Land Stewardship Project's "Crop Insurance: How a Safety Net Became a Farm Policy Disaster" white papers, see pages 10-13, or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org/organizingforchange/cropinsurance. More information is also available by contacting Mark Schultz.

Continuous Learning about Continuous Living Cover

By Brian DeVore

When it comes to introducing and supporting innovative sustainable farming practices, nothing beats a field day. Such events provide an opportunity for farmers to see firsthand how profitable, environmentally sound production practices are performing on their neighbor's land under climatic, agronomic and economic conditions they can relate to. Studies have shown that while sustainable farming practices reduce a producer's dependence on chemical and energy-based inputs, they require a greater reliance on networking with other innovative farmers.

That's why a new report showing a significant uptick of field days related to "continuous living cover" in the four-state region of Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin is so encouraging. The report is based on statistics compiled by the Green Lands Blue Waters (www.greenlandsbluwaters.net) initiative, a collaboration involving individuals, groups—including the Land Stewardship Project—and institutions that have a shared goal of increasing the amount of Mississippi River basin land that's covered in vegetation for more than 90 days a year, which is the typical growing season for the corn-soybean duo-culture that dominates the region.

Getting that cover established is key if we are to get on top of a water contamination issue that's causing problems in the Upper Midwest and extending all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. It's no coincidence Green Lands Blue Waters is focusing on Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois—these four states produce an outsized share of agricultural runoff.

Giving the land the kind of consistent armor that can build soil health while protecting water quality and providing wildlife habitat can take many forms on the farm, from well-managed pastured acres

and grassed waterways to cover crops and agroforestry enterprises. Some of these plant systems are perennial (grass, trees) while others offer a way to extend the green season on an annual basis (cover crops such as small grains and brassicas). Green Lands Blue Waters places all of these options under a general term called "continuous living cover." This category provides farmers with various choices for integrating land-friendly



LSP sponsored a cover crops field day in west-central Minnesota's Chippewa River watershed in September. (LSP Photo)

plantings into their operations, especially if they're not willing or able to plant the whole farm to grass.

And judging by Green Lands Blue Waters' "2014 Continuous Living Cover Events Report," there are increasing opportunities to learn about what options are out there for extending the green season in the Midwest. In 2010, the four-state region of Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin had less than two-dozen continuous living cover field days; by the end of 2013 that number was 161. Iowa tends to lead the pack as far as number of field days offered annually, but the other states are catching up.

By far the most popular topic discussed at these events is perennial forage (pasture grass and hay), but cover cropping is a hot issue as well, with agroforestry and biomass also featured at several field days, according

to Green Lands Blue Waters.

It's also interesting to note who is sponsoring these events. Overall, the number of organizations sponsoring or co-sponsoring such events more than doubled from 2012 to 2013 alone. The usual suspects—the Land Stewardship Project, Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota and Practical Farmers of Iowa—are on that list of sponsoring groups. But it's exciting to see university extension, state agriculture departments, some "mainstream" farm groups and even government natural resource agencies and environmental groups stepping up to the plate.

If we are to make serious inroads into shortening the "brown season," it's these latter two entities that could really make a difference. When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Nature Conservancy or Trout

Unlimited sponsor such a field day, it's a recognition that working lands conservation plays a critical role in creating a healthier landscape—simply relying on land retirement or nature preserves isn't going to cut it.

And with more groups and agencies sponsoring such events, the chances of having one in your neighborhood are better than ever. In Iowa and Minnesota, the number of counties in which continuous living cover educational events are being held has increased every year since 2010. Such localizing of innovation is how big ideas become practical, on-the-ground solutions. □

Brian DeVore is the editor of the Land Stewardship Letter.

Field Day Information

Interested in attending a field day on establishing continuous living cover on farmland? Check out LSP's **Upcoming Events** calendar or our **News Releases** section for the latest events at www.landstewardship-project.org. Field days and workshops are also listed in the *LIVE-WIRE*, our monthly e-letter. See page 31 for details on subscribing to *LIVE-WIRE*. **Green Lands Blue Waters** has an extensive listing of field days and workshops related to grass-based systems, cover crops and biomass plantings. More information is at www.greenlandsbluwaters.net or by contacting director Richard Warner at 612-625-3709.

Bust the Buckthorn

In Brian DeVore's informative article in the No. 3, 2014, *Land Stewardship Letter* ("Census Takers on the Prairie," pages 24-25), there is a sample list from the Simon Lake BioBlitz group's inventory of species spotted that day. I thought I should be pleased by the diversity it represented. Instead, I was brought up short by one plant on the list: buckthorn. Buckthorn is an extremely aggressive alien species which if left alone will certainly shrink that list on a similar walk in the future to buckthorn, buckthorn and (eventually) only buckthorn.

I have no trouble imagining this because my husband and I have about 10 hillside acres near Winona where we have been battling buckthorn for about 20 years. We



Buckthorn growing on Devon Harle's property near Winona, Minn. (Photo by Devon Harle)

use Weed Wrenches and a come-along to pull it out by the roots. Then we plant native shrubs. There are large areas on the edge of our place, and of course on neighboring property, where you look ahead and see a thick tangle of thorny branches with shiny green leaves (late in the fall, early in the spring). Above, branches are laden with

gleaming black berries. At your feet there's a lush, bright green carpet. Looking closely, you see that it's a mass of new buckthorn plants. There is nothing here except buckthorn. This absolute absence of diversity could easily move back over the cleared and maintained acres of our land.

Some day we'll be gone and the ill-nourished birds will continue to drop buckthorn seeds. So, my message to all of you who care about our forests, prairies and wetlands is: please learn to recognize buckthorn and try to destroy it whenever you can!

— **Devon Harle**
Winona, Minn.

Editor's Note: A major part of the work being undertaken by LSP and other groups working in the Simon Lake area is the control of invasive species such as buckthorn in an attempt to revitalize grasslands. For more information, see the No. 2, 2014, *Land Stewardship Letter*, pages 26-27.

Love the Soil

In the review of *Grass, Soil, Health* by Courtney White (No. 3, *Land Stewardship Letter*, pages 28-29), Brian DeVore is of the opinion that White had gone overboard on the "optimism express" when he writes that building soil health is "...about the things that nurture life—love, kindness, care, affection, experience, knowledge, laughter, liberty, family, food, and the pursuit of happiness." This made me think of the Wendell Berry essay, "It All Turns on Affection."

In the essay, Berry refers to the E.M. Forster book *Howards End* and picks up the theme that is at the heart of the book: "It

is the vice of a vulgar mind to be thrilled by bigness, to think that a thousand square miles are a thousand times more wonderful than one square mile... That is not imagination," writes Forster. "No, it kills it. ... Your universities? Oh, yes, you have learned men who collect ... facts, and facts, and empires of facts. But which of them will rekindle the light within?"

"The light within," writes Berry, "I think, means affection, affection as motive and guide. Knowledge without affection leads us astray every time. Affection leads, by way of good work, to authentic hope. The factual knowledge, in which we seem more

and more to be placing our trust, leads only to hope of the discovery, endlessly deferrable, of an ultimate fact or smallest particle that at last will explain everything."

Berry then refers to a 2006 lecture given by Fred Kirschenmann in which he quotes Constance Falk, an economist friend of his, reflecting this same theme: "There is a new vision emerging demonstrating how we can solve problems and at the same time create a better world, and it all depends on collaboration, love, respect, beauty, and fairness."

I would argue that Courtney White has not gone overboard at all and that he has it exactly right.

— **Julia Ahlers Ness**
Boyd, Minn.

Shifting the Story About Family Farming & Food

There is a widely-circulated public story, or narrative, that growing enough food for the world's future population will require doubling production by relying on technologies such as nitrogen fertilizer and pesticides tied to traits in genetically modified crops. The narrative is that family farmers, consumers and governments must rely on corporate-controlled technology from multi-national agricultural input suppliers and food companies to process calories into products for people to eat. Although it is mostly based on myth, it powerfully shapes what is possible....

...It's time to shift this narrative to a story about food and farming systems based on sustainable, community-based approaches that keep the land and people together, provide healthful food to eat now and the chance for future generations to do so. A narrative about community and justice can help us organize for much needed transformational changes like rewarding diverse systems through new markets and advancing policies that put people before corporate profits. With these changes we can support family farmers and better care for the earth.

— *Excerpted from an essay written by Land Stewardship Project executive director George Boody for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to mark World Food Day on Oct. 16. The full essay is at www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/blog/649.*

What's on Your Mind?

The *Land Stewardship Letter* welcomes letters and commentaries related to the issues we cover. Submissions can be sent to: Brian DeVore, 821 E. 35th St., Suite 200, Minneapolis, MN 55407; e-mail: bdevore@landstewardshipproject.org.

We cannot print all submissions and reserve the right to edit published pieces for length and clarity. Commentaries and letters published in the *Land Stewardship Letter* do not necessarily represent the views of the Land Stewardship Project.



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LSP News

End of a *Land Stewardship Letter* Era



The *Land Stewardship Letter* saw the end of an era this fall when it's long-time printer, Ellis Bloomfield, set sail down the Mississippi River—literally. Besides running his own printing business, Roscoe Printers, Bloomfield had over the years also published a newspaper and served as a printing instructor for World Brotherhood Exchange in Tanzania. This latter experience was documented in his book, *Salaam Bwana: An African Adventure*.

For more than a quarter-century, Bloomfield patiently and competently guided the *Land Stewardship Letter* through many phases and advancements, including bringing the publication into the digital age and, most recently, helping it become a full color magazine.

In 2000, he began rebuilding a 39-foot sailboat in the backyard of his print shop, which was in an old Doughboy Feeds building in Wanamingo, Minn. Bloomfield finished the boat, dubbed "Encore," this fall and on Oct. 10 set off from Pepin, Wis. At press time he was well on his way to the Gulf of Mexico and had plans to eventually sail around the world. Here Bloomfield is shown with a dingy he constructed for the sailboat. (LSP Photo)

Is Farming in Your Future? LSP's Farm Dreams Can Help You Find Out

Farm Dreams is an entry level, four-hour, exploratory Land Stewardship Project workshop designed to help people who are seeking practical, common sense information on whether sustainable farming is the next step for them. This is an excellent workshop to attend if you are in the exploratory stages of getting started farming and it's a good prerequisite for LSP's Farm Beginnings course.

LSP holds Farm Dreams workshops at various locations throughout the Minnesota-Wisconsin region during the year. For more information or to register, see www.farmbeginnings.org. Details are also available by calling LSP's Nick Olson at 320-269-2105 or 320-269-1057, or e-mailing nicko@landstewardshipproject.org. □

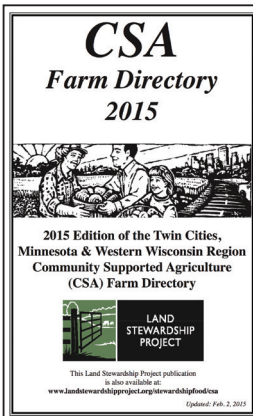
Farmers: Time to Sign-up for 2015 CSA Directory

If you are a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farmer operating in Minnesota or western Wisconsin, the Land Stewardship Project invites you to be listed in the 2015 edition of LSP's *Twin Cities, Minnesota & Western Wisconsin Region CSA Farm Directory*.

The Directory will be published in February and is distributed to eaters throughout the region, as well as posted at www.landstewardshipproject.org/stewardshipfood/findingjustfood/csa.

The deadline for submitting listings is Monday, Jan. 12. The listing fee is \$22 for LSP members and \$37 for non-members. There is a 250-word limit for listings.

For information on getting listed, contact LSP's Brian DeVore at bdevore@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377. □



Claassen Leaves LSP

Sarah Claassen has left the Land Stewardship Project to pursue her passion for apple farming.

Since early 2013, Claassen has been working with LSP's Farm Beginnings Program to organize around issues related to securing affordable land tenure for new farmers. She was the chief researcher and writer for LSP's new series of white papers:

"Crop Insurance: How a Safety Net Became a Farm Policy Disaster" (see pages 10-13).

Previously, Claassen served as an LSP Policy and Organizing Program intern and as an organizer with the Community Based Food Systems Program. □



Sarah Claassen

Good Fences Make Good Stewardship

The Land Stewardship Project held a “Women Caring for the Land” event in October at the Doug Piltingsrud and Mary Kay Sharp Piltingsrud farm in southeastern Minnesota. Women landowners gathered in the morning for a discussion about some of the goals they have for their farmland. In the afternoon, the women participated in a public workshop at the Piltingsrud farm on setting up fencing and utilizing contract grazing to manage the land (*see page 8*). Participants also had a chance to handle polywire reels and to learn more specifically about electro-nets commonly used for pasturing goats, sheep and poultry.

LSP has been holding Women Caring for the Land meetings in southeastern and western Minnesota to bring together women who own land and rent it out for agricultural production, and who are interested in learning more about conservation on that land. A Women Caring for the Land Winter Gathering will be held Jan. 27, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., in Benson in western Minnesota. The focus will be on resources for managing pasture and other types of grassland. For more information and to reserve a spot, contact LSP’s Rebecca White at 320-305-9685 or rwhite@landstewardshipproject.org. For information on future Women Caring for the Land events in southeastern Minnesota, contact Caroline van Schaik at 507-523-3366 or caroline@landstewardshipproject.org. (LSP Photos) □

Give it a Listen

On episode 161 of LSP’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast, farmland owner Gretchen Goodman and LSP organizer Caroline van Schaik talk about the role women play in the future of our farmland and rural communities: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/662.



Profits from Perennials

A Customized Approach to Land Stewardship

By Caroline van Schaik

The Land Stewardship Project's long-held mantra to cover the soil with grass and livestock has increased in intensity as non-operating farm landowners, especially women, ponder what to do next when their distaste for erosion finds a voice.

Whether the land is owned or rented, the soil needs roots in the ground all year and grazing permanent pasture provides that and income to boot. Contract grazing would seem to offer an opportunity otherwise limited by the lack of land for some and too much to manage for others.

Sometimes called custom grazing, contract grazing decouples ownership of land and livestock, thereby leaving all parties free to move across otherwise inhibiting restrictions to farming and land management. Under such an arrangement, land is rented for grazing livestock and the landowner is paid on a per-acre, per-day or per-pound-of-weight-gain basis. Benefits include soil

fertility provided by the livestock as well as income from rental and potentially the burgeoning grass-fed meat market. With contract grazing, stewardship goals are easier to reach than when land is rented out for annual row crop production.

This is agriculture for maximum profit, not maximum yield, and it can be measured in short order. Contract grazing can also offer a way for a landowner to help a beginning farmer or neighbor who doesn't have access to good forage—something many landowners tell us is important to them.

It's a very sensible solution – but what do livestock producers and landowners think?

This past summer LSP conducted interviews in and near the Root River watershed in southeastern Minnesota to understand some of the many views of contract grazing. In short, we learned that there's a good deal of neighborly, low-cost pasture sharing at work with little to nothing written down and general horror at the prospect of fencing in high-priced cropland.

LSP's interviews continue to take place primarily in the Root River watershed with a

small grant from USDA's Risk Management Education Program. So far, we've learned of some interesting situations involving the use of grazing and grazing contracts:

→ A carpenter farmed only on the weekends until neighboring land he now rents gave him the needed space to raise more registered Herefords full time.

→ A retired teacher found an organic farmer to rent her home farm when it came out of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to safeguard against genetically modified seed, loss of grassed waterways and other practices contrary to her values.

→ A contract grazer found himself with only a third of the cows he'd agreed to fatten during the summer and no written contract to guarantee even a base payment. On the other hand, a landowner facing the unexpected departure of a herd was relieved to make decisions without a signed agreement to hamper her.

→ A livestock producer depends on rented pasture to raise the cattle he needs for eager restaurant chefs.

→ Another sees retiring CRP land as a good bet for immediate organic certification and thus a source of organic, grass-fed beef—if the landowner will agree.

→ One couple built two-and-a-half miles of fence in order to borrow some of the neighbor's cow-calf pairs as part of their buckthorn management. It's hard work, but they plan on using cattle as

Contract Grazing, see page 9...

Mutual Goals, Communication, Key to Grazing Agreement

When they bought 80 acres of farmland in southeastern Minnesota a few years ago, Doug Piltingsrud and Mary Kay Sharp Piltingsrud set to work establishing grass and other perennial plants on acres that had previously been covered with corn and soybeans. They seeded pasture and put in fencing, water lines and other infrastructure for managing livestock (funding from the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program helped cover much of the cost). They then worked up a contract grazing agreement with Eric and Lisa Klein, who raise grass-fed beef for direct-sale and have a hard time finding enough pasture to meet their needs.

Doug Piltingsrud told participants in a recent Land Stewardship Project workshop on fencing (see page 7) that it's key in a contract grazing arrangement to put everything on paper and to be clear on what each party's responsibility is. The Piltingsruds own the land and manage the cattle and pastures; the

Kleins own the cattle and pay rent for pasture and livestock management. Other issues such as bulls, calving, stocking rates, joined herds, minimum grazing season, and drought/flood provisions also need spelling out before they become prickly problems.

"Communication is key," said Piltingsrud.

During the past few years, the two farms have had an arrangement where the Kleins pay based on how much weight the cattle gain (a grain elevator between the two farms provides a handy location to weigh the cattle before and after the grazing season). Eric Klein explained that paying based on weight gain, rather than on a per-animal, per-day basis, provides the landowner a better incentive to do a good job of managing the grassland and providing quality forage.

And Doug Piltingsrud, who is passionate about improving soil health on the farm, says this payment arrangement gives him the incentive to take steps to protect and build the soil, since healthier pasture is the result

of healthier humus, and of course, results in heavier cattle and thus a fatter paycheck. The Piltingsrud pastures are producing heavier cattle at the end of the growing season after just four years of management.

In general, the Piltingsruds refer to their contract grazing operation as the kind of farming that supports their commitment to soil building and a life on the land.

The way the Kleins see it, that makes for a win-win situation.

"We don't have enough grass to meet market demand," Eric said. "So it works out really well to partner with somebody who has the grass."

Contract Grazing Fact Sheets

For more information on contract grazing and pasture rental and lease agreements, see the Green Lands Blue Waters contract grazing web page: www.greenlandsbluwaters.net/Perennial_Forage/contract.html.

invasive species control again next year.

With fencing emerging as such a big issue among people we talk to, LSP organized a field day in late October on a southeastern Minnesota grass-based farm to address the basics of fencing materials and design (*see page 7*). During the event, hosts Doug Piltingsrud and Mary Kay Sharp Piltingsrud explained how they bit the bullet and set up the infrastructure for rotational grazing on former crop ground. They now work with neighbors Eric and Lisa Klein, rotationally grazing Klein cattle to manage the grassland on their farm (*see sidebar on page 8*).

Make no mistake—contract grazing is not about to take the region by storm. When corn was paying \$7 a bushel, grazing was a labor of love with pasture “thrown in” with the rented crop ground; few consider permanent pastures a rentable commodity. Even this year with corn at \$2.50, one doesn’t have to drive far to notice two things: a phenomenal number of cornfields and an equally enticing number of CRP acres begging for animal disturbance and healthy biological activity. But with issues of erosion, land access, aging farmers *and* landowners making themselves felt at every turn, pasture renting is poised to be a force for the near future. Bring on those fences, we can figure it out. □

*Caroline van Schaik is an LSP organizer working in the Root River watershed. She can be reached at 507-523-3366 or caroline@landstewardshipproject.org. For more information on LSP’s work in the Root River watershed, contact van Schaik or see the **Root River: Promise of Pasture** page at www.landstewardshipproject.org.*



During a recent LSP field day, Doug Piltingsrud described how a good fencing system and clear communications are helping contract grazing work on his southeastern Minnesota farm. (LSP Photo)

Farmers, land managers and wildlife experts gathered at the west-central Minnesota farm of Mark Halls in September for a Land Stewardship Project field day on cover crops and farmland wildlife habitat. Halls described how he takes a proactive approach to keeping deer out of his feed pile. He has a 30-acre wheat field planted into a forage mix intended to feed deer throughout the winter. Field Day participants also learned about government programs available for establishing and maintaining wildlife habitat and food plots.

LSP is working with farmers and other landowners in the Chippewa River watershed to promote profitable production systems that improve soil health and protect water quality. For more information, contact LSP’s Robin Moore at 320-269-2105 or rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org.

Cover Crops & Wildlife in the Chippewa



The Halls family used a no-till drill rented from the local Soil and Water Conservation District office to seed a cover crop mix into wheat stubble this summer. (LSP Photo)

Crop Insurance: How a Safety Net Became a Farm Policy Disaster

A Special Series of LSP White Papers Highlights how the Nation's #1 Ag Program is Using Public Funds to Enrich Corporations, Undermine Rural Communities & Stymie Beginning Farmers

The nation's main federal agricultural program is utilizing public money to enrich a handful of major corporations while helping some of the biggest crop producers in the country consolidate landholdings to an unprecedented level, according to a series of white papers released by the Land Stewardship Project in early December. The series, "Crop Insurance: How a Safety Net Became a Farm Policy Disaster," relies on data and firsthand accounts collected by LSP staff and members to portray a public policy program that has veered so far off its original mission of being a basic safety net that it is actually serving as a major barrier for beginning farmers who want access to land and capital.

"You could be guaranteed \$1 million to \$2 million in income if you have 5,000 to 10,000 acres," said southwestern Minnesota farmer Darwyn Bach. "When there's no risk in farming more land, people go out and bid up rental rates and land rates. It's a snowball effect. This was set up to be a safety net for real farmers out there producing crops, not a tool for concentrating wealth and emptying our towns."

The Corporate Connection

Started by the federal government in 1938 as a way to guarantee a steady supply of food for the United States, crop insurance

By the Numbers

#1

Crop insurance's rank as the user of public dollars to promote maximum production of a handful of commodity crops.

\$58.7 Billion

The amount of tax money spent on crop insurance from 2003-2012.

\$12.5 Billion

The amount of tax money that went to crop insurance corporations to pay their "administration and operating costs" between 2003 and 2012.

2.3%

The percentage of U.S. farms represented by the top 10% of crop insurance premium subsidy recipients.

\$1,667,852

The total amount of crop insurance premium subsidies collected by one southeastern Minnesota crop operation in 2011.

was privatized and expanded in the 1980s. Since then, crop insurance has become a massively expensive program for the American taxpayer—its annual price tag grew from \$3 billion to over \$14 billion between 2003 and 2012. The growth of this program has accelerated recently to the point where over the past five years, it has replaced direct commodity payments as the largest use of public dollars to subsidize maximum production of a few favored crops.

Today, crop insurance is offered through 19 insurance corporations that are approved by the USDA. These corporations include subsidiaries of many large banks and agribusinesses, including Rural Community Insurance Services (a subsidiary of Wells Fargo), John Deere Insurance Company, American Farm Bureau Insurance Services, and Archer Daniels Midland Crop Risk Services. Over the years, crop insurance has become an extremely lucrative business for these firms, thanks to the investment of public dollars. As LSP's white papers show, tax-funded subsidies funneled into crop insurance have in effect created an artificially large market that guarantees massive profits for these corporations.

Insurance corporations benefit from public funds in a couple of ways. For one, the government subsidizes producers' insurance premiums by an average of more than 60 percent. This is by far the most expensive aspect of the program, costing the taxpayer a total of \$42 billion from 2003 to 2012. While farmers benefit from lower cost insurance, this subsidy benefits the insurance corporations by creating a much larger market for their products than would exist normally, with the majority of this market-boost coming via the pockets of the American taxpayer. Crop insurance corporations also get tax-funded reimbursements to help cover the administrative and operating costs of servicing insurance policies. Between 2003 and 2012, for example, the federal government paid insurance corporations \$12.5 billion for their administrative and operation costs.

The LSP papers describe how there is little accountability on the part of the insurance companies when it comes to getting paid for servicing policies. For example, in 2008, 33,000 fewer crop insurance policies were sold than in 2004, yet administrative reimbursements were \$1.2 billion higher (see chart on page 11). As the U.S. Government Accountability Of-

Federal Spending on Crop Insurance, Fiscal Years 2003-2012 (in millions of dollars)

Fiscal Year	Premium and other income *1	Loss claims	Claims paid in excess of premiums and other income	Premium subsidy	Administrative expense reimbursements	Other program fund costs	Other administrative and operating fund costs	Total government costs
2003	2,946	3,768	822	1,874	743	61	88	3,588
2004	3,133	2,828	(305)	2,387	900	60	83	3,125
2005	3,089	2,796	(293)	2,070	783	58	81	2,699
2006	3,617	3,585	(32)	2,517	960	81	44	3,570
2007	4,561	3,493	(1,068)	3,544	1,341	70	53	3,940
2008	6,741	5,024	(1,717)	5,301	2,016	41	96	5,737
2009	8,308	8,416	108	5,198	1,602	42	89	7,039
2010	5,282	2,759	(2,523)	4,680	1,371	40	103	3,671
2011	11,037	13,429	2,392	7,376	1,383	54	90	11,295
2012	13,058	18,428	5,370	7,149	1,411	49	92	14,071
Total	61,772	64,526	2,754	42,096	12,510	556	819	58,735

Source: USDA Risk Management Agency

Insurance, see page 11...

fice described in 2009, the reimbursements are detached from “reasonable business expenses,” generating a “kind of windfall” for many insurance companies.

A risk-sharing agreement where the government covers the riskiest policyholders was developed several years ago in order to encourage corporate participation in crop insurance, but it has evolved into a system where taxpayers are paying claims while Wells Fargo, Archer Daniels Midland and other corporations consistently garner big profits. In fact, crop insurance corporations have banked underwriting gains in all but three years since 1993, thanks to this risk-sharing agreement.

When combined with administrative and operating reimbursements, underwriting gains can produce massive payoffs for private industry at public expense. In some cases, these profits vastly overshadow the benefits being passed on to the group of people the crop insurance system was supposedly set up to serve in the first place—farmers. These public dollars are going to already wealthy corporations—top ranked insurer Wells Fargo had \$1.4 trillion in assets in 2013, while second-ranked insurer Ace reported \$2.7 billion net income in 2012.

As a result, crop insurance corporations consistently generate profits that are considered excessive by general business standards. Between 1989 and 2009, these companies averaged a 17 percent return on equity at a time when the “reasonable rate of return” was just under 13 percent, according to a report done for the USDA by Milliman, Inc. In 2009 alone, crop insurers enjoyed an astounding 26 percent rate of return, more than double what was considered the reasonable rate of return calculated by economists for that year.

Helping the Big Get Bigger

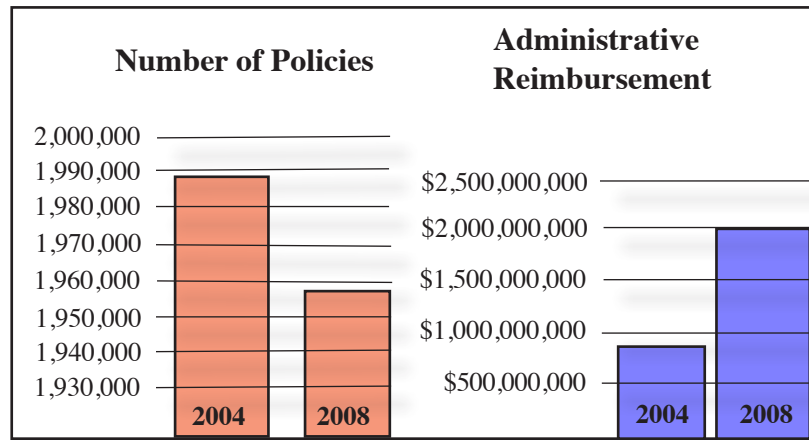
Only 22 percent of U.S. farmers utilized federally subsidized crop insurance in 2011. The current form of crop insurance provides the best coverage to a handful of commodity crops such as corn and soybeans, and is not as useful for farmers who are pursuing production systems that are more diverse. Of the farmers who do purchase insurance, the bulk of the billions of public dollars used to

support the program benefit a small handful of the largest crop operations in the country.

For example:

- In 2011, 26 operations received over \$1 million each in premium subsidies in the U.S. — each insuring from 20,000 acres to over 48,000 acres.
- In 2011, fewer than 5,000 U.S. farm operations — less than one-quarter of 1 percent of all U.S. farms — received in total more than \$1 billion from the U.S. taxpayer. These operations each averaged \$226,611 in subsidies for federal crop insurance in a year of widespread agricultural prosperity.

Even when the number of policies sold went down, tax-funded administrative reimbursements to insurance companies increased.



Source: USDA Risk Management Agency

- The top 10 percent of crop insurance subsidy recipients represent just 2.3 percent of America’s farmers, but in 2011 they took in more than half of all premium subsidies paid out of the public treasury—a whopping \$4 billion. These 50,000 farms, maximizing the production of a few favored commodity crops highly subsidized by U.S. farm policy, each received an average of \$82,223 in crop insurance premium subsidies that year, while the remaining farmers who have crop insurance received an average of \$7,639 each.

The Minnesota Example

Minnesota is a major user of crop insurance premium subsidies—for the period covering 1995 to 2012, the state ranked fourth nationally in terms of dollar amounts of premium subsidies provided. The state is home to two operations that in 2011 each received over \$1 million in insurance premium subsidies, and an additional seven that each received more than \$500,000 in premium subsidies that year.

The top 10 percent of subsidy recipients represent just 4.1 percent of Minnesota’s

farms, but in 2011 they took in 46 percent of all taxpayer-funded premium subsidies paid in Minnesota, for a total of more than \$240 million.

The massive amount of public funds being channeled to the nation’s largest crop producers via the insurance program has fueled an unprecedented concentration of land and wealth in rural communities throughout Minnesota and across the Midwest. The latest U.S. Census of Agriculture found that between 2007 and 2012, the number of farms in the U.S. dropped 4.3 percent while the average size of farms rose 3.8 percent.

The Census found that in Minnesota, for example, a short-term trend of increased farm numbers has been reversed. The only size category of Minnesota farms that increased from 2007 to 2012 was the one consisting of operations over 2,000 acres in size—their numbers jumped by 14 percent.

Fueling Poor Stewardship

Federally subsidized crop insurance promotes a narrow range of agricultural production—one that is dominated in the Upper Midwest by monocultures of corn and soybeans. Nationally in 2011, corn, soybeans and wheat made up 64 percent of policies sold and 76 percent of premium subsidies went to those crops.

And because crop insurance favors the production of a few monocrops, in effect federal tax dollars are funding practices that cause major environmental problems on the land and in our water. As national studies show, increased crop insurance subsidies encourage the farming of marginal land—acres too erosive, wet or otherwise fragile to raise a good crop on. By guaranteeing income no matter what those acres yield, there is no longer an economic brake on plowing up those acres. The USDA’s Economic Research Service studied land use changes after the government added revenue assurance and increased premium subsidies for crop insurance in the 1990s. It found insurance program changes increased cropland in production by an estimated 1 percent in 1997 alone, and much of that came on marginal land. While 25 percent of all cultivated cropland was classified as highly erodible in 1997, 33 percent of acreage put into production after crop insurance was changed was highly erodible land, concluded the USDA.

Farmers interviewed by LSP described

Insurance, see page 12...

...Insurance, from page 11

situations in recent years where every time they drove through their community, they would notice another farmstead that had been bulldozed and planted to corn and soybeans. “They had taken out the bulldozers and dozed the homestead, trees, wetlands and planted over it. One after the other,” says central Minnesota dairy farmer Loretta Jaus. “That’s what happened to this farm down the road—dozed. And yeah, that’s having an impact on Main Street businesses, on the number of our neighbors—it’s having a big impact.”

Blocking Beginners

Perhaps the biggest irony of crop insurance is that it is using public funds to the detriment of a group of people the federal government claims it wants to support: beginning farmers. It does this in a couple of ways: first by inflating land prices and cash rental rates to the point where beginning farmers with limited financial resources are priced out of the market. Secondly, the current “yield history” structure of crop insurance causes lenders to view beginning farmers, who often lack an extensive crop yield history, as “high risk producers,” limiting their access to capital. Studies and surveys show that lack of access to land and capital are the two biggest barriers to getting started in farming.

As part of its investigation of crop insurance, LSP conducted in-depth interviews with beginning and established farmers from across Minnesota. These farmers verified that crop insurance plays a major role in limiting access to land and capital, which is threatening the future of rural communities as cropping operations become larger and fewer, and the average age of the U.S. farmer creeps toward the six-decade mark.

“It feels like land prices are pushing farmland ownership for us right out of range. If it’s doing that for us, it’s doing it for a whole lot of other people,” says Min-

nesota beginning farmer Paula Foreman.

While farmland prices have always fluctuated on an historical basis, the past decade has marked an unprecedented inflationary run. Research by agricultural economist

Top 10 Minn. Recipients of Crop Insurance Premium Subsidies, 2011

Policyholder ID	Acres Insured	Crops Insured	MN County location	Premium Subsidy
207726545	26,835	corn, soybeans	Dakota, Dodge, Fillmore, Goodhue, Mower, Olmsted, Rice, Wabasha	\$1,667,852
316515753	21,246	potatoes	Becker, Hubbard, Otter Tail, Pope, Sherburne, Cass, Wadena	\$1,116,124
316653054	14,824	corn, dry beans, forage, soybeans, wheat	Clearwater, Mahanomen, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake	\$868,334
360600946	21,023	corn, green peas, corn seed, sugar beets, wheat	Chippewa, Kandiyohi, Pope, Renville, Sibley, Stearns, Stevens, Swift, Douglas, Meeker, Redwood	\$850,488
033614874	13,513	corn, soybeans, wheat	Polk, Red Lake, Pennington, Marshall	\$605,499
316399315	17,061	corn, green peas, corn seed, soybean	Dakota, Dodge, Fillmore, Goodhue, Mower, Olmsted, Rice	\$600,910
316391508	11,062	corn, dry beans, soybeans, wheat	Mahanomen, Norman	\$581,549
209319383	10,331	corn, soybeans	Clay, Norman, Polk	\$561,918
316774750	10,990	corn, soybeans, sunflower, wheat	Mahanomen, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake	\$546,229
201164146	18,617	corn, soybeans, green peas, sugar beets, sweet corn	Kandiyohi, Meeker, Renville, Sibley, McLeod, Redwood	\$482,454

Source: Environmental Working Group, EWG Farm Subsidies 2011

Steven Taff shows that in Minnesota farmland prices increased by 15 percent in 2008, 12 percent in 2010, 14 percent in 2011, 24 percent in 2012 and 5.3 percent in 2013.

Part of this inflationary trend can be attributed to years when prices for crops such as corn reached record highs. However, sale prices and cash rental rates have risen even in years when crop prices were flat, a result of large cropping operations knowing they are guaranteed significant crop insurance benefits, no matter what the elevator is paying or what yields they produce.

In addition, the crop insurance program does not limit how much any individual farmer can receive either in indemnity payments or premium subsidies. With the ability to insure yield and revenue on even marginal farmland, large cropping operations have at their disposal a massive amount of cash, which can be used to

outbid smaller farmers when purchasing and renting land.

“A lot of those guys who are running a lot of land, they know...that worst case scenario they’re going to walk away with 12 bucks an acre in their pocket. That’s if all else fails and they never even start their combines in the fall, they’re going to walk away with that,” says Jon Jovaag, a beginning farmer in southern Minnesota. “So they drive that

price up to where they can still clear a little profit, and then if things go well they’ll make a huge amount. I don’t even go to the land auctions because I know it’s going to be \$7,500 per acre, up to a lot more.”

Darwyn Bach, the southwestern Minnesota farmer, has over a quarter-century of cropping history, and benefits from the crop insurance program. But he is troubled by the fact that it has transformed from a safety net into a mechanism for concentrating land ownership while locking innovative beginning farmers out of the business.

“For someone without a connection, trying to come in is next to impossible,” said Bach. “And part of that is related to the crop insurance. If someone is coming in without any history or connection that allows him or her to use a yield history, they’re starting at a much lower level of coverage. It’s much more risky for them.” □

See the commentary on page 3 for more information on LSP’s “*Crop Insurance: How a Safety Net Became a Farm Policy Disaster*” initiative. LSP has also developed an outline of principles for reforming the crop insurance program (see page 13).

‘Crop Insurance: How a Safety Net Became a Farm Policy Disaster’

- 1) Crop Insurance—The Corporate Connection
- 2) Crop Insurance Ensures the Big Get Bigger
- 3) How Crop Insurance Hurts the Next Generation of Farmers

To read all of these white papers and for more information on the Land Stewardship Project’s proposals for reforming crop insurance, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/organizingforchange/cropinsurance. More information is also available by contacting Mark Schultz, Land Stewardship Project Policy Program Director, at 612-722-6377 or marks@landstewardshipproject.org.

The Land Stewardship Project believes that our health and the health of our communities are directly connected to the health of our land and the food it produces. We believe that public policy and public resources should support the long-term stewardship of our nation's farmlands, help family farms and rural communities thrive, and move us all, rural and urban, toward a sustainable food and agriculture system. Making these widely-shared values real in our country will require significant reform to our current agricultural system and the public (and corporate) policies that support and drive it.

When looking at the current system of federally subsidized crop insurance, it is clear that major reform is needed. As LSP's three recent white papers (*pages 10-12*) document, the crop insurance system is either broken, or worse, manipulated to benefit the few over the many, and to facilitate the all-out exploitation of the land at the expense of good land stewardship.

Over the next five years, as LSP works with allies to win major reform to the crop insurance system, these are the principles that will guide our work:

→ **Major reform can and should be achieved.** We believe that the public interest is overwhelmingly on the side of major reform, while the interests of big agribusiness and the country's largest crop operations stand against it. When we organize for change, people can still make a difference in our country. There is nothing inevitable or unchangeable about the current crop insurance system.

→ **Reform should improve the broad public good, including the long-term health and fertility of America's farmlands.** Expenditures from the public treasury for crop insurance exceeded \$40 billion from 2008 to 2012 alone. Prudence and integrity require that such huge sums be spent in ways that strengthen and support all American farmers, the communities that surround and support them, and the land itself.

→ **Reforms should be shaped by the people directly affected.** Just because the current crop insurance system has been taken over by insurance corporations and the largest crop operations, does not mean only their voices count. Federal farm policy, and the public money spent on it, affects everyone. We all have a voice when it comes to bringing about reform.

Following these principles, LSP believes crop insurance policy should be reformed under three major areas:

1. Make it a True Risk Management Program

Crop insurance must be returned to its roots as a cost-effective risk management strategy for all of America's farmers to protect themselves against a bad year. Federally subsidized crop insurance must be available to all farmers and all crops. It must stop favoring monocultural production of a handful of crops, while penalizing the operations that utilize diverse crop rotations, cover cropping, organics or grass-based production. Such diverse systems are themselves excellent risk management strategies and should be encouraged by this program.

Overall, the premium subsidy amount should be reduced from the current average of 62 percent, which is exorbitant, and subsidies at the higher percentages should be tied to higher levels of crop diversification in resource-conserving rotations.

Whole farm crop insurance should be fully developed and fully resourced. Unlike conventional crop insurance, whole farm insurance allows producers to insure the value of all of their crops, rather than only a handful of "insurable" crops. This makes the policy a potentially useful option for diversified farms with resource-conserving crop rotations, integrated grain and livestock systems, specialty crops such as fruits and vegetables, and organic enterprises. However, "Whole Farm Revenue Protection" must be made accessible to beginning farmers (under the rules, you have to have farmed for seven years to apply for it), and require higher levels of crop diversification to receive higher premium subsidies.

The program should address the suitability of the field for the crop insured, using conservation outcomes as the key measure.

Crop insurance should let organic farmers insure their crops at organic prices. Organic farmers have long faced a disadvantage when utilizing the crop insurance program — if organic producers suffered a loss, they received a payout fixed to the non-organic price for their crop, which is generally considerably lower than the organic price. The 2014 Farm Bill directed USDA to complete a series of organic price elections (setting the insurable organic price for a crop), but as of October 2014, USDA has issued price elections for only 16 organic crops, half of which are available only on the West Coast.

2. Support, Don't Impede, a New Generation of Farmers

Crop insurance subsidies paid for by the public should not be set so high that the payments underwrite the expansion of the largest cropping operations and drive up land values. Premium subsidies on crop and revenue insurance coverage should be phased down for cropping operations with adjusted gross income above certain levels, starting at a 50 percent reduction on adjusted gross income exceeding \$1 million and reaching 100 percent on adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million.

Whole Farm Revenue Protection should be made available and affordable to beginning farmers. Having crop insurance is an important way for farmers to secure credit.

3. Stop Using it as a Mechanism for Corporate Welfare

An accountable system must be created that stops sending the vast majority of the financial benefits of federally subsidized crop insurance to the biggest 2 percent of America's farms and some of the largest insurance corporations in the country. Currently, farmers, landowners and farm investors who are enrolled in the crop insurance program receive premium subsidies without limit and regardless of their income or ability to pay. Meanwhile, the profits made by insurance corporations via "reimbursements" from the public treasury, government protection from risky policies, and sales in a market highly subsidized by public dollars, are in the billions of dollars.

An effective reform, proposed this year by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), would reduce the level of federal premium subsidies for revenue crop insurance policies. The GAO found that even a small decrease would result in hundreds of millions of dollars in budgetary savings with limited costs to farmers.

With billions of dollars at stake, federally subsidized crop insurance must be transparent to be accountable. The amount of reimbursements received by each crop insurance corporation from the public till should be publicly available. The same goes for producer recipients of premium subsidies that amount to more than \$50,000 annually.

We must limit the excessive, duplicative and guaranteed administrative cost reimbursements that are charged by corporate providers of federal crop insurance. Such excessive reimbursements impose inflated costs on the public in order to guarantee corporate profits. □

Time to Sign Up for MNsure

Open Enrollment Deadlines in December, January & February

By Paul Sobocinski

Land Stewardship Project members should take a look at MNsure's latest enrollment opportunity for health insurance coverage.

Over the past few years, LSP has been working with allies across Minnesota to put people, not insurance company profits, at the center of healthcare reform in our state. As a result, during the 2013 legislative session, Minnesota put together a health insurance exchange called "MNsure." MNsure offers some of the lowest premiums in the country, expanded and improved Medicaid and MinnesotaCare programs, and is empowered to hold insurance companies accountable. Most people in Minnesota who don't have health insurance or are purchasing health insurance on the private market will be better off because of MNsure.

For farmers, the self-employed, and people who aren't offered insurance through their jobs, MNsure will likely offer more affordable, higher-quality coverage than is currently available on the private market. At

MNsure Enrollment Information

To have insurance coverage begin by Jan. 1, people must enroll in MNsure by Dec. 15. For securing coverage by Feb. 1, enrollment must be completed by Jan. 15, and for coverage starting March 1, enrollment must be completed by Feb. 15.

Check out the chart on page 15 for a quick assessment of the kind of health coverage available through MNsure. Enrollments can be made through the MNsure website: www.mnsure.org. If you would like assistance finding a navigator for MNsure in your area, contact LSP healthcare organizer Paul Sobocinski at 507-342-2323 or sobopaul@redred.com.

its most basic level, MNsure makes insurance companies give people better, clearer and fairer choices for purchasing health insurance and will offer subsidies or public health insurance programs to make the cost of the insurance more affordable.

LSP believes MNsure is a significant step that can help move us toward a healthcare system in which everyone is in and no one

is out. Insurance companies can no longer deny coverage for pre-existing conditions, nor are they allowed to charge higher rates for pre-existing conditions. Insurance plans must include coverage for a set of basic benefits, including preventative care, mental illness, maternity care and hospitalization.

An individual Minnesotan's eligibility for public programs and subsidies to make coverage more affordable will depend on income (*see chart on page 15*), meaning no more asset tests to qualify for Medicaid or MinnesotaCare.

To have insurance coverage begin by Jan. 1, people must enroll in MNsure by Dec. 15. For securing coverage by Feb. 1, enrollment must be completed by Jan. 15, and for coverage starting March 1, enrollment must be completed by Feb. 15.

LSP members Richard Handeen and Audrey Arner, who farm near Montevideo in western Minnesota, found more affordable healthcare insurance coverage through MNsure in 2014 that really made a difference in their lives. Handeen was featured on the MNsure website in late October with his story of how the program has already made a potentially lifesaving difference for him. A link to Handeen's video and more information on MNsure enrollment are available on LSP's **Affordable Healthcare for All** web page: www.landstewardshipproject.org. □

Paul Sobocinski is a healthcare organizer for the Land Stewardship Project.

Making Their Voices Heard on Corporate Control

Land Stewardship Project members gathered in the southeastern Minnesota community of Plainview in November to discuss how corporate control is negatively affecting rural communities. Meeting participants talked about ways to fight the push for frac sand mining in the region as well as how to defeat efforts to implement fast-track approval of corporate-backed trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

"We're citizens—we have a lot of power," LSP member Vince Ready told the meeting participants. "I'm a citizen who's not going away, and my neighbors aren't going away either."

For more information on LSP's work related to these issues, contact Bobby King at 612-722-6377 (bking@landstewardshipproject.org) or see the **Organizing for Change** section at www.landstewardshipproject.org. (LSP Photo)



What Kind of Health Coverage Can You Get from MNsure?

Use this chart developed by TakeAction Minnesota to get a quick sense of what kind of health coverage is available through MNsure, and what your expected monthly cost (premium) might be (note: “FPL” is short for “Federal Poverty Level”). If you have questions about your situation or need help connecting with an insurance exchange navigator for your area, contact Land Stewardship Project healthcare organizer Paul Sobocinski at 507-342-2323 or sobopaul@redred.com. To enroll in MNsure, see www.mnsure.org.

Step 1. How many people are in your household?

By “household,” we mean people on your tax return or family members who live together, not your roommate. Find that number in the column below, and then look to the right until you find your approximate household income in that row (the combined income of your household members).

Step 2. What's your category?

Follow the arrow down from your column to see what folks in your category can expect to pay for public or private coverage on MNsure.org.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD?	138% FPL HOUSEHOLD INCOME UP TO...	280% FPL PREGNANT WOMEN & KIDS* WITH HOUSEHOLD INCOME UP TO...	200% FPL HOUSEHOLD INCOME UP TO...*	250% FPL HOUSEHOLD INCOME UP TO...	300% FPL HOUSEHOLD INCOME UP TO...	350% FPL HOUSEHOLD INCOME UP TO...	400% FPL HOUSEHOLD INCOME UP TO...	OVER 400% FPL HOUSEHOLD INCOME IS...
1	\$0 to \$16,104	\$0 to \$32,676	\$16,105 to \$23,340	\$29,175	\$35,010	\$40,845	\$46,680	OVER \$46,680
2	\$0 to \$21,707	\$0 to \$44,044	\$21,708 to \$31,460	\$39,325	\$47,190	\$55,055	\$62,920	OVER \$62,920
3	\$0 to \$27,310	\$0 to \$55,412	\$27,311 to \$39,580	\$49,475	\$59,370	\$69,265	\$79,160	OVER \$79,160
4	\$0 to \$32,913	\$0 to \$66,780	\$32,914 to \$47,400	\$59,625	\$71,550	\$83,475	\$95,400	OVER \$95,400
5	\$0 to \$38,516	\$0 to \$78,148	\$38,517 to \$55,820	\$69,775	\$83,730	\$97,685	\$111,640	OVER \$111,640
FOR EACH ADDITIONAL PERSON, ADD...	\$5,603	\$11,368	\$8,120	\$10,150	\$12,180	\$14,210	\$16,240	# INCREASES WITH FPL

A
MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

B
MINNESOTACARE PREMIUMS

C
PREMIUM ASSISTANCE FOR MNSURE PLANS

D
MNSURE PLANS

A MEDICAL ASSISTANCE \$0 PREMIUM

If your household income is in the range shown, you may qualify for MEDICAL ASSISTANCE (MA)** MA is Minnesota's Medicaid program. If you qualify for MA you pay NO PREMIUMS and NO DEDUCTIBLE. You may pay small co-pays for some services.

B MINNESOTACARE PREMIUMS UP TO \$50/MONTH PER PERSON

If your household income is in this range, you may qualify for MinnesotaCare.*** MinnesotaCare enrollees pay LOW PREMIUMS of \$21-\$80 a month per adult, NO DEDUCTIBLE, and low co-pays.

C PREMIUM ASSISTANCE BASED ON YOUR INCOME

If your household income is in this range, you may qualify for Advance Premium Tax Credits (APTC) for private insurance plans sold on MNsure.*** These plans are ranked Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Platinum. Bronze plans generally have lower monthly premiums, but you may pay more to use your coverage. Platinum plans generally have higher premiums, but offer better coverage. Silver plans are in the middle. The federal government created a sliding scale for what's considered an affordable amount (your “expected contribution”) to spend on an insurance premium. The most you are expected to pay for a mid-level silver plan is shown in this chart:

PEOPLE IN HOUSEHOLD	201% FPL	250% FPL	300% FPL	350% FPL	400% FPL
1	\$123/MO	\$196/MO	\$277/MO	\$323/MO	\$370/MO
2	\$165/MO	\$264/MO	\$374/MO	\$436/MO	\$498/MO
3	\$208/MO	\$332/MO	\$470/MO	\$548/MO	\$627/MO
4	\$250/MO	\$400/MO	\$566/MO	\$661/MO	\$755/MO
5	\$293/MO	\$468/MO	\$663/MO	\$773/MO	\$884/MO

If the second-lowest-priced silver plan (called “the benchmark plan”) costs more than the amount shown, the remaining premium is your APTC and is paid by the federal government. You can apply your APTC to the benchmark plan or to any Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum plans, in which case your actual premium cost may be higher or lower.

D MNSURE PLANS WITHOUT PREMIUM ASSISTANCE

You have many insurance plans to choose from on MNsure, but you really need to use MNsure to figure out your premium and plan options. You can go online now to see the current 2014 plans and prices or, if you are looking to enroll for 2015, you need to meet with a navigator or wait until the new plans are available through MNsure.org on November 15, 2014. We can also help give you some idea of your options or connect you to a navigator now. See our contact information below.

Step 3. Apply online or get in-person assistance

The numbers above are based on income alone. To find out for sure, see your plan options, and get covered, you need to apply through MNsure.org. Sound complicated? Let us answer your questions and help connect you with a navigator. Navigators are people in your community who have been trained to provide free, impartial MNsure enrollment assistance no matter what program or private insurance you qualify for.

Step 4. Get involved!

These programs and laws didn't just happen – they are the result of people like you working to make health care accessible to all. Is health care reform helping you or those you love, or is quality, affordable health care still out of reach? Your experience matters, and you can help protect what we've won and make more possible.

If you have questions about your situation or need help connecting with an insurance exchange navigator for your area, contact LSP healthcare organizer Paul Sobocinski at 507-342-2323 or sobopaul@redred.com.

Farm Beginnings

LSP's Farm Beginnings Course Accepting Applications for 2015-2016

The Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course is accepting applications for its 2015-2016 class session.

In 2015, LSP's Farm Beginnings program is marking its 18th year of providing firsthand training in low-cost, sustainable methods of farming. The course is designed for people of all ages just getting started in farming, as well as established farmers looking to make changes in their operations. Farm Beginnings participants learn goal setting, financial planning, enterprise planning, marketing and innovative production techniques.

This 12-month training course provides training and hands-on learning opportunities in the form of classroom sessions, farm tours, field days, workshops and access to an extensive farmer network.

Classes are led by farmers and other agricultural professionals from the area. The

classes, which meet approximately twice-a-month beginning in the fall, run until March 2016, followed by an on-farm education component that includes farm tours and skills sessions.

Over the years, more than 650 people have graduated from the Minnesota-region Farm Beginnings course. Graduates are involved in a wide-range of agricultural enterprises, including grass-based livestock, organic vegetables, Community Supported Agriculture and specialty products.

Besides Minnesota and Wisconsin, Farm Beginnings classes have been held over the years in Illinois, Nebraska and North Dakota. Farm Beginnings courses have recently been launched in South Dakota, Missouri, Kentucky, Indiana, New York and Maine.

The Farm Beginnings class fee is \$1,500, which covers one "farm unit"—either one farmer or two farming partners who are on the same farm. A \$200 deposit is required

with an application, and will be put towards the final fee. Payment plans are available, as well as a limited number of scholarships.

For application materials or more information (including details on Farm Beginnings courses in other parts of the country), see www.farmbeginnings.org or call 507-523-3366. □

The Next Step: Journeyperson

The Land Stewardship Project's Journeyperson Course provides farmers who are in their first few years of launching their operations assistance through mentorship, financial planning assistance, whole farm planning and peer-to-peer learning.

Participants work with both a farmer-mentor and a financial adviser on their individual farm planning. Each farm in the course also takes part in a matched savings program, where on a monthly basis participants will deposit up to \$100 in a savings account. After two years their money will be matched and they will be able to use it toward a capital improvement on the farm.

To apply to participate in the next Journeyperson session, contact LSP's Richard Ness at rness@landstewardshipproject.org or 320-269-2105. Details are also at www.farmbeginnings.org. □



Farm Beginnings graduates Eric and Lisa Klein hosted a field day this summer showcasing livestock production and direct-marketing. On-farm educational events are a key feature of the Farm Beginnings course. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

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 LSP's *Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse*. To fill out an online form and for more information, see www.landstewardshipproject.org. You can also obtain forms by e-mailing LSP's Dori Eder at dori@landstewardshipproject.org, or by calling her at 612-578-4497. Below are excerpts of recent listings. For the full listings, see www.landstewardshipproject.org.

Seeking Farmland

◆ Matthew Koppes is seeking to buy 150 acres of farmland in **eastern Iowa's Jackson or Jones County**. Pasture is preferred; no house is required. Contact: Matthew Koppes, 563-513-1299.

◆ Christopher Fickes is seeking to buy tillable farmland in **west-central Minnesota's Traverse, Grant or Stevens County**. Contact: Christopher Fickes, 760-681-7137, fickes04@gmail.com.

◆ Gao Vang is seeking to rent 1-3 acres of farmland in **Minnesota**. A place to raise chickens and pigeons is preferred; no house is required. Contact: Gao Vang, 763-607-5235, gvan1202@gmail.com.

◆ Kay Schuler is seeking to buy 5 or more acres of farmland in **Iowa, Wisconsin or Nebraska**. Land that has not been sprayed for several years, with a barn, chicken coop, utility shed, fencing and house is preferred, but details are negotiable. Contact: Kay Schuler, kayschuler@gmail.com, 480-351-9019, 549 E. Red Rock Trail, San Tan Valley, AZ 85143.

◆ Sherry Mount is seeking to buy 10+ acres of farmland in **Minnesota**. Land that has not been sprayed for several years and that has fencing, water and outbuildings is preferred; no house is required. Contact: Sherry Mount, 763-571-9275, sherrymount@yahoo.com.

◆ Audrey Doty is seeking to rent 10+ acres of farmland in **Minnesota**. Land with pasture, a barn and a house is preferred; water and fencing are optional. Contact: Audrey Doty, audreymdoty@gmail.com.

◆ Jerry Alberte is seeking to buy 30 acres of farmland in southern **Wisconsin's Dodge, Jefferson, Walworth, Rock, Dane or Washington County**. Land with pasture, water and a barn is preferred; no house is required. Contact: Jerry Alberte, Jerryalberte@gmail.com.

Farmland Available

◆ Steven Abel and Mary Maier-Abel have for sale a 30-acre certified organic farm in **western Wisconsin (on the Pierce-Pepin County line)**. The farm was certified organic in 2012 with MOSA. The woodland (about 7 acres) has been certified for organic wild harvesting of morel mushrooms, black cap

raspberries and black walnuts. There are about 20 acres of tillable land. Dams have been added for soil conservation. Outbuildings include three hoop houses. Leaving hoop houses and perennial plant stock is negotiable and based on the interest of the buyer. Owners would like to work with someone who appreciates the fact that the farm is certified organic and wants to keep it that way. Property is listed with a realtor and there are pictures online. Contact owner for the MLS number or other information. The asking price is \$349,000, which is negotiable. Contact: Steven Abel, 715-647-3119 (home), 715-448-0876 (work), bloomhill1593@yahoo.com.

◆ Ed Lysne has for sale approximately 10 acres of farmland near the town of Northfield, in the **Twin Cities, Minn., region**. There are gardens, a small garage and a house. Contact: Ed Lysne, edriclysne@gmail.com, 612-790-7873.

◆ Justin Rose has for rent 7.5 acres of farmland in **central Wisconsin's Wood County**. The property has not been sprayed for several years. Contact: Justin Rose, 715-459-1460, justin.max.rose@gmail.com.

◆ Helen Hillukka has for sale 15 acres of farmland in east-central **Minnesota's Wright County**. No chemicals have been used on the land for 15 years. The land includes six-wire high-tensile electric fencing and a five-bedroom, 4,650-square-foot house. The asking price is \$439,000. Contact: Helen Hillukka, chemicalfreeland4sale@gmail.com.

◆ Peter and Katy Hemberger have for sale 11 acres in **south-central Minnesota** (three miles west of Hanska). Three and a half acres are tillable and have been planted in vegetables for the past three years; no spray has been used. Asparagus and raspberries are established. There are two hoop structures on the property. There is a large barn and it includes a walk-in cooler. The asking price is \$289,000 (negotiable). Contact: Peter Hemberger, 507-766-5816, 651-239-6057, pemberger@gislason.com or peterjameshemberger@gmail.com.

◆ Shodo Spring has for rent 1-3 acres of farmland in **southeastern Minnesota's Rice County**, near Faribault. The land has not been sprayed for several years and it has pasture, fencing that needs repair and outbuildings; no house is available. Spring is transitioning the land from pasture to permaculture, and would like to arrange with someone to raise chick-

ens, bees or larger livestock in cooperation with the new plantings. Spring is open to a possible sharecrop arrangement. Contact: Shodo Spring, 507-384-8541, shodo.spring@gmail.com.

◆ Daz Jonsen has for sale 130 acres of farmland in **north-central Minnesota's Crow Wing County**. The land has not been sprayed for several years. The retiring owner is willing to work with rent, rent-to-own, trade, or other creative arrangements to make a transition to the next generation. Contact: Daz Jonsen, 218-763-4447, sylvapond@gmail.com.

◆ Field Fred has for rent during the 2015-2016 growing seasons 263 acres of farmland in **southwestern Wisconsin's Richland County**. No outbuildings or house are available; the rental price is negotiable. Contact: Field Fred, Field84@mac.com.

◆ Ken Raspotnik has for rent farmland in northwestern **Wisconsin's Bayfield County**. He owns 160 acres and has an additional 150 acres rented. One hundred acres is fenced as rotationally grazed pastures and there is an automatic watering system. Breeding stock horses and cattle are available for managing; Raspotnik is looking for someone that wants to help manage livestock for share. The land has not been sprayed for several years. Contact: Ken Raspotnik, 715-682-9240, ken@raspotnikfarm.com.

Seeking Farmer

◆ John Sumption is seeking a farmer to join his operation in **north-central Minnesota's Cass County**. Sumption has a vegetable farm and Community Supported Agriculture operation serving up to 50 families as well as restaurants and youth camps. Sumption is looking for someone interested in mentorship and running the business with an option to buy in the future. Net income from the farm and housing are available. Contact: John Sumption, 218-363-2942, sumptionenv@gmail.com.

◆ Karin Jordahl is seeking an organic farmer for land in **north-central Iowa's Webster County**. The 80-acre operation is transitioning to organic and enterprises include dairy, beef, poultry, hogs, sheep, goats and vegetables. No house is available. Contact: Karin Jordahl, 651-415-2900.

Farm Transitions

Inspiration, Hope & Ideas

By Karen Stettler

The Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings program is committed to more thriving family farmers helping to create vibrant rural communities. One significant factor that stands in the way is secure and affordable access to land for beginning farmers (*see pages 10-13 for LSP's special report on the role crop insurance plays as a barrier to land access*). It is important to Farm Beginnings that examples of successful farms that have

a positive impact on the land, their families and the community are lifted up.

With this in mind, last summer journalism intern Matt Grimley interviewed beginning and retiring farmers in various stages of transition, which are featured on pages 19-27. We are hoping these profiles will provide inspiration, hope and ideas for how others can undertake their own farm transitions.

The profiles highlight different examples of how land can be managed in ways that restore and enhance the ecosystem while generating good income for the farm families involved. Just as importantly, these stories

show how that stewardship legacy can be passed on to the next generation. We hope with these actual stories to plant seeds that farmers and landowners are able to transition onto the next generation their farming enterprises while keeping their legacy goals intact.

Each of these stories is unique, and yet it is our hope that there are threads that can apply to other situations. A big thanks to Eric and Lisa Klein, Hannah Breckbill, the Dale Family, Art and Jean Thicke, Melissa and Chad Crowley for sharing their experiences, goals, processes and themselves with us. □

LSP organizer Karen Stettler works on farm transition issues. She can be reached at stettler@landstewardshipproject.org or 507-523-3366.

Farm Transitions Toolkit Available

Owners of farmland who are looking to transition their enterprise on to the next generation of farmers can now turn to the *Farm Transitions Toolkit*, a comprehensive resource produced by the Land Stewardship Project and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA).

Whether you are a farmer, an absentee landowner who rents or leases your land to a farmer or simply someone with farmland in your family, the *Toolkit* provides a starting

point for the important process of transitioning to the next generation. The need for such a comprehensive resource is more critical than ever. With the percentage of older farmers on the rise, it is projected in the next 20 years 70 percent of ranchland and farmland will change hands.

The *Toolkit*, which was authored and edited by MISA's Jane Grimsbo Jewett, contains resources, links to services and practical calculation tables to help landowners establish a commonsense plan for farm transitions. It also features user-friendly resources on the economic, legal, governmental, agronomic, ecological and even social issues that must be considered in order to ensure a successful farm transition. It is rounded out with profiles of farmers who are in various stages of transitioning their enterprises to the next generation (*see pages 19-27 of this Land Stewardship Letter for examples of those profiles*).

The target audience for the *Toolkit* is those people who want to pass their farm on in a way that supports healthy rural communities, strong local economies and sustainable land stewardship. Too often retiring farmers or people who find themselves in possession of family land feel pressured to make decisions that go against their own values. The *Toolkit* can help people align those values with the decisions they make as far as their land's future is concerned.

The *Farm Transitions Toolkit* was developed through a collaborative project involving LSP, MISA, Farmers' Legal Action Group and ATTRA. Its development was guided by individuals representing

a number of organizations. This project was supported by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, USDA, Grant # 2010-03107. To find more resources and programs for beginning farmers and ranchers, visit www.Start2Farm.gov, a component of the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. □

LSP Farm Transition Coaching Service

Are you a beginning farmer looking for land or an active farmer thinking about next steps for your farm? The Land Stewardship Project has two Farm Transition Coaches that are available for farm families ready to engage in the process and work of goal setting, financial planning and engaging experts to put a farm transition plan into place.

There are many questions and complexities that come up for each situation. LSP's Farm Transition Coaches start by listening to the family's story and priorities, and then facilitating conversations, asking clarifying questions, connecting people to helpful resources, and checking in regularly. Priority will be given to families that have identified a successor.

If you are interested in learning more, contact LSP's Karen Stettler at 507-523-3366 or stettler@landstewardshipproject.org.

Farm Transitions Toolkit

September 2013

Land Stewardship Project
Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture
National Center for Appropriate Technology
Farmers' Legal Action Group



Getting a Copy of the Farm Transitions Toolkit

An online version of the Farm Transitions Toolkit is at www.landstewardshipproject.org/farmtransitionstoolkit; paper versions can be purchased by calling 800-909-MISA (6472).

Thinking Outside the Lines

By Matt Grimley

Atop the river-bluffs near the south-eastern Minnesota community of La Crescent, the 90-plus Ayrshires of Enchanted Meadows Organic Farm munch on fescue, clovers, plantain and other greenery on a recent summer day. Then, on schedule, they're led from pasture to barn.

Last year, after 10 years of a dairy farming partnership between Chad and Melissa Crowley on one hand and Art and Jean Thicke on the other, this twice-a-day trot began crossing a boundary of sorts. In 2013, the Thickses, who are in their mid-60s, sold the younger couple (they are in their mid-30s) 190 acres with a house, barn and shed off their 524-acre home place. There are times now when the cows may be grazed on pastures technically owned by the Crowleys, but are herded into the Thickses' barn to be milked. However, the two families consider Enchanted Meadows—its land, livestock and buildings—all part of one whole entity. After all, according to the plan, the whole dairy business will eventually transfer to the younger couple.



Jean and Art Thicke had to re-start the transition process for their dairy farm after a family tragedy. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

This farm transition is not the usual passing on of one generation to the next, because of one key fact: the two families involved are not in any way related.

But then again, this is not the usual property. In the late 1970s, Art abandoned fertilizer and pesticides on this scenic farm, which is perched on a ridge near the Mississippi River. In 1985, he stopped growing corn and started his cattle on managed rotational grazing, a process that moves the animals from paddock-to-paddock, allowing the pasture to recover for periods of 25 to 50

days. He hasn't plowed the land or planted row crops since the 1980s either, choosing instead to rely on the perennial plant systems of pasture and hay to feed the cows.

Ever since they started managed rotational grazing and abandoned row-cropping, the land has had an "unreal" capacity for holding water, says Art. The cattle are consistently unleashed into knee-high pastures that contain well-rooted plants supporting a whole ecosystem, below and above ground, including breeding meadow birds such as the bobolink and horned lark. And the farm is economically sustainable as well; it supports two families, including the Crowleys' three children—Dylan, 11; Jessica, 8; and Erin, 6.

"It's not how much milk you get per cow, it's how much money you keep. I found this out quite a while ago. If you spend less than you make, you make some money," Art says of his certified organic operation, laughing. "A lot of farmers haven't figured that out yet."

Starting Again

Eleven years ago, the Thickses were in a similar farm transition situation with their nephew Dan, who had farmed with them during the previous decade. But then the unthinkable occurred: Dan and his wife Wendy were killed by a drunken motorist in a motorcycle accident.

Art and Jean were devastated. In their mid-50s at the time, with no kids of their own, it was then they knew they couldn't run the farm by themselves forever. They had spent years planning a transition with Dan, and now, they knew, they'd have to do it again. After a period of mourning and rest, they began to interview new farm partners.

One day, an old family friend dropped by. He suggested they talk to his oldest daughter, Melissa. They had never met her before, but Jean remembers the first time she and Chad came to look at their would-be house.

"I remember her saying when they came to look at it that she— could be wrong on this, but this is my memory of it — that she knew that this was where she wanted to raise her babies," recalls Jean.

"It's felt like home ever since I've been in the house," says Melissa, with Chad nodding in agreement beside her. "Even when we didn't own it, it felt like home."

Chad and Melissa first met at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, where they both studied agriculture. She had grown up with dairy farming, and her parents own a



Chad and Melissa Crowley, shown here with their children, Dylan, Erin and Jessica, have during the past decade been gradually working their way into full ownership of Enchanted Meadows Farm. "We're committed now," says Melissa, adding that this process has provided a template for their own family to someday find "someone who wants to farm it this way and carry on." (Photo by Matt Grimley)

Outside see page 20...

Farm Transitions

...Outside from page 19

farm in nearby Ridgeway, Minn. He grew up in a small Nebraska town surrounded by beef, corn and soybeans, gaining some experience with Wisconsin dairy farms in college.

When they first got married, they just wanted to farm together. This was unlike the majority of the other agriculture students at River Falls, even those who had come from farms. "They wanted the jobs in the ag industry," says Chad. "But if [agriculture graduates] don't go back to the farm, who do you think the industry is going to service in the future?"

In late 2003, the Thickets hired the Crowleys to work the farm. At the same time, they began the gradual process of handing over greater responsibility to the younger couple. Working through a land contract that allows the land to be financed through the Thickets and not a bank, the Crowleys worked ahead in increments, paying off student loans and debt. Meanwhile, the Thickets, to build Chad and Melissa's assets, began to give them calves every year.

"I didn't want them to come merging with us in some big debt," says Art. "I wanted equity."

Chad and Melissa, in this gradual way, eventually got to the point where they were on equal footing with Art and Jean. Now they split the milk check and all the expenses

down the middle with the older couple. Art and Jean still own the machinery, but as they buy more equipment from here on out, they plan to do it together. And in an attempt to pass on more equity, the two families have restored much of the farm's infrastructure during the past few years.

"I can't transition all my junk," says Art with a laugh.

For this particular transition, there's an emphasis on time, an important sort of true paths and intentions. The 10-year transition period provided the Crowleys a chance to determine if farming wasn't for them or that they simply couldn't get their finances in order. Besides, those years of farming together allowed the younger couple to pay off their debts, build up savings, live frugally and really learn how to farm.

"The nice thing about their buying the farm over there, too, is that it gives them practice instead of just landing with the whole heap all at once," says Jean.

With the Thickets' specialized farm system, it was important for them to find someone who would manage the land in the same way—not using chemicals, allowing the cattle to roam freely and the grass to grow high. Currently, the two parties make management decisions together, often through daily meet-ups in the barn. In the years to come, an increasing amount of responsibility will transfer to the Crowleys as they learn to take on the whole of the farm.

But perhaps most importantly, this transition

See & Hear

In an LSP multi-media slide show, the Thickets and Crowleys talk about how they developed a successful farm transition relationship: www.youtube.com/user/LSPNOW.

period has allowed the two families to build mutual trust. Art and Chad ride motorcycles together. The families give each other bluebird boxes and cheese curds. The kids steal some veggies from the Thickets' garden, and then ride on the ATV with Art to put the gate back in place at the end of the day. All these little things add up to the Crowleys being like family, which is important to Art and Jean.

But that trust, along with any farm transition, takes time. "People who are thinking about keeping their farm, they need to start thinking about that 20 years before they're going to retire, or 10 years before, because if the first beginning farmer doesn't work out, they have to get a second one," says Art. "We just happened to be lucky to get someone who liked farming, agreed with the way we were farming, you know."

And part of farming is recognizing it's not a 9 to 5 job.

"I think it's hard to teach," says Melissa of the necessary time management and work ethic.

Building trust outside of the family may be seen by many as a barrier, but the Thickets don't see it as a problem.

"It might actually be easier," says Art,

Outside, see page 21...

Looking Outside the Family in an Era of High Land Prices

As Art and Jean Thicke make clear, rising land prices are squeezing out agriculture in southeastern Minnesota's Winona County, where Enchanted Meadows is located. According to the USDA's 2012 Census of Agriculture, land prices in Winona County were 57 percent higher than in 2007 and 136 percent higher than in 2002. Due in part to the scenic nature of the Mississippi River bluffs near the Thickets' home, country estates and housing developments are crowning the horizon.

It's part of a larger trend across the Midwest and the United States. The Agriculture Census shows that: land prices are increasing and shutting out beginning farmers; farm acreage is being lost; small-acreage farms are decreasing in number; large-acreages are increasing; farm operators are now an average 58-years-old and keep getting older; and younger farmers are not entering the profession as quickly as the older farmers are retiring.

More specifically, beginning farmers, or those who have been farming for 10 years or less, decreased by 20 percent from 2007 to 2012. According to Land Stewardship Project surveys, around 40 percent of Farm Beginnings course participants report having no access to land.

Connecting the younger and older generations, especially those farmers who are unrelated, becomes essential for the continuation of farming. According to The FarmLASTS Project, more than two-thirds of retiring farmers do not have successors in line, and nearly 90 percent of farm owners neither have an exit strategy nor know how to develop one.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of resources for beginning farmers seeking to connect with existing farmers:

- *Seeking Farmers Seeking Land Clearinghouse*, Land Stewardship Project (see page 17).
- FarmLink, a state-by-state listing of farmer-landowner connection programs: www.farmtransition.org/netwpart.html.
- Midwest Farm Connection, The Land Connection: www.midwestfarmconnection.org/farms.
- MOSES Land Link-Up, Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service: www.mosesorganic.org/farming/land-link-up.
- US Farm Lease: www.usfarmlease.com.

noting the difficulty of in-family disputes and inheritance issues.

Apart from the land sale in 2013, the two families haven't discussed further transition steps yet, partially because Art says he's not ready to stop farming yet. He doesn't see himself ever leaving the farm, in fact, joking that the Crowleys will have to build a fenced-in yard for him and Jean.

Both parties say that before the transition process can advance further, some issues external to their own relations will have to be addressed. One is land prices. Art says they're booming in Winona County, where Enchanted Meadows is located. Inflated prices made the land the Thickest recently sold the Crowleys on a contract-for-deed basis a hot property, but the older couple provided a break on the sale price. However, the larger effect of the bubble is that many farmers, not necessarily caring about the future of the land, will sell for the top price. Most likely, that top price will not be a deterrent to developers who have no interest in preserving farmland.

Another barrier, linked to land price, is the estate tax. Currently, an individual can leave \$1.2 million worth of estate to an inheritor without being taxed in Minnesota (under federal tax law, that amount is \$5.34 million). That estate exemption in Minnesota will rise to \$2 million by 2018, but Art remains worried that the inflated land prices

will disallow some from passing on their farms at a reasonable price.

"We're competing against the big guys who have money, just go out and buy farms," he says. "That's what's going to destroy agriculture more than anything... If I charge Chad and Melissa \$2 million for the farm, how long are they going to be farming? They aren't going to be farming. It can't be done."

The Landing

The three Crowley kids rush to the barn on a summer day. Jessica swings on the rope tied to the central beam and Erin hoists up two of the many barn kittens. Then they're off again, down the hill and below the barn where the chickens strut about. As Dylan points out the one with the funny leg, Art, Chad and Melissa look on with a grin.

This is Art's family farm. Out of high school, he thought he'd get away. He worked for an air conditioning factory, and he thought about further schooling, but he saw that life off of the land wasn't for him.

"Once you live on the farm, then live in town, work in the factory with all the people that don't like their jobs...that's not fun," says Art. "I think it's important people have a job they like... You don't have to look out for so many things to entertain yourself because your life's pretty well entertaining you."

Art adores the land. He glows as he talks about the scarlet tanagers near his pond, the small cave that he and his brother used

to explore on the edge of the hill, and the morels that magically appear every spring. Everything he needs is right here.

As he told the Crowleys when they first arrived on the farm, there are only three rules: keep it simple, keep it simple, keep it simple. So far it appears that Chad and Melissa are following these rules and will follow in the Thickest' footsteps.

"We're committed now," says Melissa, adding that this process has provided a template for their own family to someday find "someone who wants to farm it this way and carry on."

"The land provides a way of life for us, so that's what you've got to value," says Chad. "Without the land and without the practices that we do, we probably wouldn't be a successful dairy."

The three-mile side road leading to Enchanted Meadows was once home to eight dairies — now the closest might be 10 miles away. The farming trend increasingly favors bigger farms, but Art and Jean say there can be a future with grazing farms like this. And at least for the Thicke farm, the future is now a little bit clearer.

"Being sustainable isn't just one generation — it's got to be handed down through," says Jean. "It doesn't have to be with relatives. It just has to be with family, and we're a family." □

Matt Grimley served a Land Stewardship Project journalism internship during the summer of 2014.



Besides an organic dairy operation, Enchanted Meadows is home to breathtaking scenery as well as grassland and woodland wildlife habitat. That makes it especially critical to the Thickest that it's passed on to beginning farmers who are good stewards as well as good business managers. "Being sustainable isn't just one generation — it's got to be handed down through," says Jean. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

Don't Sell the Farm Without Talking to Me

By Matt Grimley

Back in the 1970s, all Rick and Janet Dale knew was that they were tired of moving. Janet was raised on a mission in Papua New Guinea and subjected to a boarding school education in Australia. Rick's father changed jobs frequently in Minnesota, often uprooting his family in the middle of a school year as they moved from community-to-community. Eager to start their own family after spending the first five years of their marriage moving frequently, Rick and Janet realized that they wanted "roots."

Over the years, the location they chose to set down those roots — it's just over the hill from Bayfield, Wis., and Lake Superior — has evolved into not only a stable home place but a thriving berry production business: Highland Valley Farm. On a recent summer day, Rick points to a clearing with a fire pit where he and Janet camped when they arrived here in 1977 to make a new beginning. None of the development that is Highland Valley Farm today — the house, the outbuildings, the established plantations of perennial fruits — was here. They built it all from scratch.

Highland Valley (www.bayfieldblues.com) now sells honey and maple syrup and crops 15 acres of blueberries, raspberries and currants on 50 acres. The Dales market the majority of their fresh and frozen berries to regional distributors and processors. The remainder is sold retail at the farm or self-distributed to local retail outlets and restaurants. In the midst of transitioning their business to their three kids, the Dales squeeze three-and-a-half family incomes out of these acres. That success didn't happen overnight—it was years in the making.

Making a Business

Janet, a registered nurse, initially worked full-time at a hospital in the area. That source of income freed up Rick to build the house and start a garden, which quickly grew a surplus. They started selling that boon, along with the honey crop from Rick's apiary. When Janet's parents bought land in the neighborhood as a place to retire,



Rick and Janet Dale originally moved onto a piece of land in northwestern Wisconsin just to have a place where they could put down roots. Today, they have a thriving farm business they are transitioning to their three children. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

they asked the Dales to share a three-acre enterprise of established red raspberries on the newly acquired land. For several years they grew and sold raspberries as a part-time endeavor, while planting additional berry acreage on their own land. Rick eventually began teaching commercial horticulture part-time at the technical college in Ashland,

Wis. One day, as he was driving to his job at the college, he passed the farm's hired help arriving for work. In that awkward moment, Rick realized that he was going to an off-farm job to be able to pay the wages of people who were going to do the work on his farm that day—work he wanted to be a part of. When he came home at the end of the day, he shared his epiphany with Janet. He was seasonally contracted at the college without tenure and benefits, and he was also working a farm that by itself couldn't support the family's livelihood. Something had to change.

The choice was for Rick to apply the business planning and commercial horticulture lessons that he was teaching at the college to his own farm plan in an effort to create a more sustaining and sustainable family farm business. Janet was charged with combing the family financial records to determine what net income the family needed for an acceptable standard of living. It had to include contributions to college educations for their children, a retirement plan, family health care, and all the necessities for a secure lifestyle.

The emerging business plan, Rick recalls, revealed, "What crops, grown at what cost, sold at what price, would get us to Janet's bottom line. We became farmers for the family lifestyle that farming affords us, not because of the money, and yet we wouldn't be here today if we hadn't developed a sound business plan that looks at just that: the money."

With a comprehensive business plan to achieve "Janet's bottom line," their existing equity was sufficient to leverage a commercial loan from the local bank to finance the necessary expansion and improvements. Attracted to the concept of utilizing perennial plant systems as much as possible, Rick decided to grow blueberries in a permanent sod culture. Years of pre-productive work were required to condition the soil, put irrigation systems in place and plant more than 10,000 bushes. To come into significant production, a blueberry bush requires five years, and another 10 to 12 years are required before the plants realize their peak yield potential.

"Regardless of what is being produced, farming is a capital-intensive business. Start-up farmers have to make tremendous inputs

Sell the Farm, see page 23...

up-front in the early years,” says Rick.

To Rick, being financially solvent is just as important as being ecologically sound. He emphasizes that farming can’t be considered successful or sustainable if it’s only done in the short term. “There’s no such thing as farming for a year,” he says. “Farming is something you come to for a lifetime. The best farming is done over generations.”

He concedes, though, that fewer farmers are thinking this way... and maybe that’s why it was so important to him when his children chose to return to the farm.

The Legacy

Rick, now 68, considers himself “retired” (as retired as a farmer can be who is still at home on the farm). The move wasn’t something he came to overnight. When the kids were going through school, they each in turn were expected to help on the farm. But when they became restless for a different experience, the Dales didn’t put them on a “ball and chain.”

“Fly!” Rick told them. “We can hire someone to do what you’ve been doing.”

So the kids winged it to Australia, Japan, Minneapolis, Seattle, Ohio, Chicago and other places. They established independent lives. Then, home for Christmas in 2001, the oldest son, Jon, asked his father if they could talk. “Dad, you’re getting kind of old. You must be thinking about retirement,” Jon said. “Whatever it is you’re thinking, please don’t sell the farm before talking to me.”

Jon wasn’t ready to come home just yet, but the seed had been planted.

It was about this time that Rick began to volunteer in his off-season to consult for

the U.S. Agency for International Development, working with farmers overseas. When he was offered a larger paid position developing a berry industry in the Republic of Georgia, he realized it would require his full attention. Rick and Janet had always envisioned a life after the farm, what they called a “third career,” and because he knew the kids wanted back in, this was an opportunity for transition. Rick sent the kids an e-mail offering salaried management positions on the family farm. Chris, the middle child, was the first to respond: he was eager to take the job. Jon, who had expressed an earlier interest in the farm, needed to be considered as well. When Rick informed Chris that the two of them would have to make the decision, Chris looked back at him and smiled, “I’d love to have my brother for a partner,” he said.

Not to be left out, daughter Magdalen decided she wanted in, too. “I wasn’t a very good farmer when I was a kid,” she recalls, her father adding that she’d sometimes lay in the berry rows reading a book or watching the clouds.

Magdalen had studied English and women’s studies at Oberlin College in Ohio. “Dad always said study what you’re passionate about and it will lead you to work you will want to do. Don’t worry if it seems like it doesn’t connect,” she recalls, repeating his words, “Ultimately, it will.”



“My job is to get out of the way,” says Dale. (Photo by Matt Grimley)



Everything—from the buildings to the thousands of blueberry bushes—was started from scratch on Highland Valley Farm. “Regardless of what is being produced, farming is a capital-intensive business. Start-up farmers have to make tremendous inputs up-front in the early years,” says Rick Dale. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

See & Hear

In a short LSP video, Rick Dale talks about preparing a farm transitions “toolkit”: www.youtube.com/user/LSPNOW.

Eventually Magdalen decided to come home as well.

To facilitate the transition process, the Dales incorporated the farm (*see sidebar on page 24*), negotiated job descriptions with the kids, and began to give ownership shares to the children every Christmas, gifting

roughly what value the U.S. Internal Revenue Service would allow before imposing taxes. This way, incrementally, the older generation is letting go and the younger generation is taking control.

Jon is the general manager, responsible for finances and the budget, commercial accounts, marketing and post-harvest operations. Chris is the production manager, supervises work in the fields, and maintains equipment. Magdalen is responsible for human resources, promotion, and on-farm retail sales. Janet has remained as the office manager, paying the bills and managing the payroll. As president of Highland Valley Farm, Rick functions as an adviser and

helps when and where he can.

“Although I’m the only one not getting a salary, I like to remind them that I can fire any one of them at any time,” he says with a laugh. As stockholders, the five family members are the farm corporation’s board of directors. Rick serves as chair of the board.

Rick says one of the best things he and Janet did was to not incorporate the real estate, only the business and its assets. The elder Dales still hold title to the land and buildings; the two of them rent the land and its facilities to Highland Valley Farm, Inc. in the form of a “triple net lease.” The annual rent provides Rick and Janet a return on their lifelong investment, which supplements their monthly Social Security check as retirement income. This arrangement also provides the children the freedom to defer making a lifetime commitment to the farm. Should they decide they don’t want to farm anymore, they’ll still have an ownership stake in the assets of the farm, which can be sold. But if they want to stick around, they have

Sell the Farm, see page 24...

the opportunity to purchase the farm real estate at any future date from their parents, singly or in partnership with their siblings. A land contract could make such a purchase feasible. The rent from the corporation now paid to the new owners would make land payments to the parents possible. Any way around it, the kids are guaranteed a job if they want it and their fair share of an inheritance, while Rick and Janet are afforded a secure retirement.

It took a lot of research, education, and discussion to develop this plan, to avoid what Rick calls “the tragedies of farm transition.” People need to think through the many scenarios that can affect their farm business transition plans, he insists. Some believe they can simply pass the farm to their intended heirs through inheritance. It may never get that far. Rick cites unforeseen events that can muddle the best of intentions, and with so many options for transferal, a farmer should leverage the resources available.

The Dales started contacting farm transition professionals in 2006 and they eventually attended a farm succession seminar offered by University of Minnesota Extension as part of a regional farm conference. They sought counsel from a knowledgeable attorney and involved the farm’s tax accountant.

At 50 acres, Highland Valley Farm is already a small agricultural business by today’s standards. Rick and Janet believe that if their land is to remain viable as a farm for future generations, it is necessary to keep it whole. For this reason they sold a conservation easement to ensure that it will never be subdivided (the easement was made available through the partnership of a local land trust and the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service). Income from selling those development rights helped Rick and

Janet pay down the farm debt, which allowed them to provide salaries to the children. Under the easement, a future owner may choose not to farm the land, but since the easement restricts residential, industrial, commercial and other development, the property will remain affordable for prospective farmers and always have the potential of being a place where food is produced. As far as where the kids are going with it, though, that’s up to them.

“My children don’t have to relive my life,” says Rick. “They have to live their own lives. I’m glad to have come to this point in my working life where I’m able and willing to let go. If we treat the kids as employees, rather than the owners they are becoming, they won’t stay with it. My job is to get out of the way.”

More Than Berries

Magdalen says this transition away from the farm was a conscious effort for her Dad, just as it’s been for the rest of the family.

“We work at this,” she says. “Every relationship takes work. This does, too.”

Family spats and business disagreements are worked out via weekly management meetings (Highland Valley Farm also has a key annual meeting where the business plan and budget for the coming year are discussed and approved). One thing that’s become clear is that no matter how well the business is going, it’s key that family members have their own physical space both on and off the farm. This space is critical if good family relations and effective working



Rick Dale with his daughter Magdalen and grandson Oscar. “We work at this,” says Magdalen. “Every relationship takes work. This does, too.” (Photo by Matt Grimley)

relationships are to co-exist side-by-side.

Magdalen now has her own infant son, Oscar. Late one summer afternoon, the sun arching over the fields and forest, she stands up from the bench downhill from where her parents first camped, searching for Oscar’s pacifier. “If they weren’t here,” she says of her family, “I don’t know if I would’ve come back.”

Rick looks on at his fussing grandson. For him, family defines Highland Valley Farm. Rick and Janet see themselves and their kids as part of the land. “We’re the Dales of Bayfield... it’s the place we’ve come to and it’s the place we’ve decided to stay put. We’ll take it, for better or for worse, like a marriage, right?” □

Incorporation as a Farm Transition Tool

The Dales turned their farm into a corporation so that they could pass the business to their children incrementally over time in equal shares. Several forms of incorporation are available for a farm business. The simpler limited liability corporation, also called an LLC, is regulated much like a sole-proprietorship except that most personal assets are protected from business liability. The C corporation is an entity unto itself. Highland Valley Farm is an S corporation. An S corporation differs from a C corporation in that it is not subject to income taxes. Corporate earnings or losses for an S corporation are passed through to the individual owners in proportion to their holdings and are reported as part of each individual’s personal income taxes. This means for family businesses, where family members may be both owners and employees, the double taxation of business and personal earnings is avoided.

“Our reasons for incorporation have more to do with transition of the business to the next generation than it has to do with liability,” says Rick Dale. “The S corp business organization option gives us more tools to enable us to accomplish this goal.”

Dale talked to legal and financial professionals before incorporating the farm. He recommends always consulting a professional before engaging in the delicate, years-long process of farm business transition. Additional materials regarding incorporation and other modes of farm transition can be found online at the University of Minnesota’s Extension website: www.extension.umn.edu/agriculture/business/farm-transfer-estate-planning/#farm-transfer.

Building the Foundation

Matt Grimley

Over the past 17 years, Eric and Lisa Klein have based their southeastern Minnesota farm's business model on a key concept: there is a strong demand for local, sustainably-produced food, and enterprises like theirs can meet that demand.

"Anybody who says you can't source local just isn't working on it," says Eric, 46. Over the years, he and Lisa's Hidden Stream Farm, which is near Elgin, has invested in everything from cutting-edge grazing technology and animal housing to storage facilities and dependable transportation in order to meet the demand for their sustainably-produced pork, beef and chicken. And it's paid off: they now have loyal customers—restaurants, co-ops, institutions and individuals—from Rochester to the Twin Cities that they are consistently able to satisfy.

But the Kleins know a thriving local food economy isn't just based on having the right hoop house or walk-in cooler. A critical element is also people—specifically a new crop of beginning farmers who, like themselves, are willing to balance innovative practices with good old-fashioned sweat equity.

"You gotta love what you do," says Lisa, 47. "If you like what you do, if you believe in the way you're raising it, the product is easy to sell."

That's why the past few growing seasons Hidden Stream Farm has shared a few of its acres with an up and coming farmer. This arrangement has provided the Kleins an efficient way to supply local markets while helping the newbie take an important step in her own agricultural career. Just as importantly, it's put another brick in the local food economy foundation.

"It's a thing to get me started, which is awesome," says the beginning farmer, Hannah Breckbill, 27, who is moving on

to a new farming adventure in 2015. "It's a jump-start for me as a farm business owner. That goal's been fulfilled."

Filling a Niche

An established farmer providing a helping hand to a beginner is nothing new. But what sets apart the relationship between Breckbill and the Kleins is that Eric and Lisa didn't mentor the younger farmer on the



Eric and Lisa Klein have built their farming operation around supplying sustainably-produced food to local markets. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

basics of antibiotic-free livestock production, which is Hidden Stream's bread and butter. Rather, Breckbill used the farm's infrastructure as a base for launching a vegetable operation, something the Kleins had no interest in doing themselves. This has been a way for them to, in a sense, expand their farm's offerings to customers without expanding the farm itself.

Eric says selling to restaurants, for example, has allowed them to concentrate on providing a quality product, making it so they can strike a balance between being big enough to make a living but not so big that they lose touch with their goal of being a family-sized sustainable farm.

"Basically, the chefs have done all of the marketing for us, which has allowed us to grow not fast, but organically," he says. "By growing at that rate, we keep up with the needs and production. We've been able to grow slowly, more within our means."

The Kleins annually raise approximately 1,300 pigs, 175 beef cattle and 2,800 chickens for local markets. They use pasture-

based systems for the cattle and chickens, and deep straw systems for the hogs. Hidden Stream has set up an efficient marketing system—relying on a combination of online (www.hiddenstreamfarm.com) and telephone orders. The Kleins also transport the product directly to customers using their own truck. All of this brings them in regular contact with chefs, food service providers and retailers who are seeking sustainably-raised meat. As a result, over the years

the Kleins have learned a lot about what other local, sustainable products are in demand. They now round out their meat offerings to customers with vegetables, eggs, fruits and honey sourced from 10 to 12 other farms in their community. Anything they can't get through these connections, they look for at a produce auction managed by members of the Amish community in St. Charles, Minn., which regularly draws up to 50 area farmers on a given day with product to sell. By re-selling other farmers' product, the Kleins are able to focus on what they do best, produce meat, while supporting the local food economy infrastructure on a wider scale.

The success the Kleins have had in providing customers a variety of local products shows there are plenty of farmers in the area willing to serve this growing market. Even so, at times it can be difficult to keep up with demand for products such as vegetables, which are growing in popularity as eaters become more health conscious.

So in 2012 the Kleins placed a notice in the Land Stewardship Project's *Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse* (see page 17) that they had two acres they were willing to rent to a beginning farmer who wanted to raise vegetables. It took two or three listings before they got a response.

"It wasn't easy to find someone," recalls Eric.

But eventually Breckbill gave them a call. She had studied mathematics at Carleton College and had originally wanted

See & Hear

In an LSP multi-media slide show, the Kleins and Hannah Breckbill talk about their farming goals: www.youtube.com/user/LSPNOW.

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Farm Transitions

...Foundation, from page 25

to be a math professor, but was eventually drawn to farming as a way to combine activism with her love of the land. Breckbill's first internship—a trial by fire, she recalls—was managing a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farming operation in Texas. She eventually followed some friends to northeastern Iowa, near Decorah, where she worked on farms for three years, building a community while getting solid production experience. Now she needed a place to put her learning into action.

By the time she saw the Hidden Stream listing, Breckbill was a fresh graduate of LSP's Farm Beginnings Program, a course taught by farmers and other agricultural professionals that provides training in innovative business planning, marketing and goal-setting (see page 16). Breckbill called the Kleins and learned that in fact Farm Beginnings is what had helped them launch their own farming career—Eric and Lisa had graduated from one of the first classes in the late 1990s, and Lisa's father, Everett Koenig, had been part of a group of farmers who had helped LSP create the course.

After Breckbill first contacted the Kleins, the three of them met a few times and developed a formal plan for the partnership. Under the arrangement, the Kleins agreed to buy nearly all of the beginning farmer's produce. This not only assured Hidden Stream a steady supply of vegetables for their resale business, but also provided Breckbill an immediate start for her business, which she would run independently from the Kleins.

"Eric and Lisa are easy to work with, ask for help, ask questions of," says Hannah. "They have a lot of ideas, but they don't know much about vegetables. That's what I'm here for."

During the 2012 growing season, Breckbill sold most of her production to Hidden Stream. In 2013, she extended her season by erecting a greenhouse on the Kleins' property to house starter plants during the winter and early spring. During some harsh winter weather in early 2014, she literally slept in the greenhouse many nights to keep the stove stoked and her starters from freezing.

"Fun but at the same time a little ridiculous," Breckbill recalls with a laugh.

In 2014, she diversified her operation by starting a CSA operation, an arrangement where consumers buy "memberships" in a farm for a share of the production. With 25 members invested in her, Breckbill also

started participating in the Rochester Farmers' Market. She also managed an intern and two work-shares in her CSA, bringing the young farmer closer to fulfilling a dream of hers: running her own full-fledged business.

This experience has provided Breckbill with the grounding she needed to launch a farm enterprise without going deep into debt. And having the marketing mostly taken care of through Hidden Stream also allowed her to focus on refining her production techniques. Now Breckbill is ready to take the next step. In 2015 she will be farming land in the Decorah area owned by a retiring couple that want their vegetable production plots to be used. Breckbill says this new opportunity is similar to the relationship she had with the Kleins, although she will miss the "awesome" marketing infrastructure Hidden Stream provided.

"That's been key for helping me get started here, and I think I'll be able to continue with a lot of my connections, including hopefully with Hidden Stream, from my spot in Decorah," says Breckbill.

She concedes it was hard to leave Hidden Stream, but this new opportunity will help her get closer to her goal of establishing a permanent farming enterprise. Such



Having Hannah Breckbill raise vegetables on the otherwise livestock-intensive farm exposed the Klein children to other forms of making a living on the land. Here, Ben Klein is helping her wash greens. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

permanence is needed, "in order to really begin thinking about caring for the land, really investing in soil building and perennial crops," she says, adding that she has a kind of "five-year" plan for establishing a permanent farming operation.

"I'd really like to do perennial tree crops and maybe nuts and berries," says Breckbill. "The question is how I will attain that...I'm earning my living from farming but it's not a huge living. How will a farm that provides a full-time living look? How will I pick a place that is permanent for me?"

A lot of questions, but Breckbill's experience at Hidden Stream Farm has given her the confidence to tackle them.

"I've grown a lot through running my

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Over the past 17 years, the Kleins have built a solid base of retail, institutional and individual customers who are seeking sustainably-raised poultry, beef and pork. (Photo by Matt Grimley)

own farm business,” she says.

A Community Effort

“That means our incubator was a success,” says Eric of Breckbill’s moving on. “It gave her a foothold.”

Providing such a foothold is important to the Kleins, who themselves have benefited from such stepping-stones. Besides the education and networking provided by Farm Beginnings, Eric and Lisa say they owe their farming career to the assistance of Everett. Now 79, Lisa’s father over the years has helped with everything from livestock care and developing new grazing techniques to manning the farmers’ market booth. He and his wife Rosemary are providing a geographical base for Hidden Stream—besides renting 100 acres from neighbors, the Kleins lease 170 acres from the Koenigs and their long-term plan is to take ownership of the entire family farm someday. But Lisa’s parents have also provided a valuable philosophical framework for producing food.

In the early 1970s, the Koenigs removed chemicals completely from their farming system, something almost unheard of at that time. Then in the early 1990s, they converted much of their land from row crops to grass and started using managed rotational grazing to produce milk and beef. The Kleins have continued that stewardship legacy and added to it by seeking



As graduates of LSP’s Farm Beginnings course who have benefitted from a vast network of established farmers, the Kleins are big believers in helping out a new generation of agrarians. Here, Lisa is shown discussing Hidden Stream’s pasture-based production system at a recent field day. “You gotta love what you do,” she says. “If you like what you do, if you believe in the way you’re raising it, the product is easy to sell.” (Photo by Matt Grimley)

out consumers who are willing to put their money where their mouth is when it comes to supporting sustainable farming methods.

“My dad... instilled that value, not using chemicals and all,” says Lisa. “We’re just trying to keep it nice and good and clean, because all around us, everyone sprays, and this is our little piece of the world.”

Preserving that little piece of the world has become increasingly important to the Kleins as their family grows. They have six children—Andy 15, Ben 13, Katie 11, Sarah 8, Isaac 6 and April 3— and having them be a part of a safe, environmentally-sound farming operation is important to the couple.

But farming utilizing innovative, sustainable methods such as rotational grazing can be a challenge, particularly when one is surrounded by more “conventional” agriculture. Knowing they’ve benefited from networking with other farmers over the years, the Kleins have often opened up their operation to beginning producers, hosting Farm Beginnings field days and presenting at workshops on innovative production and marketing methods, for example.

The Kleins see helping out a new generation of farmers as a mutually beneficial relationship, and that’s why they are open to

hosting another beginner at Hidden Stream in the future. Having a vegetable enterprise on the farm not only allowed them to diversify, but exposed their children to different ways of making a living on the land. When Breckbill first joined Hidden Stream, the Kleins couldn’t stop their son Ben from going out to help with the produce operation. It ended up being a positive experience for him—he learned about greenhouse management and what it takes to produce vegetables on a larger scale.

“He’d go out and till for her. ‘Can I go out till? Can I go out and mow?’ Hard part was we needed him here on the farm and he was out on the other side,” Lisa says with a laugh.

Future relationships with beginning farmers may involve adjusting rental fees and the way expenses as well as facilities are shared, say the Kleins. But the overall goal will still remain making the kind of connection that builds healthy roots for a strong local food community. And, says Lisa, maybe one of those connections will come along when she and Eric are looking for a more permanent partner for the operation.

“Maybe that’s the person that stays.” □



Hannah Breckbill says her experience farming a few acres at Hidden Stream has been an important step toward her ultimate goal. “It’s a jump-start for me as a farm business owner. That goal’s been fulfilled.” (Photo by Matt Grimley)



The Ogallala Road

A Memoir of Love and Reckoning

By Julene Bair

2014; 278 pages

Viking

www.julenebair.com

Reviewed by Dana Jackson

The *Ogallala Road* is the story of a woman's connection and disconnection to land, to the farm where she grew up and to a particular region, the northwestern edge of Kansas near the Colorado border—the dry, High Plains. This memoir by Julene Bair is also a very personal story about connections to family, of relationships with her parents and two brothers, her teenage son Jake, and a Kansas cowboy named Ward. But there is a reckoning of Bair's future with Ward and the farm in western Kansas, and in spite of her love for both, she does not make a lifetime commitment to either.

The diversified wheat and livestock farm Bair loved as a child was changed forever when her father, Harold Bair, followed his neighbors and began pumping water from the Ogallala Aquifer to irrigate corn, replacing grass pastures and dryland wheat. With high corn prices, government payments and subsidized crop insurance assured, and essentially no limits on the gallons farmers could withdraw from the aquifer (irrigators pumped more water each year than the total flow of the Colorado River), landowners would be stupid if they didn't install center pivots and profit from the system. Initially, Harold Bair kept a thousand acres for dryland wheat, half of which lay fallow in stubble each year, a system that farmers had successfully adopted after the disastrous wind-blown soil losses of the 1930s. But when the land was sold after his death, the new owners converted almost every acre to irrigated corn.

The story of the Bair family operation is a microcosm of what threatens to decimate this region. It's been known for a long time that the recharge rate for the Ogallala is much less than the withdrawal rate from modern irrigation. The water will run out, the cornfields will disappear from western Kansas, and the livestock feedlots located near the plentiful corn supply will shut down. Buffalo, then cattle, once thrived on

the grass of the High Plains, and grass-based livestock could have provided a livelihood for people far into the future, as it had for Native Americans before European settlement. But most of the buffalo grass has been extirpated, and restoring it—watered only by natural rainfall—could take a very long time. More likely, western Kansas will become a real desert.

Desertification on the High Plains is a consequence of the market driving natural resource use and conservation being given only lip service. After coming to grips with the reality of losing the life-giving aquifer, Julene met with the water district director and learned that to stabilize the Ogallala in her district, water rights would have to be cut by 80

percent. Initially the director had promoted a zero depletion plan, and his board of farmer irrigators and voters in the district hated it. It was politically infeasible. Even Bair's sweetheart Ward, a rancher raising cattle on grass, believed that "this country was founded on the rights to own property," and landowners should be able to do as they pleased with their land without government regulation.

Julene Bair's father Harold knew farmers would keep pumping water out of the aquifer to raise corn until the water was gone, irrigation costs became too high or the government stopped them. He knew that it was wrong to deplete the Ogallala aquifer, but he told his daughter that "Big Daddy" (the U.S. government) would "put the plug in before it's too late." Until then, he would bank his share of corn subsidies.

Harold Bair's relationship to the land and his family is dysfunctional, limiting the future for both. After living for a time in the Mojave Desert, the author describes how she goes back to Kansas, pregnant and broke, and drives tractors for her father. She fixes up the old house on the farm (her parents had moved into the town of Goodland in the 1960s) and moves in with her baby, but she's afraid he will be poisoned from the empty farm chemical containers carelessly stashed in and around outbuildings. She likes learning how to handle the field equipment, but her father is a hard boss and a harsh judge of those whose work ethic falls short of his, which is why Julene's brothers refused to work with him and take over the farm. To his eye, only land that could be farmed was

beautiful.

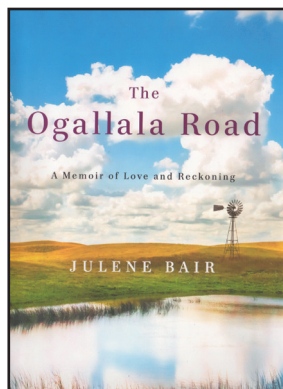
The author describes the process of extracting herself from her father's expectations, all hopelessly demanding and contrary to her values about water stewardship and grasslands. She finally moves to Iowa City with her son to study writing at the University of Iowa, returns only two summers to do farm work for her father, and then begins teaching and writing and raising her son in Laramie, Wyo. She makes the drive from Laramie to Goodland fairly often to see her family and Ward, and writes fondly about the wide open landscape of the High Plains and "the Ogallala road"—the drive along winding riverbeds still marked by cottonwood trees with leaves rippling from the incessant winds that characterize the region.

"Hang on to the land," no matter what, Harold Bair had taught his children, and after his death, they did...for a while. When Julene and her brother Bruce finally decide to sell the land because no one in the next generation could or would farm it, and Bruce was tired of overseeing hired farm managers, family members suffer from guilt and loss. The author explains how she felt like a "lone thread," without the strength and status of being a landowner, without a connection to the land. Yet she could not make a living or survive socially in the value system supporting the corn economy. The places she explored to find springs where the Ogallala surfaced, streams with wet sand but no running water, had been almost completely inundated by a sea of green corn by the time they sold the farm.

The dilemma of children who inherit farmland isn't just a Kansas-specific story. Across the United States, absentee landowners—the sons and daughters of farmers—are hanging on to family farms because of family values or because they are sentimentally attached, but they don't want to farm. Many end up selling to investors who buy the land to plant corn and reap government subsidies, though they would prefer to find buyers who really want to live on the land and farm it.

Six years after the sale, Julene Bair is living in Colorado but travels the "Ogallala Road," to connect again to the land and her family, a trip she describes in the last section of the book. In this "reckoning," she explains more about the aquifer's continuing decline in the context of agricultural politics and economics, but sees a window of hope after conversations with some High Plains farmers who share her values about water and who have rejected modern chemicals to produce organic wheat and vegetables. "This type of talking and thinking had never happened before, not in my Kansas," she writes.

Ogallala, see page 29...



This statement surprised and disturbed me. “Her” Kansas, the High Plains on the western edge, somehow missed out on conversations that have been going on openly in Kansas for almost 40 years, since the founding of the Land Institute in 1976 and the

The Third Plate

Field Notes on the Future of Food

By Dan Barber

2014; 486 pages

Penguin Press

www.thethirdplate.com

Reviewed by Terry VanDerPol

In his new book, *The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food*, Dan Barber weaves a fascinating narrative on the history and culture of food. Even more importantly, he takes the conversation about what a truly sustainable farming and food system requires of us a good stretch beyond what almost seems, at times, presumptive jingoism about “local” and “sustainable.”

Early on, the author, who is the award-winning executive chef at the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, frames the book with his response to a challenge from a food magazine—design a plate of food that looks like the future of food. He drew three plates. The first, representing the recent past, was a seven-ounce corn-fed steak and a small heap of steamed carrots. The second plate tried to capture all the ideas and ideals of the farm-to-table movement: the steak was grass-fed, the vegetables were organic and heirloom. Although the elements were different, Barber was struck by how similar they appeared in his drawing and in his imagination. On the third plate was a “carrot steak dominated with a sauce of braised second cuts of beef.”

The book is not a scold about how much red meat vs. vegetables forms “a good diet.” His point is that if we want a farming system that is sustainable, our dinner plate must feature what the landscape can grow. From his point of view, that the steak is now grass-fed and the vegetables are local and heirloom is good, but good farming requires us to think and act beyond such a tweaking of the elements on our dinner plate.

Truly good food comes from an entire system of agriculture that is not the product of a set of rules and prescriptions. Nor is it

Kansas Rural Center in 1979. In all kinds of meetings, conferences and publications, these organizations have promoted sustainable and organic farming practices and advocated for public policies to prevent the depletion and pollution of the state’s water resources, including the Ogallala Aquifer. Perhaps it is true that people only hear what they are ready to hear. I hope this book is

an agriculture that seeks to control nature with chemicals, altered genetics and powerful machinery. It’s a system of producing food that is a dance with nature. It is figuring out how to “grow nature” to produce healthy and delicious food. Fads, habits and cultural baggage about how prosperous people eat should not drive what food is on our plate if we want to continue eating into the future. Nature and the relationship of the farm to it determine what’s for dinner and chefs have an important role to play in leading along that path. Barber’s book is his quest, told through richly detailed stories, for a new cuisine, a new way of eating that pulls it all together.

The story of wheat figures prominently in the author’s journey. Pushing back on the genetic monoculture of modern grain production and our prejudice against whole grain, Barber manages to get a seed breeder to develop a new strain of wheat out of heirloom genetics that can deliver the kind of flavor the chef is seeking. He quickly realizes that good plant breeding and good farming alone are insufficient to achieve what he seeks from “Barber wheat.” Also required are good blending and milling practices, as well as a knowledge about baking all but lost with his grandmother’s generation. In addition, as his farmer friend Klaas reminds him, it is not enough to buy all of the Barber wheat he can grow. For the wheat to be truly delicious the soil biology must be built and maintained by a whole variety of grains and legumes in deep rotation on his farm. For this to work, we need a market for all of these supporting plants.

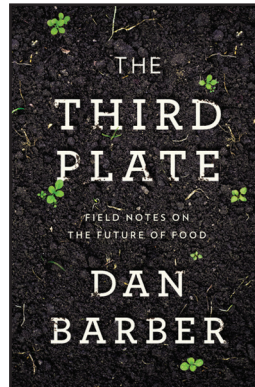
This realization brings the author to what I believe is one of his most important revelations. The farm-to-table movement celebrates the small produce farmers who grow incredible food and sell through innovative means like farmers’ markets and Community Supported Agriculture enterprises. Those types of farms have a vital role in a new, emerging food system. Conversely, if our food system remains rooted in a small vari-

ety of crops, a small number of huge farms can grow a lot of those things, at least for the near term. But, if we are going to change the food and farming system, we need the lion’s share of the agricultural landscape to be mid-sized farms—diversified, nimble and interlocking with farms around them to develop the markets and value-added opportunities for all the plants that are required to build healthy soil. And if we want outstanding wheat for our bread, those farms need to be embedded in thriving rural communities so we have the feed mills, the grain millers and blenders, the seed cleaners and the bakers to support the whole system required to deliver that wheat consistently and affordably.

Barber closes the book with a series of menus for the future rising out of what he calls “whole farm cooking.” The second menu includes “Rotation Risotto,” re-emphasizing that great wheat is not just about the wheat. The flavor springs from all of the plants farmer Klaas uses in his rotation. A diner in his restaurant commented that what the chef was trying to do was the plant equivalent of “nose to tail” eating. It is, but with the recognition that the animal’s nose

to tail is part of the dance with the plants to create the “growing nature” we need for a more sustainable food and farming system. It’s an expansion of the idea of *terroir*—the concept that conditions specific to a geographical area can have a profound impact on the nature of the food produced there. The taste of place comes from interaction between genetics and a whole host of careful human activity and community.

Humans are hard-wired to eat what’s in our environment. That’s why dialing down the abundance of highly processed food-like substances in our urban and rural areas matters for the health of the people and the environment. It makes sense to start with the notion of “growing nature” to feed ourselves instead of relying on an industrial agriculture that tries to control or force nature, a



Plate, see page 30...

system Aldo Leopold says will “die of its own too much.” The same principle must be exported to our built environment and our human community. Good farming is a complex relationship involving careful menu planning, good breeding, good milling and blending, good baking — the list goes on.

I had planned to present a sidebar to this

review that included a tested recipe of “lentils and pig’s ear soup,” so I asked family members at Pastures A Plenty farm to score a couple of pig’s ears after some hogs were processed. It turns out you can’t get pig’s ears, at least from a typical meat processor, even if you own the pig who wore the ears into the plant. The author of *The Third Plate* has taken the conversation about sustainable food and farming in the right direction, but

in a world where Oreo cookie-flavored milk is instantly recognized as food and pig’s ears are dog toys, we have a long way to go. However, our progress is steady and I think Dan Barber has added to it. □

Terry VanDerPol directs the Land Stewardship Project’s Community Based Food Systems Program and raises grass-fed beef cattle in western Minnesota.



LAND
STEWARDSHIP
PROJECT

Membership Update

Many Ways to Support LSP

By Mike McMahon

Members contribute to the Land Stewardship Project in all sorts of key ways. They give their time and their labor to get the job done. They share their knowledge and their talents to teach each other how to be better stewards of the land. And they give financially to advance all of LSP’s work to keep the land and people together.

Attend any LSP gathering and you’ll see members contributing in all of these ways. At a field day you might meet members who have opened up their farm to people who are interested in learning about innovative production systems. Go to an LSP organizing meeting and you could be listening to a member speak about frac sand mining or another issue that directly affects the land. Look around at an event and you’ll see people donating their time to all of the tasks required to pull it off, from the planning to the clean up.

And at any of these gatherings, you will also likely hear a member ask you to make a financial contribution. They may ask you to join as a new member or to renew your membership. They may ask you to chip in when the donation baskets are circulated, or maybe they’ll ask you to sign up as a

monthly pledger.

These donations add up to be a critical part of the funding LSP needs. Most of these contributions come in the forms of cash, check or credit card donations, which is a great way to support LSP.

But what you may not know is that LSP can accept support via a wide range of contributions that go beyond cash. LSP supporters have generously donated gifts of stock, land, in-kind donations (one LSP member donated a tractor this year!), memorial gifts and bequests, workplace donations, event proceeds and more.

These kinds of donations sometimes require some discussion and a little planning, but all of them are important to LSP and have a real impact. If you have any questions about making a gift to LSP, please contact me. I would enjoy the opportunity to talk with you about it.

As the end of the year approaches, I would like to ask you to think about how you can support LSP’s work for stewardship and justice on the land. I promise you that whatever you can contribute, LSP will put it right to work for people and the land. □

Mike McMahon is LSP’s director of individual giving. He can be reached at 612-722-6377 or mcmahon@landstewardshipproject.org.

In Memory & in Honor...

The Land Stewardship Project is grateful to have received the following gifts made to honor or remember loved ones, friends or special events:

In Memory of Phyllis Pladsen

◆ Karen Bartig

In Memory of Karl Weissing

◆ Mike & Jennifer Rupprecht

In Memory of Richard

“Dick” Fahrendholz

◆ Barb & Martin Nelson

In Memory of Steve O’Neil

◆ Angela Miller

For details on donating to LSP in the name of someone, contact Mike McMahon at 612-722-6377 or mcmahon@landstewardshipproject.org.

Many Ways to Help LSP Keep the Land & People Together

Gifts of Stock

Gifts of stock are valuable to the Land Stewardship Project and easy to do. Contact Michael McMahon at 612-722-6377 or mcmahon@landstewardshipproject.org for the information you’ll need to make the gift or if you have questions.

Gifts of Land

The *Land & Stewardship Legacies* initiative provides a way for your family’s legacy on the land to continue by using it to support LSP’s work or to provide opportunities for a new generation of stewardship farmers. LSP is able to accept gifts of farmland or other real estate from members or other friends of our organization. If you’re interested in exploring a gift of land, contact LSP’s George Boody at 612-722-6377 or gboody@landstewardshipproject.org.

Bequests

A bequest is another way you can make a gift that will have a lasting impact on LSP’s work. With the help of an adviser, you can include language in your will or trust specifying a gift to family, friends or a charity as part of your estate plan. For details, e-mail plannedgiving@landstewardshipproject.org or call 612-722-6377.

Keep Your LSP Membership Current

Renewing your annual LSP membership—whether you give \$35, \$100, \$500 or \$1,500—is important to keeping LSP strong and effective. And of course, any contribution above your membership dues makes a big difference. If you have questions about your membership status, contact Abby Liesch at 612-722-6377 or aliesch@landstewardshipproject.org.

You can also make gifts directly through LSP’s website (www.landstewardshipproject.org) or by calling 612-722-6377. Prefer to mail in your contribution? An envelope is provided in the center of this *Land Stewardship Letter*.

Support LSP in Your Workplace

The Land Stewardship Project is a proud member of the Minnesota Environmental Fund, which is a coalition of 20 environmental organizations in Minnesota that offer 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, ask the person in charge of workplace giving to include it. For details, contact LSP's Mike McMahon (mcmahon@landstewardshipproject.org) or Abby Liesch (aliesch@landstewardshipproject.org) at 612-722-6377.



Give a Gift LSP Membership

Know someone who would enjoy becoming a member of the Land Stewardship Project? Contact us and we will send a special card describing the gift, along with a "new member" packet of materials. For details, call 612-722-6377 or see www.landstewardshipproject.org/home/donate. ☐

Get Current with LSP's

LIVE  **WIRE**

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

LSP's Ear to the Ground Podcast

The Land Stewardship Project's award-winning *Ear to the Ground* podcast features conversations with farmers, scientists and active citizens who are working to create a sustainable food and farming system. We now have over 160 episodes available at www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast, covering topics ranging from beginning farmers and soil health to frac sand mining and local democracy. ☐

LSP Admin Corner



The Land Stewardship Project's administrative team posed for a photo during a recent meeting in our Lewiston, Minn., office. Pictured (left to right): Karen Benson, Lewiston office manager; Timothy Kenney, director of finance and operations; and Amelia Shoptaugh, operations manager. (Photo by Johanna Rupprecht)

Wear Your Land Stewardship Project Pride

Show your support for the Land Stewardship Project with an official LSP t-shirt and cap. LSP's baseball-style cap is union made in the U.S. of high quality 100-percent cotton. It comes in black with LSP's green and white embroidered logo featured on the front. A fabric strap and brass clip on the back make this a one-size-fits-all cap. The price is \$15.

LSP's limited edition black t-shirts have our logo on the front and the words "Land Stewardship Project" on the back. They are also union made in the U.S., are 100 percent preshrunk cotton, and are available in adult sizes: small, medium, large and extra large. The price is \$15.

T-shirts and caps are available in LSP's offices in Minneapolis (612-722-6377), Lewiston (507-523-3366) or Montevideo (320-269-2105). You can also order them online at www.landstewardshipproject.org/store.





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STEWARDSHIP CALENDAR

- **DEC. 20—LSP Farm Beginnings class session in Watertown, Minn., & La Crosse, Wis.** (see page 16)
- **JAN. 6—2015 session of the Minn. Legislature begins.** Contact Bobby King, LSP, 612-722-6377, bking@landstewardshipproject.org
- **JAN. 8—LSP Farm Beginnings class in La Crosse, Wis.** (see page 16)

- **JAN. 9-10—Rutabaga Riches: Farm Finances for Farmers Course**, Rockton, Ill. Contact: Chris Blanchard, 507-951-4470, chris@flyingrutabagaworks.com, www.purplepitchfork.com/rutabaga-riches-conference.html
- **JAN. 9-10—Minnesota Organic Conf.**, St. Cloud, Minn. Contact: Meg Moynihan, 651-201-6616, www.mda.state.mn.us/organic

- **JAN. 10—LSP Farm Beginnings class session in Watertown, Minn.** (see page 16)
- **JAN. 12—Deadline for submitting descriptions for the 2015 Land Stewardship Project CSA Farm Directory for the Twin Cities, Minn. & Western Wis. Region** (see page 6)
- **JAN. 15—Open enrollment deadline for MNsure coverage starting Feb. 1** (see page 14)

- **JAN. 15-16—Upper Midwest Fruit & Vegetable Growers Conf.**, St. Cloud, Minn. Contact: www.mfvga.org, 763-434-0400
- **JAN. 15-17—GrassWorks Grazing Conf.**, Wisconsin Dells, Wis. Contact: Heather Flashinski, 715-289-4896, www.grassworks.org

- **JAN. 17—LSP Farm Beginnings class in La Crosse, Wis.** (see page 16)

- **JAN. 20—LSP Farm Beginnings class in Watertown, Minn.** (see page 16)

- **JAN. 22-25—Northern Plains Sustainable Ag Society Winter Conference**, Aberdeen, S. Dak. Contact: www.npsas.org, 701-883-4304
- **JAN. 23—MDA Minn. Sustainable Ag Demo Grants Application Deadline.** Contact: Jeanne Ciborowski, 651-201-6217, www.mda.state.mn.us/grants/agri.aspx
- **JAN. 23-24—Practical Farmers of Iowa Annual Conf.**, Ames, Iowa. Contact: 515-232-5661, www.practicalfarmers.org

- **JAN. 27—LSP Women Caring for the Land Winter Gathering**, 1 p.m.-4 p.m., Benson, Minn. Contact: Rebecca White, LSP, 320-305-9685, rwhite@landstewardshipproject.org (see page 7)

- **JAN. 31—SFA Deep Winter Production of Greens & Livestock Fodder Utilizing Passive Solar**, Ashby, Minn. Contact: www.sfa-mn.org, 763-260-0209

- **FEB. 7—LSP Farm Beginnings class in La Crosse, Wis., & Watertown, Minn.** (see page 16)

- **FEB. 7-8—10th Immigrant & Minority Farmers Conf.**, University of Minnesota, St. Paul. Contact: www.mnfoodassociation.org, 651-433-3676
- **FEB. 14—Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota Annual Conf.**, Saint Joseph, Minn. Contact: 763-260-0209, www.sfa-mn.org
- **FEB. 14—Minnesota Organic Transition Cost Share Program Application Deadline.** Contact: Meg Moynihan, 651-201-6616, www.mda.state.mn.us/en/food/organic/transitioncostshare.aspx

- **FEB. 15—Open enrollment deadline for MNsure coverage starting March 1** (see page 14)

- **FEB. 17—Global Warming: Carbon Solutions for a Warming World.** Duluth, Minn.; Contact: Richard Olsen, 320-634-0342, richard.olsen@state.mn.us
- **FEB. 18-19—SFA Midwest Soil Health Summit**, Alexandria, Minn. Contact: Kent Solberg, 218-445-7580, www.sfa-mn.org

- **FEB. 21—LSP Farm Beginnings class in Watertown, Minn.** (see page 16)

- **FEB. 26-28—26th Annual MOSES Organic Farming Conference**, La Crosse, Wis. Contact: www.mosesorganic.org, 715-778-5775

- **WINTER—Land Stewardship Project's 10th Annual Family Farm Breakfast & Day at the Capitol**, St. Paul, Minn. (date to be determined) Contact: 612-722-6377
- **MARCH 7—LSP Farm Beginnings class in Watertown, Minn.** (see page 16)

- **MARCH 21—MDA Minnesota Value Added Grants Deadline.** Contact: David Weinand, 651-201-6646, www.mda.state.mn.us/grants/agri.aspx

- **MARCH 21—LSP Farm Beginnings class session in Watertown, Minn.** (see page 16)
- **SEPT. 1—Deadline for LSP's 2015-2016 Farm Beginnings Course** (see page 16)

Check LSP's Upcoming Events at www.landstewardshipproject.org for the latest workshops, classes, field days and deadlines.