The Land Stewardship Letter

LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

43 Years of Keeping the Land & People Together

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Reintroducing livestock to the land (*page 14*).

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—Diversifying Farms: Small Grains, Flower Power—

—Next Farm Beginnings Class Accepting Applications—

—Meet a New Generation of Farmers—

—Review: Sea of Grass—

The
Land
Stewardship
Letter
Keeping the Land & People Together
Volume 43—Number 1, 2025

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.

All inquiries pertaining to the *Land Stewardship Letter* should be addressed to the editor, Brian DeVore, 4917 Nokomis Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55417; phone: 612-816-9342; e-mail: bdevore@landstewardshipproject.org.

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LSP's Long Range Plan for 2025-2030

By Beth Slocum & Scott Elkins

Every five years, the Land Stewardship Project's board of directors gathers input from our members, supporters, allies, and staff on our organizational priorities so that we can develop a long range plan that best fulfills our mission going forward. LSP's newest long range plan, *The Roots of Resilience: Grow, Challenge, Build & Steward*, is the result of this latest endeavor.

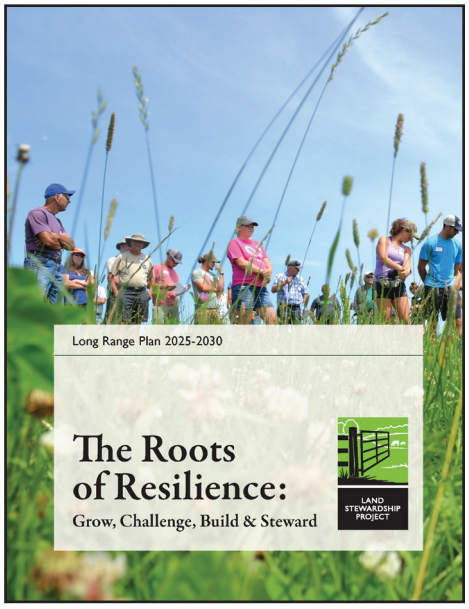
It's Time to Grow

For more than 40 years, LSP members and supporters — farmers, rural residents, suburbanites, and city dwellers — have been committed to our mission to foster an ethic of stewardship for farmland, to promote sustainable agriculture, and to develop healthy communities. As we look to the future, LSP's members, staff, and supporters are poised to build on the values that are the foundation of our work as we navigate the changes that confront small and mid-sized independent, diversified farmers, our rural communities, and the food system we all rely on.

It's Time to Challenge

The current system of corporate consolidation of land ownership, industrialized livestock, and commodity production harms our soil and water while extracting wealth from our rural communities.

This system leaves behind shuttered businesses and hospitals, empty schools, and an unhealthy food infrastructure. The current system also harms communities of color and blocks the path to land stewardship for all who want to follow it, no matter their race or background. And overall, lack of access to land for all farmers has created a consolidated system that favors corporations and the wealthiest landowners.



The farmers we work with and support understand that healthy soil and fair access to land and markets for all people supports clean water and vibrant communities, builds climate resilience, and sustains a food system that nourishes everyone.

It's Time to Build

LSP is committed to democracy in action and equal opportunity. So much of what goes on in farm country is directly connected to policy decisions made by elected and appointed officials. When we see the problems created by these decisions for small and mid-sized farms and for our food system, we organize in our communities and ensure those who are affected most by these policies are part of the conversation and decision-making. When we know new policies could enhance the possibilities for beginning and emerging farmers to build their agricultural futures, we advocate for those changes.

It's Time to Steward

We have the skills, the lived experiences, and the strength of our mutual values to find common ground. Our shared visions for health and prosperity connect all of us to the future we want for our families, communities, and for the generations of people that follow.

This long range plan is bold and ambitious — and attainable! Our members, supporters, allies, and partners, along with our talented and dedicated staff, are ready to move forward with energy and excitement as we renew our commitment to creating transformational change in our food and farming system. There is great strength in our LSP community and positive energy to bring our vision to reality over the next five years.

We are ready to engage in the work ahead of us, and you play an important role in that work. Now really is the time to grow, challenge, build, and steward. ❐

LSP board chair Beth Slocum farms near Welch in southeastern Minnesota. Scott Elkins is LSP's executive director. See pages 4-5 for an excerpt of the plan and for information on obtaining a full copy.

The Roots of this Long Range Plan

During the spring of 2024, the Land Stewardship Project's Long Range Planning Committee — working with our consulting partner, Seiche, a social impact strategy and communications firm — conducted a member and supporter survey and held six in-person listening sessions. We also hosted a panel discussion with some of the BIPOC allies LSP partners with.

Overall, 591 individuals provided input for this long range plan. Seiche also gathered the perspectives of LSP staff during a special listening session. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who participated in this process — your input and insights were invaluable. Because of this input, we feel confident the 2025-2030 long range plan communicates in an open and honest manner our intentions as we address the work ahead. And during the next five years, stay tuned: we will be consistently and clearly communicating to our members, allies, and the general public about how this exciting work is being carried out.

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"The strength of LSP lies in the grassroots and deepening the bonds among rural people that empower them to take action."

— member comment from LSP's long range plan survey

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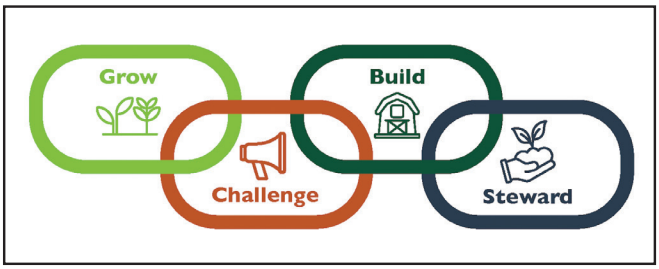
LSP's Long Range Plan

The Roots of Resilience: Grow, Challenge, Build & Steward

Over the next five years, the Land Stewardship Project will utilize four interlinked strategies in an intentional manner to accomplish our goals: Grow, Challenge, Build, and Steward. Some of this work is building on what LSP is already doing, while other aspects will require germinating new initiatives. The challenges we face together are daunting — the climate crisis, political uncertainty, and rural disinvestment have placed farming communities in a unique, and oftentimes difficult, position. In addition, systemic economic injustice, structural racism, and gender inequity are major barriers to the advancement of LSP's mission. These forces are interconnected and impact every facet of our work.

At a time of uncertainty and division, LSP sees opportunity and promise in uniting people around shared values such as living soil, clean water, healthy food, and vibrant communities. This optimism is built on the success we've had over our 43-year history. Here, we present how we will connect with a broad spectrum of people — farmers and nonfarmers — to carry out this work going forward.



Grow

The Next Generation of Farmers

A lack of access to affordable land and infrastructure can be a significant barrier to even the most well-trained farmer, particularly if they are a farmer of color. LSP's vision of creating a resilient, regenerative food and farm system cannot be attained until all people, no matter their race or background, are allowed to gain access to the land, resources, and markets needed to be good stewards.

Economic, Racial & Gender Justice

If we are to have a truly sustainable farm and food system, we need more farmers on the land, not fewer. Our overall goals of having a sustainable, regenerative farm and food system will not be reached without racial, gender, and economic equity. LSP is in a prime position to help urban, suburban, and rural people work together to get more farmers on the land.

Challenge

The Corporate-Controlled, Industrialized Farm & Food System

While multinational corporations rake in record profits, farmers of all types are being pushed off the land at an unprecedented pace. People in urban and rural food deserts have limited healthy food choices, working conditions in food processing plants are dangerous and exploitative — particularly for new immigrants and communities of color— and wealth is being exported out of communities into the bank accounts of multinational companies. Giant farm and food firms enjoy unfair advantages as a result of public policy, including not being held accountable for the water and air pollution they cause, mismanagement of cropping systems, and soil loss. They also receive public support in the form of subsidies, which, in turn, promote practices that are detrimental to the land, the climate, communities, and small and medium-sized farmers.

Conventional Narratives

LSP's long experience with training the next generation of innovative farmers, advancing viable regenerative farming practices, and working to develop resilient food systems proves that we can unite around creating a fair, sustainable system of agriculture. Corporate control of our farm and food system is threatening to create a self-fulfilling prophecy: the only future for agriculture is one in which a handful of highly-industrialized, mega-operations control everything from field-to-fork and export wealth out of our rural communities. This false, conventional narrative divides us along economic, political, racial, and geographical lines and stands in opposition to our mission.

Build

Vibrant Rural Communities

The health of our land and soil is inextricably linked to the health of our communities. The ongoing economic crisis that threatens our small and medium-sized farms, as well as local businesses and institutions, has devastating impacts on the residents of our communities — farmers and non-farmers alike. Addressing this crisis means creating a system of economic equity and fairness where all farmers, no matter their size or the products they raise, have free and fair access to open markets, and communities achieve food security. We must staunch the flow of money, soil, and people from our rural communities, and rebuild resiliency.

Resilient, Climate-Positive Farming Systems

The climate crisis threatens not only the health of people, communities, and the land, but our ability to produce food. In recent years, LSP's work with thousands of crop and livestock farmers through our Soil Builders' Network and with specialty crop producers via our Climate Resilience Cohorts proves that agriculture has great potential for mitigating the climate crisis by adapting to extreme weather in a way that builds long-term resiliency. Climate-positive farming is one key to creating a brighter climate future.

Long Range Plan, *see page 5…*

…Long Range Plan, *from page 4*

Steward

Local Democracy

The bedrock of sustainable, vibrant communities is the ability of people to, through their townships, counties, and other forms of local government, shape the kind of future they want for the land, as well as farms and Main Street businesses.

Backers of large-scale CAFOs/factory farms and other forms of extreme natural resource extraction often oppose functioning local democracy because it gives people the power to speak about and determine their future. This attempt to silence people attacks the foundations of democracy and intentionally divides members of our communities.

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"I count on LSP to track, craft, and lobby for the policy work side of things. My head and heart are in the land — thanks for doing the city work."

— member comment from LSP's long range plan survey

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Our Membership Mix of Farmers, Rural, Urban & Suburban People

LSP is effective and unique in part because our membership is not only made up of farmers; non-farmers who live in rural communities, as well as suburban and urban areas, are also LSP members. This diverse community of people has joined forces under the LSP banner because they believe small and medium-sized farms are a benefit to the food system, the land, and local communities. As a grassroots organization, our members give us the power to bring people together around shared values and a shared vision of a farm and food system that fosters vibrant communities, resilient and just economies, healthy soil, and clean water, while creating opportunities for farmers to be fairly rewarded for their hard work, no matter their race or background. ❒

Read the Entire Plan

To read and download the full long range plan, see landstewardshipproject.org/long-range-plan. Paper copies are available by e-mailing membership@landstewardshipproject.org or calling 612-722-6377.

Why This is LSP's Work

The Four Interlinked Paths to Resilience presented on pages 4-5 outline an ambitious agenda. However, during our more than four-decade history, LSP has proven repeatedly that we can get the job done. From holding giant insurance companies accountable for their treatment of farmland and helping local communities fight factory farms and frac sand mining, to training the next generation of farmers and building regenerative farming systems based on healthy soil, LSP delivers.

Key to how LSP accomplishes its work is the use of paired strategies:

➔ **Advancing the Best & Fighting the Worst:** LSP fights some of the worst ideas and developments that would damage the land, our communities, and our democracy — like corporate-backed factory farms and unjust farm subsidies that consolidate land ownership and extract wealth from rural communities. At the same time, we know that we must work to create and build what we want and need — new farms, new leaders, new ways of farming, new local and regional food systems, and new public policies. By advancing the best and fighting the worst, we fulfill our mission and accomplish our long-term goals.

➔ **Mission Driven & Member Driven:** LSP is both mission-driven and member-driven. Our mission gives us guidance every day — so do the lived experiences, needs, and aspirations of LSP's members.

➔ **Local & Personal, Structural & Systemic:** LSP works in the sphere of local, specific, and even personal action. Examples include helping a farmer develop a soil health plan, organizing with local residents to stop a large-scale CAFO/factory farm, and helping farmers transition their land to the next generation. But equally important is our work to achieve structural change and build thriving rural communities by passing public policy that rewards farmland conservation, working in multi-racial, multi-issue statewide and national coalitions to dismantle structural racism and economic injustice, and creating multi-state collaboratives to expand beginning farmer training. For LSP, investing in both of these two "ends" of the work makes us practical, effective, cutting-edge, and grounded.

➔ **Taking Action & Telling the Story:** Through reflection, evaluation, conversation, and writing, LSP strives to improve our work and to share what we learn from others; it is a constant and highly valued part of LSP's work, whether it is through the *Land Stewardship Letter*, commentaries and articles, podcasts, social media, or the evaluation at the end of a meeting. And we also know that we must act, do, create, and build. We strive to create a virtuous cycle where we take action, reflect, and learn from our actions so that we continually learn and grow as we go.

➔ **Rural & Urban/Suburban Membership Base:** These days, it is unusual for rural, suburban, and urban people to be united around a shared agenda. But this is what LSP does: we unite a strong rural/small town base with urban and suburban members. We emphasize the need for farmers and other rural people to be leading elements of LSP's power base, and sources of knowledge and solutions. We know that urban and suburban communities also not only bring important ideas and solutions to the table but are truly invested in local foods and healthy land and water. United by values and purpose, LSP members are able to influence decision-makers, steward the land, and create communities we want and need — together.

Myth Buster Box

An Ongoing Series on Ag Myths & Ways of Deflating Them

➔ *Myth:* Bird Flu's Deadly Variant is the Fault of Regenerative Ag & Nature

➔ *Fact:* Big Ag has done an exemplary job of insulating the typical American eater from the negative impacts of our concentrated, industrialized form of food production. But there are periodic reminders of how this system externalizes its costs, causing all of us to foot the bill.

Perhaps nothing has brought home the cost of this system like H5N1 avian influenza. In February 2022, the USDA announced that there had been an outbreak of H5N1 in turkeys being raised in a commercial poultry operation. This set off a series of outbreaks that have ripped through large-scale concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) at a staggering rate — once a chicken or turkey is infected, the mortality rate is virtually 100%. As of this writing, in the U.S. over 168 million commercially raised birds have been impacted by H5N1. And the problem shows no signs of dissipating; in fact, the virulence seems to be growing. Between December and February, chicken producers had to cull 53.8 birds because of exposure to the flu — that's nearly four times more when compared to the same period a year previous, according to the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

And epidemiologists are alarmed that this version of the bird flu has evolved to jump species. As of early 2025, over 1,000 dairy herds in 17 states had tested positive for H5N1. The virus has also popped up in seals, cats, bobcats, foxes, dogs, otters, and mink.

From a human health perspective, the impact has been minimal. Around 70 people in the U.S. have become mildly ill from the virus, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; one woman has died after contracting avian flu. There is no evidence that people can catch the virus by consuming poultry, eggs, or milk.

But the financial impact is significant. At one point, egg prices in the U.S. jumped to record high levels, with some restaurants even imposing "egg surcharges" on meals. The taxpayer has also been significantly impacted given that the number one strategy for dealing with the problem has been to kill off entire flocks when the flu shows up in any of the birds. The public costs of the ongoing outbreaks have exceeded $1.4 billion, including $1.25 billion paid to poultry producers to compensate them for having to euthanize their birds, according to APHIS. Of this, APHIS has spent roughly $227 million on indemnity payments to operations that have been infected with H5N1 more than once.

The poultry industry and the USDA are quick to claim that CAFO operators are not to blame for the avian flu's virulence and that confinement facilities are still the best way to produce livestock. But it's a myth that CAFOs can be made completely biosecure; that's why an increasing number of mega-hog operations, for example, are seeking to build facilities in places like northern Wisconsin, where they can distance themselves from disease outbreaks.

As a result, Big Ag is laying the blame for this unprecedented series of outbreaks squarely on two causes: wild waterfowl and farming operations that raise poultry on pasture and in otherwise non-confined situations. Their argument is that wild birds and free-range poultry carry H5N1 because they are not confined in biosecure facilities. However, there is growing evidence that this argument has it backwards: CAFOs are not the victims of the deadly version of the virus, so much as they are the incubators of it.

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The CAFO system produces "food for flu."

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For one, wild birds have been carriers of various forms of avian flu for a long time, but have evolved a way to survive outbreaks without massive die-offs. A form of the virus they have learned to live with is considered "low pathogenic avian influenza" (LPAI), given that the hosts usually survive. However, H5N1 represents a form of the virus — "highly pathogenic avian influenza" (HPAI) — that has evolved to be extremely deadly. So why, after millennia, has HPAI become a problem?

It turns out CAFOs are the perfect environment for HPAI to evolve and thrive. A century ago, the average American chicken flock contained 70 birds. Today, 85% of all table eggs come from operations that have between 50,000 and six million hens, according to the Poultry Site, a website that tracks the poultry industry. On an integrated egg farm, the birds are crowded together to increase the "efficient" use of space. The close quarters make it easy for pathogens to spread and evolve into a form that kills the host quite efficiently. In commercial systems, "you facilitate the Darwinian selection from an LPAI into an HPAI," Marius Gilbert, an epidemiologist at the Free University of Brussels, told *Nautilus* magazine.

Studies have shown how the flu, even when introduced by wild swans for example, doesn't become deadly until it has an opportunity to incubate and spread in large-scale commercial operations. Of the 39 times an LPAI strain evolved into a HPAI strain between 1959 and 2015, 37 of those jumps were reported in commercial poultry production systems, according to a study in the journal *Frontiers in Veterinary Medicine*. Evolutionary ecologist Rob Wallace told science journalist Brandon Keim that the CAFO production system makes poultry not only food for humans, but "food for flu."

Wallace is among scientists calling for industrialized livestock production to be replaced by agroecological systems in which meat comes from networks of small, locally-owned farms whose practices are less likely to intensify disease. But in order for such a production system to become viable, it needs to be backed up by an equally de-centralized processing, marketing, and distribution system.

That's why the Land Stewardship Project's Community-Based Food Systems initiative (*see page 30*) is focusing on helping communities assess ways to develop localized networks that support regenerative farming methods and build Main Street economies — with no hidden price tags.

More Information

• "The Unnatural History of Bird Flu," *Nautilus*, nautil.us/the-unnatural-history-of-bird-flu-1189930

• "Geographical and Historical Patterns in the Emergences of Novel Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5 and H7 Viruses in Poultry," *Frontiers in Veterinary Medicine*, frontiersin.org/journals/veterinary-science

• Check out more LSP *Myth Busters* at landstewardshipproject.org/myth-busters.

LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

LSP News

LSP Staff Update

Laura Schreiber has been named the Land Stewardship Project's government relations director. Schreiber first joined LSP as a Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs intern in 2018. She has worn several hats with LSP and Land Stewardship Action since. She can be reached at lschreiber@landstewardshipproject.org.

Laura Schreiber

Olivia Blanchflower has been named LSP's deputy executive director. She first joined LSP as its development director in November 2021, and through that position worked to cultivate relationships with funders, strategic partners, and others to support LSP's mission. Blanchflower can be reached at oblanchflower@landstewardshipproject.org.

Olivia Blanchflower

Madeline Reid joined LSP's staff in January as the organization's grants specialist. Before joining LSP, Reid worked with Good Works Grant Writing, where she raised money for small and mid-sized nonprofits across Arizona in sectors such as arts, education, healthcare, and social justice. She can be reached at mreid@landstewardshipproject.org.

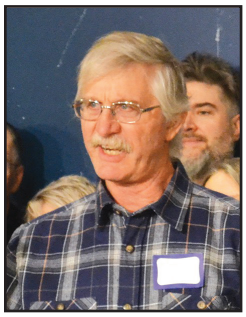
Madeline Reid

Kathryn Rowe has joined LSP's Policy Team as a soil health and climate organizer based out of the organization's southeastern Minnesota office in Lewiston. Rowe has extensive farming experience, most recently working as an evaluation manager and greenhouse coordinator at Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, Iowa.

Rowe can be contacted at krowe@landstewardshipproject.org.

Kathryn Rowe

James Kanne has been working with LSP as a community organizer in western Minnesota. Kanne, a longtime LSP member, owned and operated a dairy farm in Minnesota's Renville County from 1978 to 2014. Kanne's LSP work is focused on organizing meetings in southwestern and west-central Minnesota. He can be reached at jkanne@landstewardshipproject.org.



James Kanne

Sarah Wescott has joined LSP's Soil Health Team as an organizer. She has a degree in environmental studies from Macalester College, with a food systems emphasis. Wescott has worked for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Minnesota Grown Program, Greener Pastures, Honeybear Brands, and her family's orchard business in Elgin, Minn. She also has a small farm business selling eggs and vegetables.

Sarah Wescott

Wescott is based out of LSP's southeastern Minnesota office in Lewiston and can be reached at swescott@landstewardshipproject.org.

Taya Schulte recently wrapped up her role as the coordinator of LSP's 2025 Family Farm Breakfast (*see page 8*). Schulte is a Farm Beginnings graduate and owns and operates Growing Lots Farm in Wheeler, Wis. Schulte also coordinated the 2024 edition of the Family Farm Breakfast.

Taya Schulte

Estib Ramirez

Estib Ramirez recently served an internship with LSP's Land Access and Land Legacy Program *(see page 28)*. During the internship, he helped plan and implement various LSP-related events, including a Spanish-language land access workshop in April. In May, Ramirez graduated from Winona State University with a degree in Spanish and global studies.

Jasmine Curtis

Jasmine Curtis recently served an internship with LSP's Soil Health Program (*see page 18*). During the internship, she collected and analyzing survey data to support research on sustainable agriculture. She also wrote about Minnesota farmers who teamed up to diversify their cropping rotation (*see page 19*). In May, Curtis received a degree in environmental science, conservation, and resource management from the University of Minnesota.

Josh Journey-Heinz has wrapped up his work as a major donor fundraiser for LSP. For almost a decade, Journey-Heinz supported the organization's work by developing and maintaining relationships with major donors and other financial supporters. ❒

Josh Journey-Heinz

Contact LSP Staffers

To contact any member of the Land Stewardship Project's staff, see landstewardshipproject.org/staff-directory. Information on our offices is at landstewardshipproject.org/contact.

Local Democracy

LSP Applauds State Supreme Court's Support of Local Democracy

Ruling Comes After Yearslong Attempt to Circumvent County's Local Rules

The Land Stewardship Project applauded the Minnesota Supreme Court's decision earlier this year to deny a Winona County factory farm owner's attempt to circumvent the county's rules governing the size of livestock operations. On March 18, Chief Justice Natalie Hudson announced that the Court would not hear an appeal filed by Daley Farm of Lewiston. Daley was attempting to appeal a decision issued by the state Court of Appeals that upheld a county's right to limit the size of large animal feedlots operating within its borders.

"This decision sends an important message that when we fight back against even the most powerful forces, we can have a say in the future of agriculture, our land, and our communities," says LSP member Doug Nopar, who farms near Winona.

The Court of Appeals decision leaves in place a state District Court ruling that Winona County had the right to deny Daley Farm's attempt to bypass the county's 1,500 animal unit cap. In 2018, Daley Farm first proposed adding 3,000 dairy cows to its facilities near Lewiston, despite the fact that such an expansion would put the operation at 5,968 animal units (roughly 4,500 cows), almost four times Winona County's cap.

The expanded facility would have annually used 92 million gallons of the area's groundwater and produced 46 million gallons of manure and wastewater in an area dominated by karst geology and nitrate pollution problems. The expansion would have made the facility larger than 99% of all livestock operations in the state, according to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Feedlots in Minnesota database.

The Winona County Board of Adjustment (BOA) has twice denied Daley's request for a variance, and, despite strong opposition from Winona County residents, Daley officials have repeatedly attempted to circumvent local county government rulings through various means, including suing Winona County over its BOA decision. In its March 18 ruling, the Supreme Court also denied an amici curiae (friend of the court) motion in support of Daley that had been filed by the Minnesota Milk Producers Association, Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation, Minnesota Pork Producers Association, Minnesota State Cattlemen's Association, and the Winona County Farm Bureau.

Over the years, LSP members in Winona County have been deeply involved in upholding the county's animal unit cap, and in 2024 the organization, along with the group Defenders of Drinking Water, filed a legal brief with the Minnesota Court of Appeals contesting Daley Farm's appeal of the state District Court's decision. LSP was represented in the case by FarmSTAND and Public Justice.

"The Minnesota Supreme Court's decision not to take up this appeal affirms the right of the people of Winona County to govern themselves and to decide what the future of agriculture should be where they live," says Holly Bainbridge, a FarmSTAND staff attorney.

Sean Carroll, LSP's policy director, says the Supreme Court's decision tops off the legal system's repeated support of local citizens' right to speak up and control the future of their community.

It comes at a key time for rural communities in the Upper Midwest that are facing the onslaught of an unprecedented expansion of factory farming: earlier this year, a dairy in Pierce County, Wis., received state approval to expand from 1,700 cows to 6,500 cows, despite heavy local opposition, and Riverview Dairy, which is based in Morris, Minn., has plans to build two facilities in North Dakota that would house 25,000 and 12,500 cows, respectively.

"When people speak out against large-scale industrial agriculture, they are casting a vote for a type of farming that is good for the environment, provides options for the next generation of farmers, and supports Main Street businesses," says Carroll. "LSP will continue working with our members and allies to build this kind of positive future." ❐

State Policy

LSP Supporters Talk 'Farm to Kids,' Land Access & Soil Health During 20th Family Farm Breakfast at the Capitol

Farmers Join Minnesota Lieutenant Governor & Attorney General as Featured Speakers

Getting healthy, local food to Minnesota's children, providing support for emerging farmers, and building resilient soil were the topics of conversation when over 170 Land Stewardship Project members and allies gathered in Saint Paul March 13 for the 20th iteration of the Family Farm Breakfast at the Capitol.

Minnesota Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan and Attorney General Keith Ellison joined area farmers as the event's featured speakers. Sylvia Burgos Toftness, a farmer and member of LSP's Program Committee, kicked off the event by encouraging farmers, rural residents, and others gathered in the basement of Christ Lutheran Church to cross the street and meet with lawmakers after the breakfast. Only a little over 1% of the U.S. population is involved in farming, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture. That means those people who are involved in agriculture as well as those who care about building a sustainable farm and food system need to speak up and share their stories, said Burgos Toftness.

"If you don't lift your voice, nobody's going to do this for you," she said. "The halls should ring with your voices."

One story that needs to be relayed to lawmakers is the importance of getting more fresh, locally produced food to children via programs that serve schools and early childcare settings, Sara George, a farmer who also manages the Red Wing Farmers'

Breakfast, *see page 9…*

…Breakfast, *from page 8*

Market and works on local food issues for Renewing the Countryside, told breakfast attendees. George said a new "Farm to Kids" campaign involving LSP, Renewing the Countryside, and numerous other groups is working to advance public policy that not only feeds children healthy food, but helps them learn more about the relationship between agriculture, their community, and stewardship of the land while creating greater market access for farmers.

"Getting our kids engaged in farming activities and practices, letting them learn about this, is such an important role for an initiative like this," said George.

And more of that local food can be raised by people of color and other emerging farmers, said Ka Zoua Berry, a farmer and education manager at Big River Farms, which helps train new farmers (*see page 28*). She encouraged landowners in the room to consider selling land to Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) farmers and new immigrant farmers. While roughly 20% of Minnesota's population is made up of people of color, less than 1% of the farms in the state are operated by members of the BIPOC community. Ownership provides farmers long-term stability while building the economies of local communities, said Berry, adding that rental arrangements simply can't provide such benefits in the long term.

"Diverse land ownership creates community vitality," she said.

And no matter who is farming the land, there's great potential to build the kind of healthy soil that is less erosive, not as reliant on chemical fertilizers, and that is resilient in the face of climate change, said Laura Schreiber, LSP's director of government relations. That's why during the 2025 legislative session, LSP and its allies supported several soil health initiatives at the Legislature. She said that in recent years the Legislature has made significant investments in soil health programming and recognized the role regenerative farming can play in building resilient agriculture systems that protect water quality.

"We need to continue to build off that momentum and prioritize funding to farmers who want to adopt more soil health practices that work for their operations," said Schreiber.

Regenerative farming operations that are producing food for local markets face massive barriers in the form of unprecedented consolidation in agriculture — from seeds and other inputs to control of how farmers can repair their own equipment and where they can sell their grain and livestock, said Attorney General Ellison. Even consolidation in health care negatively impacts farmers and rural communities as local clinics and hospitals drop services or close completely, forcing people to travel long distances to get basic care.

That's why, Ellison told breakfast attendees, it's so important to challenge consolidation by reporting situations where it appears antitrust violations are having a negative impact on the ability of farmers and others to make a living and live an affordable life. He encouraged those who have evidence of antitrust violations to contact his office.

"These corporations are going to keep taking advantage of you until you fight back," said Ellison. "All of us, every single one of us, I don't care if you live in an apartment on the fifteenth floor, have a reason to fight for the family farm."

But resisting practices that threaten creating a fair, resilient farm and food system isn't enough, said Lieutenant Governor Flanagan. She said it was exciting to be at a gathering where people were talking about all the proactive work being done to support farmers, rural communities, local foods and regenerative practices.

"Fighting matters, but building something people want to be a part of also matters," she said. "I see LSP and the other organizations doing that every single day." ❒

With the support of chef Jenny Breen (*blue shirt*), participants in the culinary arts program at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis prepared food for the breakfast. (*LSP Photo*)

During LSP's Family Farm Breakfast at the Capitol, Ka Zoua Berry spoke about the importance of supporting emerging farmers. "Diverse land ownership creates community vitality," she said. (*LSP Photo*)

See pages 10-11 for a summary of how the Land Stewardship Project's priorities fared during the 2025 session of the Minnesota Legislature.

Land Stewardship Action

Land Stewardship Action (LSA) is LSP's 501(c)(4) partner organization that provides the movement with political and electoral tools for reforming our farm and food system.

For more information on LSA and to get involved in such initiatives as voter education and deep canvassing, see landstewardshipaction.org or contact political organizer Emily Minge at eminge@landstewardshipaction.org, 612-400-6353.

LAND STEWARDSHIP ACTION

State Policy

Legislative Wrap-Up: A Chaotic Session Produces Concrete Results

Market Access, Land Access & Soil Health Support Passes

By Laura Schreiber

The Agriculture Bill passed by the Minnesota Legislature in May includes several priorities Land Stewardship Project members were pushing during the 2025 session. This year, lawmakers' main priority was to set a two-year (biennium) budget for the state. That became particularly challenging when a budget forecast released early in the year painted a dire financial picture. Given that, it was good to see legislators support proposals that represent long-term investments in the health and resiliency of our state.

A big thanks goes out to Agriculture Chairs Rep. Rick Hansen, Rep. Paul Anderson, and Sen. Aric Putnam, as well as all the conferees, for putting together a strong Agriculture Bill. And a special thanks to all of LSP's members, allies, and coalition partners who testified, signed petitions, and reached out to lawmakers to push through policy during a particularly chaotic legislation session.

And it was chaotic right up to the end. For example, conference committees are the venues where lawmakers meet to hammer out differences between House and Senate versions of specific pieces of legislation. In the case of the Agriculture Bill, that conference committee met on May 9 and there was not another conference committee meeting held prior to the bill being sent back to the House/Senate floor on May 18, the day before the regular session wrapped up.

That means that since there were no public meetings or time to take additional testimony, during the waning days of the regular session I had to make sure I was meeting with the House and Senate Ag Chairs and conferees, as well as remaining in close communication with folks at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and partner organizations to stay in the loop and be able to influence the final legislation. It pays to stay on top of the bill-making process to the bitter end, especially when the overall process lacks transparency. We couldn't do this kind of work without the support of our members.

Following is a wrap-up of where we landed.

Market Access

In recent years, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture Farm to School and Early Care Program has played a critical role in expanding market access opportunities across the state, especially for beginning farmers and smaller operators. It has also been critical in getting healthy, local food to our kids in both schools and childcare settings. Year-after-year there is greater demand for these resources than funding available; in 2023, for example, there were $5.3 million in requests for the program, and at the time the state funded it at just $1.29 million.

During the session, LSP leaders and supporters lobbied legislators to provide increased funding for Farm to School and Early Care and testified before the House and Senate Agriculture Committees about how this program creates market access for smaller farmers across a range of products, from produce to protein, and makes the cafeteria a classroom for students. We were thrilled to have strong bipartisan support for this bill, with Rep. Nathan Nelson being the House bill author and Sen. Heather Gustafson serving as the Senate author. There were 16 co-authors for the House version of the bill, with a wide mix of Republican and Democratic co-authors. The Senate version also had bipartisan support.

LSP, along with our allies, collected 31 letters from farmers and grantees currently engaged in the program, as well as students from Roosevelt High School (shout out to LSP member Chris Macleod for organizing), which were sent to the Agriculture Chairs. We also delivered a petition that collected nearly 500 signatures from farmers, school food service staff, early care providers, partner organizations, parents, and supporters.

In April, LSP organized with Aimee Haag — the farm to school coordinator for the Hutchinson, Dassel-Cokato, and Litchfield School Districts — a Farm to School tour and lunch that brought together legislators, farmers, agency staff, community leaders, and advocates to see the program in action at the Hutchinson High School. This event highlighted how the positive effects of such a program expand beyond the school walls or childcare setting, having ripple effects into the greater community.

Thanks to the work of LSP and allies such as the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the Agriculture Bill that was passed now provides $1.59 million in funding for Farm to School and Early Care the first year and $1.54 million the second year, which represents a $300,000 and $250,000 increase, respectively, over current funding. The new baseline funding for this program starting in 2028 will be $1.63 million going forward, which is also a win from the previous base or "set" amount of $1.29 million.

Public support for local food marketing is more critical than ever, now that the USDA has cancelled future funding for such initiatives. For example, the USDA's Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Cooperative Agreement program has proven to be a highly effective way to get farmers paid a fair price for food that is then given to food shelves in their community.

Throughout the session, LSP supported legislation that would create a state-level LFPA. Big thanks to Minnesota Farmers Union for getting the bill first introduced with the help of Rep. Fue Lee and Sen. Mary Kunesh. LSP helped organize letters of support from farmers, food hubs, and food banks. We also worked to organize testifiers from Sprout Food Hub in Little Falls and the Village Agriculture Co-op in Rochester. They shared the positive impacts that the LFPA program had produced for their organizations and communities and what the federal cuts mean for them.

Legislators heard loud and clear from farmers and advocates about how this is a smart, win-win investment, and as a result the Agriculture Bill establishes a Minnesota version of the LFPA with an investment of $700,000 the first year and $700,000 the second year. This new program is required to source at least 70% of its food from "limited land access farmers" and "limited market access farmers." These are farmers that do not own land and/or have a lease that is three years or less in duration and have less than $100,000 in annual gross sales. The food that is purchased from local farmers must then be provided free of charge to food banks and food shelves.

Legislature, *see page 11…*

…Legislature, *from page 10*

Land Access

An initiative developed to assist beginning farmers with purchasing farmland — the Minnesota Down Payment Assistance Program — has been overwhelmed with applications since it was established in 2022. During the 2025 legislative session, LSP and our allies worked to improve the program by allowing farmers up to a year — the stipulation is currently six months — to purchase land with awarded funds. And as a result of skyrocketing land prices, LSP and its allies pushed for legislation that would increase the grant award from $15,000 to $25,000 per successful applicant.

Eight members of LSP's Land Access and Emerging Farmers Steering Committee joined us at the Family Farm Breakfast and Lobby Day (*see page 8*) and had meaningful conversations with the members and chairs of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees. That committee also organized a petition signed by farmers and other organizations that was then delivered to the Agriculture Chairs. The petition highlighted the need for a holistic approach to creating more opportunities for land access and called for an increase in the grant award amount. It also asked for an extension of the timeline related to purchasing land with awarded funds. Special thanks to LSP member and Farm Beginnings graduate Derek Ellis, who testified before the House Agriculture Committee about extending the grant timeline.

In the end, the timeline was not extended. However, overall the program will be funded at $1.25 million the first year and $1.25 million the second year, which represents a $250,000 per year increase over the current budget. In addition, each grantee is now eligible for up to $20,000 in funding. We will continue to work with legislators to expand opportunities for greater land access.

Soil Health & Water Quality

During this session, LSP backed legislation that would provide continued funding for the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program, which provides farmers resources for purchasing the kind of equipment needed to build resilient soil in an economically viable manner. Given that the program recently received requests worth $5 million, it's clear there's huge demand for these resources.

LSP's Climate and Soil Health Steering Committee collected 422 petition signatures from farmers, Soil and Water Conservation District staff and board members, as well as supporters. This petition called for support of soil health legislation and was submitted to the Agriculture Committee Chairs as they headed into final negotiations.

After LSP's Family Farm Breakfast at the Capitol (*see page 8*)**, dozens of LSP members and supporters met with lawmakers, including Aric Putnam** (*standing*)**, the chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee.** (*LSP Photo*)

The final Agriculture Bill provides the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program $639,000 in the first year and $639,000 in the second year. There is additional support for this program in the Legacy Bill under Clean Water Funds that would add $1.75 million in the first year and another $1.75 million in the second year.

In recent years there has been increased public support for regenerative farming methods, especially for equipment grants, which can be the biggest (and most expensive) barrier to adopting soil health practices for farmers. While state funding alone does not meet the demand for covering such costs, soil health support is due to receive another boost from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Climate Smart Food Systems grant program, which will bring $200 million to Minnesota for various initiatives, including the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program.

For the past few years, southeastern Minnesota's Olmsted County has been implementing a program that pays farmers to grow cover crops, small grains, and forages, as well as utilize rotational grazing. Notably, this program doesn't just reward farmers for putting in practices — it pays for proven results. The Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program is seen as a model for taking a proactive, holistic approach to keeping nitrates and other pollutants out of groundwater.

There were proposals during the legislative session to expand this program to southeastern Minnesota in general. In the end, the Agriculture Bill instead provides $75,000 for a cost-benefit analysis of this program in terms of environmental outcomes. The results of this analysis could serve as the basis for eventually expanding the program.

Another program that LSP supported this year was additional funding for the Forever Green Initiative to continue research and innovation into continuous living cover crops like Kernza and winter annuals like pennycress. In the end, the program was funded at $802,000 per year in the Agriculture Bill and received additional support to the tune of $2 million in the first year and $3 million in the second year from the Legacy Bill under Clean Water Funding.

Climate Land Leaders, an LSP ally, pushed for legislation to help especially beginning farmers use the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's AGRI Livestock Investment Grant Program to purchase equipment that could support practices such as managed rotational grazing. In an attempt to make more resources available to small and medium-sized farmers, the Agriculture Bill provides a cost-share level of 50% for the first $20,000 of expenses and 25% for the next $220,000. Thanks to Sen. Rob Kupec for making this preferred language part of the final deal. ❐

LSP government relations director Laura Schreiber can be reached at lschreiber@landstewardshipproject.org. For more on LSP's state policy work, see landstewardshipproject.org/state-policy.

Give it a Listen

Episode 374 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast features a discussion with government relations director Laura Schreiber about how the organization's priorities fared during the legislative session: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-374-the-power-of-being-heard.

What Are the Benefits of Reintegrating Grazing Livestock into Row Crop Country?

By George Boody

Improved water quality and soil health, plus more birds and butterflies? Cattle on the land in row crop country could help produce these and other results — that is if these and other ruminants graze on the land in well-managed, multifunctional systems that rely on a diversity of perennial pastures and/or annual crops. That was the bottom line conclusion I came to when conducting a study on the feasibility and benefits related to integrating grazing livestock back onto the land in Minnesota. And I found that the benefits of reintegrating animals and the land for farmers aren't just environmental, as row crop farmer Eric Volsen made clear to me.

"Now that I'm more established in the row crop and the small grain operation, it's easier to pencil out a small grain crop and cover crops with the cattle in that operation," says Volsen, who farms in the Blue Earth watershed in southern Minnesota. "That's putting the soil health back. It brings opportunity for family involvement and additional markets."

Rotationally grazing cattle on fields planted to summer annual cover crops is one way to reintegrate livestock onto the land. (*LSP Photo*)

Historical Shift

For much of the 20th century, grazing animals returned fertility to farmland in the form of manure and the diverse crops they eat. However, in recent decades federal policy that encourages specialized production of commodities like corn and soybeans, coupled with the rise of biofuel production and the consolidation of marketing opportunities, has created a situation where ruminants have been separated from the land and placed into confined facilities. A wider diversity of feedstocks fed to animals has been narrowed to mostly corn, soybeans, and alfalfa. Those crops are harvested and typically brought to the animals in confined facilities. This separation of grazing livestock from the land has helped to propel the dominance of corn and soybean systems in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. Today, few corn-soybean operations incorporate small grains or perennials in their rotation.

Impacts of the loss of cropland diversity and perennial pasture land include soil erosion, sediment in streams, more rapid runoff of water and pollutants to surface waters, nitrogen leaking into groundwater, declining soil health, greater release of greenhouse gases, loss of wildlife habitat, and rural population decline.

Over the decades, the Land Stewardship Project has led education and organizing on Holistic Management, which focuses on, among other things, raising ruminants utilizing managed rotational grazing of perennial pastures. LSP has also done extensive work helping farmers build soil health utilizing cover cropping, no-till, diverse rotations, and other methods. Numerous graduates of LSP's Farm Beginnings course are interested in raising livestock on the land. LSP has long worked to promote state and federal policies that get more animals out on the land grazing on well-managed pastures or cover crops. Finally, while working with LSP, I was involved with several scientific investigations related to integrating livestock back into row cropping operations.

Pathways for Farmers

To build on those efforts, I proposed a preliminary feasibility study while serving as the Endowed Chair for Agricultural Systems, which is managed by the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Minnesota. (You can find my report — "Reintegrating Ruminant Grazing in Row Crop Country" — along with calculations, maps, and 10 videos featuring interviews with farmers at misa.umn.edu/publications/reintegrating-ruminant-grazing-row-crop-country.)

Volsen was one of 21 Minnesota and Iowa farmers I interviewed on 14 different operations. The farmers fell into three general categories: producers who were growing only row crops; those that integrated row crop production and grazing livestock in an "Integrated Crop and Grazing Ruminant" (ICGR) system; and farmers who shifted production from a system based on feeding livestock harvested row crops to a 100% pasture-based system.

Farmers who grazed ruminants as a bridge to soil health or as a way to utilize cover crops and shift marginal land to pasture, or who grew up with cattle, were more likely to be interested in integrating livestock onto the land. I found there are numerous pathways to ICGR. For example, row crop farmers could contract with drylot operators for cattle to graze on cover crops. Drylots are used for beef cow-calf or stocker operations for part or all of the year instead of pastures. These drylot operators might then lower their winter feed costs by shifting some cattle to graze cover crops in late fall. In the Blue Earth watershed, Steve Ewest (he's a geographic information system expert) and I calculated there are enough cattle in drylots to graze marginal row-crop acres. Beginning farmers could be aided in launching new

Reintegrating Livestock, *see page 13…*

… Reintegrating Livestock, *from page 12*

grass-fed enterprises on converted pastures by grazing nearby cover crops in late fall or as "summer annuals." Grazing cover crops can not only take pressure off permanent pastures, but provide a low-cost entry into grazing while building soil health. Several farmers I talked to for this study saw integrating livestock back onto the land as a way to help the next generation join an operation and get established successfully in farming.

I estimated contract grazing on cover crops in a corn-soybean system might initially cost a row-crop farmer about $230 per acre on an 80-acre field, including upfront perimeter fencing and watering system costs. Returns might be slightly negative the first year but turn positive after that. I estimated the initial investment for a beginning farmer starting a cow-calf operation on 80 acres of leased cropland converted to pasture to be about $111,000, including the cost of fencing, equipment, seeding, and livestock. By selling grass-fed beef raised on the pasture and grazing nearby cover crops with cows, there was a small net profit in year three, a positive net cash flow in year six, and a total payback period of about 10 years.

Farmer Benefits

By one estimate, about 23% of Minnesota's 16 million corn and soybean acres have been found to be economically or environmentally marginal, which means they lack the fertility to raise a consistently profitable row crop or are too steep or too wet to be considered prime crop ground. Such parcels require more inputs to produce a viable crop. Larger applications of fertilizers on these acres lead to higher nitrous oxide emissions, as well as nitrate and sediment losses to water, which impose significant costs on the public. Individual farmers feel the pinch as well, as they buy more inputs to try to maintain productivity.

MJ and Luverne Forbord, who farm highly erodible acres in west-central Minnesota's Pope County, have shifted from producing row crops to feed their livestock to raising perennials grazed by cattle.

"We've seen much better soil aggregation, better water infiltration, and the organic matter has increased," MJ told me. "We see erosion in farm country, but not on our farm, not anymore." And now they see butterflies and many species of songbirds and waterfowl successfully nesting in their fields.

Other farmers told me that getting more cattle and/or continuous living cover onto their fields following corn, soybeans, or small grains led to greater resilience when it comes to swings in markets and weather.

Public Benefits

Using a geographic information system analysis, Ewest and I estimated that Minnesota could conceivably shift 7.5 million acres as follows:

- 20% of all marginal row crop parcels shifted to continuous living cover, some with grazing.
- 25% of the remaining good row crop fields have cover crops added to them.
- 25% more pasture land shifted to managed rotational grazing systems.

For this study, I calculated farmers' adoption costs and avoided methane and nitrogen oxide emissions, along with carbon sequestration potential, that could result from Minnesota agriculture by integrating more livestock into row crop systems. I also calculated the potential for this transition to reduce losses of nitrogen fertilizer and eroded soil.

I assumed that 60% of the new 7.5 million acres would utilize advanced management with practices that have been shown to have higher rates of carbon sequestration and avoided emissions. These practices include combining no-till and cover cropping, longer rotations with reduced chemical use, and managed rotational grazing of cattle.

What I found was that transitioning more livestock back onto the land utilizing managed rotational grazing of perennial pastures, fall cover crops, and summer annual cover crops wouldn't just benefit individual farmers — it could also generate significant public goods in Minnesota. Overall, it could drive a public benefit of $450 million over six years after an initial $330 million in state-funded cost-sharing for farmers to shift their practices was provided. These cost-share funds could be used to, among other things, establish rotational grazing fencing and watering systems and integrate cover cropping into the corn-soybean rotation.

I calculated potential reductions per biennium from these acres compared to conventional management: 11 million fewer U.S. tons of net carbon dioxide equivalent emissions, 5.8 million tons of soil saved, and 16.2 million less pounds of nitrogen lost to water. Granted, some scientists and environmentalists are quick to dismiss the potential of a more regenerative approach to cattle production as a pathway to helping reduce net emissions — they see ruminant livestock on the land as mostly a detriment to the environment. But my results underscore that in fact there are many potential benefits to integrating grazing livestock onto the land and that advancing wider farmer adoption of these regenerative practices could be a good public investment.

The Benefits?

- ➔ **11 million** fewer U.S. tons of net carbon dioxide equivalent emissions.
- ➔ **5.8 million** tons of soil saved.
- ➔ **16.2 million** less pounds of nitrogen lost to water.

A Public Investment

What's next? I propose that governments, land grant universities, and businesses invest in researching carbon cycling in dynamic, regenerative farming systems. We need more information on how stable carbon is stored in the soil and we need to explore the connections between the microbiomes present in grazing ruminants and the microbiomes in soil. Substantial public benefits in terms of water quality, wildlife habitat, and new farmer opportunities justify the taxpayer investments needed to spur adoption at a landscape scale.

Western Minnesota crop and livestock farmer Jim VanDerPol sees integrating animals back onto the land via a regenerative system as a critical step in fixing a broken nutrient cycle.

"Everything is better when it's been through a cow," he told me. "It will help build organic matter in the soil. It will improve the energy cycle and the mineral cycle and the water cycle, even if everything is frozen in the wintertime. It'll be a large improvement in the land over the course of some years. You won't see it in one year, but you'll sure see the difference by the time you get to a year three."

And it's a multifunctional win-win — benefits accrue to farmers, the public, pollinators, soil microbes, and more. ❐

George Boody is principal and lead Researcher for SoilCarbon, LLC. Boody served as the Land Stewardship Project's executive director for 23 years. During his time at LSP, he was the lead researcher on several projects that examined the role regenerative farming can play in producing benefits for soil, water, and rural communities. See page 14 for an example of a farm that's integrating livestock into its cropping operation.

Not an Either-Or Choice

How One Farm is Integrating Crops & Livestock

By Brian DeVore

Deleting the disconnect between livestock and crops on Midwestern farms (*see page 12*) can be the key to a more regenerative form of agriculture, but what does it look like in the flesh? On a cool morning in late summer, it's in the form of an acre of seemingly undifferentiated sorghum-sudangrass standing over seven-feet high in the northeastern Iowa sun. At first glance, a pretty mundane scene. Then, for a moment, the dark back of a single Black Angus bovine breaches the sea of sorghum before disappearing again.

"The only thing I don't like about this is you have 150 or 160 cattle in there, and I can only see one calf," says Rick Matt with a laugh as he drives away from the 23-acre field containing the paddock. He has just moved a line of polywire to create new grazing for the cow-calf herd. It's noon, and by supper time, all that forage will be either in the rumens of those animals, or stomped into the ground as soil enrichment, leaving exposed the cattle, as well as the diverse "salad mix" of cover crop summer annuals growing close to the ground. As the 58-year-old farmer concedes, integrating crops and livestock requires a changed relationship with the land, animals, and biology, and a willingness to sometimes just let go.

"Everything seems to be in more control," he says. And yet, he adds, "It's such a new paradigm of not realizing where my control is."

Yes, linking animals and the land requires loosening the reins and letting nature call more of the shots. But as Rick's son, Damien, explains, farmers can play a key role in such a system by consciously creating a foundational base from which those natural processes can do their work. And that foundation starts with a strategic focus on plant diversity.

"When we start to have an emphasis on soil health, I think that's where all the puzzle pieces of livestock integration fall into place," says Damien.

For the Matts, this integrated approach is yielding economic and ecological dividends, as well as setting the stage for a new generation to continue their farm's legacy.

"I love what we're doing; it brought fun back," says Rick Matt, shown with his son, Damien. (*LSP Photo*)

A Flat-on-the-Back Epiphany

Livestock production is not a new enterprise on the Matt farm. Rick grew up on the home place here in northern Fayette County, and beef cattle always played a role. However, they traditionally focused on raising the animals in a feedlot system where the feed was hauled in and the manure hauled out. Up until 2020, the family custom finished hogs in a confinement system as well. Rick's father, Art, always used good conservation practices on the extremely hilly land, and in 1993, their operation, which they call Varykino, adopted no-till crop production. Over the years, they utilized simple cover crop mixes consisting of mostly rye and one or two other species to build and protect soil.

When Rick had knee surgery in 2019 he vowed to make good use of his recovery time by learning to play a musical instrument. That turned out to be pretty tough going while lying on one's back, so instead he read *Dirt to Soil*, which describes North Dakota farmer Gabe Brown's use of multiple species of cover crops, combined with diverse rotations, no-till and managed rotational grazing, to build soil profitably.

Rick was struck by the idea that various species of plants in a field can often play off of each other in a way that builds long-term fertility and resilience. Native prairies are based on this premise, and recent agricultural research in Kansas and Minnesota has backed up this concept. Such resilience has become even more critical as climate change generates extreme, oftentimes unprecedented, weather events with increasing frequency. This focus on diversity and greater interaction with the land and natural biological processes runs counter to the conventional agriculture paradigm, which is based on monocropping and removing livestock from the land so they can be raised in specialized confinement facilities.

"And that just connected the dots," recalls Rick of the points Brown made about integrating crops, livestock, and diversity.

Before that tall stand of sorghum-sudangrass was mowed down by the cattle on this summer day, the father and son walked amongst the seeming monoculture and took a closer look at the undergrowth. Rick, a student of history, recalls the story of how early European settlers described riding through prairies so tall it engulfed horses. But he points out that such a description of a "sea of grass" is misleading, since it overlooks all the forbs and other kinds of plants growing close to the ground, contributing to an incredibly diverse, healthy ecosystem.

"You're saying, 'Oh my gosh, this grass is tall — I can tie it in a knot over the saddle.' You wouldn't have even mentioned the stuff down here," says the farmer as he points at the diverse mix of summer annuals growing below the sudangrass: sunn hemp, three varieties of clover, radish, rapeseed, peas, Japanese millet, and fava beans, among others.

After Rick's on-the-back epiphany, the Matts utilized funding from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to increase their plantings of cover crops and to put in place a wide-ranging rotation involving row crops, summer annual salad mixes, and permanent pasture.

The farmers are still adjusting the system,

Either-Or, *see page 15…*

…Either-Or, *from page 14*

but after six years a consistent pattern has emerged. For example, once a cornfield is harvested — either as chopped, high moisture corn or grain — they may plant a winter annual cover crop mix consisting of rye and triticale. In the spring, the Matts graze, bale, or chop off that winter cover crop. That land is then planted to a 12-way summer annual salad mix and the farmers utilize portable polywire fencing to break the fields up into roughly one-acre paddocks, allowing the cattle to rotate through a couple of times during the summer and fall as they graze.

Damien jokes it's hard to keep track of what makes up a typical mix, given that his dad is constantly tweaking it, but there is a method to the madness. Rick owns three books on weeds, and he picks the seed mixes based on what plant pests are trying to dominate. For example, foxtail is a major problem on Varykino, so Rick makes sure he includes millet in the mix, which is a similar species.

"They say grow what your problem is, and that's what grew, the millet," Rick says, pointing to a low-lying spot in a field that was under water during the early part of 2024, a situation that would have typically created perfect conditions for foxtail.

The mix also includes legumes to help fix nitrogen for the following corn crop and radishes to help scavenge sulfur.

Corn Suitability Waiting

Character begets nicknames, and the 1,500 acres of owned and rented land the Matts farm on the edge of the Driftless Region has plenty of character. One valley they farm is called "Watercress" for the bright green member of the mustard family that flourishes in a stream flowing amongst steep hillsides. "It's good on a salad – it's a little bitter, but it's good," says Rick as he guides his pickup truck along the snaking stream. One sidehill is called the "Hanging Gardens" by the farmers because of the way individual parcels of oddly shaped land seem to cling to the slope. Another parcel that's suffered from compacted soil was termed "Mojave Desert" by local NRCS staffers. "Every drop of rain that landed just raced off the edge of the field," explains Rick.

It would make sense for the Matts to focus on grazing some of their more marginal acres rather than placing them in an intense row-cropping rotation year-after-year. Indeed, around two-thirds of the land they farm is planted to perennial forages.

But under their system, even land with a relatively high corn suitability rating is exposed to grazing cattle. For example, the 23-acre parcel is made up of prime bottomland soil that, before the Matts first started grazing summer annuals on it a few years ago, had been in continuous corn since 1965. Once the cattle had grazed it a couple times in 2024, it was planted to corn this past spring in soil reinvigorated by a diversity of living roots and biological activity spawned by manure and animal disturbance.

Such a rotation has paid off elsewhere. Later in the day, Rick and Damien checked out row-cropped fields that had already gone through cycles of cattle grazing off summer annuals in previous growing seasons. The stands were thriving, and the Matts are getting over 200 bushels-per-acre in corn yields on some of those acres, despite the fact that the farmers have been cutting back on applications of nitrogen fertilizer — one cornfield had received around 120 pounds of nitrogen per acre. On average, Iowa State University recommends 125 pounds of nitrogen in corn planted after soybeans, and 175 pounds on corn planted after corn.

The Matts are rotating grazing of summer annuals with the planting of row crops. "Everything seems to be in more control," says Rick. (*LSP Photo*)

Rick concedes it's been a trial-and-error process to figure out how much of a nitrogen credit to take when switching between grazing summer annuals and planting corn. Because of years of hog manure applications, the soil still has plenty of other sources of fertility to draw on as well.

"I haven't put phosphorus on for I bet close to 30 years," says the farmer. "And we haven't put potash on for maybe 12 or 15."

When setting up and experimenting with this system, there were some misses. Hairy vetch is difficult to establish, and it can be hard to stay ahead of rye in the spring when trying to graze it off, for example. But during the drought of 2023, the Matts saw signs that they were hitting their stride, and that the soil was responding to the intermingling of crops and livestock.

On Mother's Day that year, they received 2.5 inches of rain, and no more precipitation fell until mid-September, creating dry conditions that were particularly tough on the permanent pastures the Matts were grazing. But they invested in more polywire so they could adjust their grazing system in such a way that they were able to increase the frequency of the cattle movements from every three- to five-days to roughly every one-and-half days. This gave the paddocks more time to recover, reducing overgrazing. In addition, having the summer annuals in the mix took pressure off those pastures.

"We had deep, green grass growing," recalls Rick. "It's almost embarrassing to admit that we had grass left over in the fall."

This, despite the fact that they had let go 200 acres of pasture they were renting that year in order to reduce travel time and simplify logistics. In a way, the Matts see their moveable grazing infrastructure as a kind of crop insurance policy — cattle can always be turned out into a cornfield decimated by severe weather.

The Payoff

As Rick drives his pickup on a field road past a mix of permanent pasture and new plantings of summer annuals, Damien is in the backseat going over some calculations he's done on the economics of integrating crops and livestock. Based on the farm's historical average corn yield, the cost of infrastructure such as grazing paddocks and watering systems, and other expenses, he was able to determine what price corn would need to be before it wasn't worth grazing summer annuals on crop fields. He figures if corn is below $4.17 a bushel, it makes more sense to be grazing. If corn's above that, then their return on a per-year basis is going to be better by growing the row crop.

Damien cites a six-year study done by the American Forage and Grassland Council that compared the profitability of a strictly corn-soybean farm with one that had a more

Either-Or, *see page 16…*

…Either-Or, *from page 15*

diverse crop rotation, along with livestock.

"In the end what they found is there's not really a statistical difference between having livestock on the farm profitability wise, and not having livestock," he says.

But the Matts see building economic resilience on this farm as a long-term investment in their soil; responding to short-term cyclical spikes in corn prices threatens to undermine that investment. Damien recalls seeing fellow Iowa farmer Jerome Fulsaas present at a Land Stewardship Project workshop about how building soil health is like sticking money in an individual retirement account and allowing interest to accumulate.

"It's a multi-year, even a generational, return on investment by building your soils," says Damien. In fact, he concedes that they are so committed to building long-term resiliency in their fields that they've often ignored the $4.17 per-bushel corn profitability cutoff. "We were grazing two-three years ago when corn was $6.50 to $7 a bushel. To me, it seems like a no-brainer."

And as they learned during the 2023 drought, that kind of investment pays dividends when extreme weather strikes. It paid off again in early 2024 when the weather picture flipped and heavy rains threatened to waterlog low-lying fields for an extended period of time. Instead, because of the good aggregate structure the Matts have been able to build, the soil soaked up and stored that moisture.

Financially, one factor that helps the father-son duo is that they are raising their beef cattle for a European hormone-free market, which pays a premium; they finish the cattle out on grain 120 days prior to slaughter, which takes place in Omaha, Neb. Having a reliable market that pays a livestock producer for adopting regenerative practices is important. Many farmers who are utilizing grazing, for example, are attempting to market their animals direct to consumers or via specialty markets, but inadequate local processing infrastructure is a major barrier.

Match Made In Heaven is a six-state collaboration involving 50-plus groups — including LSP — that's working to show ways crops and livestock can be integrated in a profitable and sustainable manner. A recent survey conducted by the initiative of over 550 farmers primarily in Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri found that lack of adequate local processing and the inability to get a premium price for a product were among the top challenges to integrating livestock into cropping operations. It's hard to compete with a corn-soybean system that simply allows a grower to haul the harvest to town and, when disaster strikes, to receive an insurance payout.

80-20 Rule

Successfully integrating crops and livestock also requires tossing out some traditional paradigms about even perennially-based agriculture. For example, hay production has long been considered a way of providing forage to livestock that's good for the soil and an efficient use of land, since multiple cuttings can be taken during the growing season. But the Matts are reconsidering the role this crop plays on their farm.

The Matts select their grazing mix based not only on forage quality, but what each particular species contributes to rejuvenating the soil. "When we start to have an emphasis on soil health, I think that's where all the puzzle pieces of livestock integration fall into place," says Damien. (*LSP Photo*)

By analyzing how haying as an individual enterprise fits into their overall system, they've found it to be the least profitable sector, given all the labor and equipment it requires. Damien says they've applied the "80-20" rule to it. Are you spending 80% of your time bringing in 20% of your profit, or 20% of your time generating 80% of your profit? On Varykino, haying seems to fit in the former category, Damien has concluded. And besides consuming a lot of time and labor, this form of forage production removes plant cover and nutrients from their farm with each cutting. So maybe it makes more sense to purchase hay than to raise it.

"When you're purchasing hay and bringing it in, you're not only bringing in that feedstock, but you're also bringing in everybody else's nutrients that they cut and removed," says Damien, adding that raising less of their own hay gives them the incentive to rely more on grazing. "I'll let the cattle do all that work themselves."

But relying less on harvested forage and more on grazing takes a new mindset. For example, the farmers could have grazed some of their winter cover crops earlier in 2024, but they had haylage they needed to burn through to make room for first crop hay. "It's scary not to make that hay," concedes Rick.

Healing the Land

To the Matts, economic and ecological resiliency go-hand-in-hand. This is particularly true when they recall the impacts decades of row cropping and moldboard plowing have had.

"There were gullies in the middle of this field where I could stand up and it was still a foot over my head," says Damien, pointing at a now smooth stretch of land rising out of a creek bottom. "It looked more like the surface of the moon than what a field should look like."

The Matts are proud of how the combination of no-till, diverse rotations, and managed rotational grazing is starting to heal these acres, both above and below ground. Organic matter levels are rising, aggregate structure is being built, water is infiltrating even on the "Mojave Desert" land, and a cold-water stream flowing through one section of the farm is running clear and fast, unclouded by eroded sediment. As the pickup crosses the creek on a small field bridge, Damien talks excitedly about a neighbor's plan to reintroduce trout to the waterway.

"You can't have a legacy with depleted soil," says Rick from the driver's seat. "No one will want to be around that."

The Toys & Joys of Farming

And family legacy is important. Damien, 33, served in the National Guard and got an agriculture degree from Iowa State University before returning to the farm. He says that fully integrating livestock into the operation

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…Either-Or, *from page 16*

via grazing has helped provide room for him without expanding acres. As they proved when they dropped those 200 acres in 2023, they feel they are getting more value out of each existing square foot. Another Matt son, Jesse, works for the NRCS and has shown interest in coming back to the operation as well. The Matts recently added a flock of ewes to their operation, and the younger farmer sees this new species as a way to expand opportunities on the farm via grazing.

"I never really knew what I wanted to do growing up," says Damien. "But I always played with farm toys, so I guess my 5-year-old self would be pretty impressed with me."

Rick and Damien seem to have a good give-and-take relationship, something that's important when a farm is trying out innovations to the point where, "I'm willing to swing and miss," says Rick.

Damien knows of situations where children come back to the farm wanting to try out new practices and strategies, but they're hampered by an older generation resistant to change. In fact, at times the opposite dynamic is at work at Varykino.

"Boy, I feel a lot of the time I have to say, 'Dad we gotta slow down a little bit, we've got to see if this will work first,' " Damien says.

Such a strategy built on innovating and experimenting can be attractive to a new generation from a quality of life standpoint.

"I'm blessed to have a family that wants to learn," says Rick. "I love what we're doing; it brought fun back."

Power of Community

The Matts are the first to admit that an integrated system that uses nature as a model would not be possible without the use of managed rotational grazing, which allows them to move their cattle in response to the growth of summer annuals and permanent pasture. And they've added their own twists to this system. For example, in summer annual paddocks dominated by tall stands of sorghum-sudangrass, they use a tire drug behind a four-wheeler to create alleyways where the polywire can be strung. It can be a challenge in vegetation that's sometimes eight-feet-tall, but it's worth it, given what can happen if there isn't such a demarcation.

"We've had instances where the cattle just sort of walk through that wire," says Damien. "And it turns your intensive grazing system into a continuous grazing system really quick."

The Matts have also used "swath grazing" — a system where they cut forage in the late fall and leave it in windrows for the cattle to browse during the winter. This makes it easier for the animals to access the forage through the snow. Rotational grazing in the winter is also possible with the help of a clever system involving highly moveable "tumble wheels" — rolling devices that allow the farmers to create temporary paddocks without planting fenceposts in the frozen ground.

A stream flowing through the Matts' land. "You can't have a legacy with depleted soil," says Rick. (*LSP Photo*)

Such innovations aren't conjured out of thin air — the Matts say they've benefited greatly from taking part in learning opportunities as much as possible. Studies show that farmers who are part of peer learning networks are much more likely to succeed in adapting and maintaining regenerative practices. The six-state Match Made in Heaven survey found that crops-only farmers emphasized the need for more information — particularly from other farmers — on setting up grazing systems and the economics associated with them before they would consider integrating livestock.

The Matts attended LSP's Driftless Grazing School in June 2024, where they saw firsthand how to transition land out of row crops on widely varying landforms. Before that, Damien went to Missouri to learn more about integrating sheep into their grazing system. Rick is a member of LSP's Soil Health Steering Committee, which develops strategies around how farmers can share information on various regenerative practices.

He also meets regularly with an informal group of about 40 farmers from northeastern Iowa and southeastern Minnesota that call themselves the SCABS: "Soil Health, Cards, and Bullshit."

"But we never get to the cards," jokes Rick. "It's a different subject every month. There's no one judging anybody."

One August evening, the Matts put that community aspect of sharing knowledge into action by hosting a Match Made In Heaven field day. As farmers, NRCS staffers, and commodity group leaders, along with forage, soil, and livestock experts from Iowa State, sit at long picnic tables across the road from the 23-acre field of summer annuals, the cow herd bawls incessantly, begging to be moved to a new paddock.

The father-son team takes turns describing the operation's big picture rotation involving summer annuals, permanent pasture, and row crops. They also explain how this system helps them adhere to the five principles of soil health: armor the soil, minimize soil disturbance, increase plant diversity, keep living roots in the soil, and integrate livestock. There are questions about seeding rates, what species of summer annuals they use, weed control, paddock sizes, and frequency with which animals are rotated. At one point, Damien goes off script to reiterate the interconnected nature of their enterprise.

"I know the schedule says we'll talk about the economics of crops versus livestock," he says. "But I don't like the word 'versus' too much, because crops and livestock can and should be complementary of one another."

To prove his point, he leads the field day participants across the road and takes down the strand of polywire separating the complaining herd from a strapping stand of summer annuals. Almost immediately, the bawling is replaced by the thrum of bovines chomping and stomping a field of forage. It almost sounds like corn flowing out of a wagon. ❐

Give it a Listen

Episode 345 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast features a discussion with Rick and Damien Matt about how they are building an intergenerational farming operation based on soil health, diversity, and grazing: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-345-grazings-generational-jump.

Soil Health

Bringing Small Grains Back to MN

LSP Workshop Focuses on the Opportunities Crops Like Oats Can Provide

Corn and soybeans may dominate the agricultural landscape in the Upper Midwest, but reintroducing small grains such as oats into the rotation could help make farming more economically, agronomically, and environmentally sustainable, while serving a growing consumer demand for healthy food, said a panel of national and local experts during a Land Stewardship Project workshop held in Albert Lea, Minn., in January.

"It's all driven by diversity," Roy Pfaltzgraff, who farms 2,200 acres in northeastern Colorado, told the over 150 farmers and other ag professionals from three states gathered for the "Bringing Small Grains Back to Minnesota" workshop. Co-sponsors of the workshop included Albert Lea Seed and Practical Farmers of Iowa.

Since coming back to the family operation in 2016, Pfaltzgraff has increased the operation's production base from a handful of crops to over 18 species, including several kinds of small grains. He said this diversity has increased his farm's resiliency in an area that only gets 13 inches of precipitation annually, and that resiliency has repercussions all the way to people's dinner table.

"The more things we raise, the better our soil is," Pfaltzgraff said. "The better the soil is, the more nutritious things are. Farmers need to remember they are feeding people when they are farming."

Small grains such as oats, once a staple across parts of the Corn Belt, have largely disappeared from large parts of the region, taking with them vital markets and infrastructure, said Shea-Lynn Ramthun, a Goodhue County farmer and LSP soil health organizer. However, recent USDA figures show oat acreage is making a comeback in areas like southern Minnesota and northern Iowa as farmers seek avenues for diversifying their corn-soybean rotation in a way that builds soil and reduces the need for expensive chemical inputs. They are also responding to a growing consumer demand for oats, which has a reputation as a heart-healthy food. The market for oats in the U.S. is expected to have a 7.8% mean annual growth rate between now and 2030, according to one analysis.

One of those farmers who has added oats back into their crop rotation is Landon Plagge, who farms 4,000 acres an hour south of Albert Lea near Latimer, Iowa. He told the workshop participants that since he began including oats in his rotation, soil health has improved and erosion has plummeted. In addition, fertilizer and pesticide costs have dropped and it's opened up new opportunities such as a cattle grazing enterprise. Plagge said that when considered over several growing seasons, having oats in the rotation is an economic winner because it boosts row crop yields while cutting costs.

"Under a regenerative system, everybody wins — our farms, our communities, our Earth and our people," said Bob Quinn, a Montana small grains producer, entrepreneur, and scientist. (*LSP Photo*)

The Iowa farmer sees even more economic opportunities in diversification. That's why he has launched Green Acres Milling, an oat processing enterprise that is scheduled to go online in Albert Lea next year. Around 70 farmers have bought shares in the mill, which would initially process oats raised on 30,000 acres of land in the region. One estimate is that each oat-producing acre would use 50 pounds less purchased nitrogen annually. That translates into not only fewer nitrates in the area's water, but more money in the local economy, said Plagge.

"We want to be sustainable. We want to do great things for the environment," he said. "But we also have to make money."

Local processing of small grains provides a way to connect eaters with the source of their food and to use their pocketbook as a way to support a different approach to farming, said Bob Quinn, a Montana farmer, scientist, and author who founded a specialty wheat processing and marketing company. In his book, *Grain By Grain: A Quest to Revive Ancient Wheat, Rural Jobs, and Healthy Food*, Quinn described how the organic small grain-based food business he created helped diversify the rotation in his part of Montana while producing healthy food, creating jobs, and keeping wealth local. Treating food as a healthy source of nutrition that benefits the land and communities can help reverse the trend of farmers being forced to sell into a commodified, industrial system and being relegated to "price taker" status, said Quinn.

"Under a regenerative system, everybody wins — our farms, our communities, our Earth and our people," he said.

During an afternoon workshop session, a panel involving the keynote speakers as well as local experts fielded questions from the audience about everything from fertilization rates for small grains to ways farmers and eaters can connect around healthy, sustainably-produced food. One concern raised by the workshop attendees is that the vast majority of oats consumed in this country are imported from Canada, even though two of the country's top oat users are based in Minnesota.

"What if our homegrown companies bought more homegrown product?" Ramthun asked workshop participants at one point. "The potential for rural Minnesota is huge." ❐

Watch & Listen

To watch videos of presentations given at the Albert Lea small grains workshop, see landstewardshipproject.org/smallgrain. On that web page, you can also access *Ear to the Ground* podcast interviews featuring Roy Pfaltzgraff, Landon Plagge, and Bob Quinn.

Small Grains Field Day Aug. 2 in Western Minnesota

The Land Stewardship Project is holding a field day on producing, processing, and marketing small grains Saturday, Aug. 2, in the western Minnesota communities of Canby and Madison,

For details and to reserve a spot, see bit.ly/wmsmallgrains or contact LSP's Alex Kiminski at akiminski@landstewardshipproject.org, 320-269-2105. ❐

Flower Power

How 3 Farmers Teamed Up to Diversify Out of the Corn-Soybean Duoculture

By Jasmine Curtis

Near the beautiful southern Minnesota town of Austin, three farmers are going against the grain with an unlikely crop: sunflowers. While most Midwestern farmers stick to corn and soybeans, backed by reliable federal subsidies and a marketing and transportation infrastructure centered around such commodities, these pioneers saw an opportunity where others saw risk. Their story isn't just about growing a plant known for its pretty yellow flower – it's about building community, protecting soil health, and reimagining what modern crop farming can be.

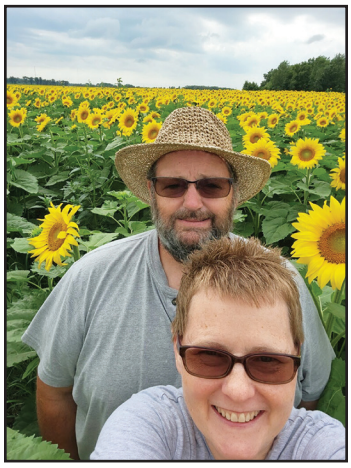
The journey began in spring 2024 when Tom Cotter, a fourth-generation farmer who had been successfully growing sunflowers for two years, saw an opportunity to expand. He had started out growing 130 acres of the crop and liked how it fit into his diverse rotation of corn, soybeans, and other crops. His early success with sunflowers had caught the attention of Seven Sundays, a growing cereal company looking for local suppliers of organic sunflower seeds for its granola. Recognizing the potential for a larger impact, Cotter reached out to fellow members of the Land Stewardship Project's Soil Builders' Network (*see page 20*), including Scott Lightly and Tom Finnegan. Together, they formed a partnership based on a shared interest in crop diversity and soil health.

To put things in context as to how unusual it is for these southern Minnesota farmers to grow sunflowers, consider this: 71,000 acres of the crop are expected to be grown in Minnesota in 2025. In comparison, 8.2 million and 7.4 million acres of corn and soybeans, respectively, were planted in Minnesota in 2024. The Red River Valley, which encompasses parts of northwestern Minnesota as well as North Dakota, is much better known for sunflower production than the area around Austin.

But the farmers were willing to take a chance on a new crop. As Finnegan, who is passionate about building soil health on his crop and livestock farm, explains, "Crop rotation diversity was one of my goals."

Tom Cotter

Lightly, who had previously grown only corn and soybeans, was hesitant about stepping out of his cropping routine. However, when the opportunity to grow sunflowers came with a solid market, he saw it as the perfect chance to diversify. "I didn't have a good place to market anything other than corn and soybeans," he recalls. "Then along comes this sunflower contract, and I thought, 'That's what I've been waiting for.' "



Scott & Dawn Lightly

In 2024, the farmers raised a total of 290 acres of sunflowers and pooled them together into one Seven Sundays contract. The three farmers were all familiar with the importance of crop diversity but were at different stages of implementation. While Lightly had previously grown corn and soybeans exclusively, Cotter and Finnegan had experience with diverse crops such as oats, wheat, hay, and cover crops in their production rotations. To keep his risk low, Lightly grew around two dozen acres of sunflowers that first year.

It wasn't just a guaranteed market that attracted Lightly to growing something different. "Sunflowers are great for soil health," he says. "Their taproots dig deep and loosen up the soil, which makes a noticeable difference. After we harvested the crop, the soil was much looser than it had been in years."

Despite the benefits, growing sunflowers presents challenges. Federal crop insurance coverage is not available for non-traditional crops like sunflowers until they have been grown for at least two years, and even then, it's a complicated and costly process. "It's expensive," says Lightly of insuring sunflowers. "Sometimes double or triple the cost of corn insurance per acre."

Nevertheless, the farmers took the risk. As Finnegan admits, "We were up for a challenge."

The early stages of planting were not without their hurdles, and Lightly played a crucial role in helping with the equipment setup. "I had zero challenges because I turned it all over to Scott," recalls Finnegan. "He did all the heavy lifting. He even came to my house on a Sunday to help set up the planter. Sunflowers are light and fluffy, unlike corn, which is dense. Each seed has different characteristics, so Scott was instrumental in helping us figure it out."

Lightly recalls his own learning process. "I spent a lot of time researching online, watching videos, reading material from North Dakota, South Dakota, and university extension services," he says. "I even called my planter guy and asked if I could plant sunflowers with my corn planter. He said, 'Nobody's ever asked me that before.' "

Despite the challenges, the teamwork paid off. Lightly helped Finnegan calibrate his equipment; Cotter's equipment was also adjusted to meet the needs of sunflower planting. When it came time to harvest, another challenge emerged: specialized equipment was needed. While there is the option to purchase commercial sunflower harvesting heads for combines, these farmers took a creative, lower-cost approach. They built their own adapter kit for the corn harvester to work with the sunflowers. "It worked really, really well," Lightly says, marveling at the success of the homemade adapter.

The commercial version of the adapter would have cost about $2,100 per row. Instead, Lightly's version, built with the help

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Tom Finnegan

Soil Health

…Flower Power, *from page 19*

of a machinist friend, came to just $240 in material costs. "I drew up the plans, and we worked well together. It was a long weekend," Lightly says.

Ultimately, the sunflower project was about more than just diversifying crops; it became a way to connect with the land, the community, and consumers in unexpected ways. The sunflower fields became a local attraction, with neighbors stopping to admire the vibrant blooms.

"It was absolutely beautiful," Finnegan recalls. "So many people stopped and asked for permission to take pictures." Kim, Tom's wife, had a surprising moment of connection when she saw her cousin eating cereal during a camping trip.

"I asked my cousin, 'What are you eating?' She turned the bag around, and it was the Seven Sundays cereal," recalls Kim, adding that her cousin says she now thinks about the farmer every time she eats her cereal. "I didn't realize how much our work was connected to people's everyday lives until that moment."

The connection with Seven Sundays brought the farmers closer to other consumers as well. Through a community event where the Seven Sundays truck made an appearance, the farmers met the people who would eventually eat the crop they had grown.

In the end, the sunflower project was a success, both in terms of harvest and community impact. In 2025, Cotter, Lightly, and Finnegan plan on growing the crop again for a Seven Sundays contract. The farmers not only are growing a crop that is an alternative to the typical Corn Belt rotation, but they have also strengthened their ties to the land and the people around them. As Lightly says, "It's not just about the harvest. It's about the connections, the community, and the story we're telling."

Their story is one of resilience, collaboration, and a bold step toward sustainability. ❒

Jasmine Curtis recently served a soil health internship with the Land Stewardship Project. During the internship, she collected and analyzed survey data to support research on sustainable agriculture. In May, Curtis graduated from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities with a degree in environmental science, conservation, and resource management.

Join LSP's Soil Builders' Network

Interested in profitable ways to build soil health? Join hundreds of other like-minded farmers, natural resource professionals, and others in the Upper Midwest and become a member of the Land Stewardship Project's Soil Builders' Network. Members get regular updates on workshops, field days, and on-farm demonstrations, as well as the latest soil health and cover crop research. They also receive a subscription to the Soil Builders' Network e-letter.

For more information on joining, see landstewardshipproject.org/soil-health or contact LSP's Alex Romano at aromano@landstewardshipproject.org or LSP's Shea-Lynn Ramthun at slramthun@landstewardshipproject.org. You can also contact our office in Lewiston, Minn., at 507-523-3366.

Farm Beginnings

FB Course Accepting Applications for 2025-2026

Beginning and prospective farmers are invited to apply to the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course, a training program that focuses on the goal-setting, marketing, and financial skills needed to establish a successful farm business. The next class will run from December 2025 through March 2026.

The deadline for applications is Sept. 1. The cost of the class is $1,000 for up to two participants per farm. Early bird applications submitted by Aug. 1 will receive a $100 discount if you are accepted into the class; scholarships are available. For more details and to apply, see landstewardshipproject.org/farm-beginnings-class. The class schedule is at bit.ly/FBclass2026.

Reach out with any specific questions by contacting LSP's Annelie Livingston-Anderson at annelie@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-400-6350. If you're trying to figure out if farming is the right career path for you, take part in the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Dreams Visioning Exercise at landstewardshipproject.org/farm-dreams-workshop. ❒

Farm Beginnings grad Elyssa Eull is busting some farming stereotypes by producing vegetables on a commercial scale in the midst of an urban community. See page 21 for more on Eull. (*LSP Photo*)

California Dreaming

A Farm Beginnings Grad Makes a Go of it in an Urban Setting

By the time Elyssa Eull moved back to Minnesota a few years ago, she already had several years of experience working on vegetable farms. But she felt that in order to successfully launch her own farming enterprise, she needed to learn more about business planning and marketing; Eull also wanted to connect with other folks who were interested in producing food for a living. So she enrolled in the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course (*see page 20*). The course is taught by farmers and other ag professionals, and helps participants form networks with other beginners as well as established farmers. For Eull, who is 30, those connections paid off. She is in the midst of her fourth growing season on California Street Farm (californiastreetfarm.com), a small vegetable operation tucked between railroad tracks and a commercial building in Northeast Minneapolis. California Street is located on land leased from the owners of the California Building, and was originally founded by Jim Bovino and Jillia Pessenda back in 2012. A few different people have grown on the land over the years, and the farm was reinvigorated in 2019 by Ashley Thorfinnson and Chris Barth. The couple are Farm Beginnings grads as well, and Eull met them through the course. When Thorfinnson and Barth were ready to move on, Eull took over California Street.

Today, Eull's operation grows some 50 varieties of vegetables on a third-of-an-acre. She has two employees during the growing season, and the farmer has used initiatives such as the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program to set up infrastructure. The farm markets its produce via a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprise. It also has a farm stand on-site and sells produce through the Northeast Minneapolis Farmers' Market.

Eull is farming in a metro area at a time when urban agriculture is gaining traction with beginning farmers, as well as eaters and city governments, university researchers, and government agencies. For example, the USDA has launched urban service centers for farmers in various places around the country, including Minnesota's Twin Cities.

Eull recently talked to the *Land Stewardship Letter* about why she took Farm Beginnings, the challenges and opportunities that come with farming in the city, and why she thinks urban agriculture is beginning to catch on. Below are excerpts of that interview. To listen to the full conversation, see LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast at landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-348-urban-agrarian.

Urban Soil's Challenges

"How do we prioritize soil health when I'm trying to make a living for myself and for my two employees off of a third of an acre? Soil health is so important when you're farming on such an intense scale. Most beds are turned over two- to three-times in a season; it's like I have three years packed into one year of accumulation of disease or stress or using up those nutrients. Because everything is so tightly planted, disease transfer from plant-to-plant is very quick.

"We also have problems with high phosphorus accumulations as a result of long-term use of manure-based compost. So we're trying to get away from using that source of fertility and are incorporating more cover crops.

"I learned about no- and low-till several years ago, specifically when thinking about heavy tillage in the soil and how that really weakens the soil and disrupts the fungal communities. So on my farm, I call what we use low-till because our only form of tillage is with a broad fork; I'm never flipping the topsoil upside down in a way that disrupts the natural layers of things.

"We have two hoop houses and I started noticing a pretty severe drop-off in production after year three. So I got involved with the University of Minnesota Extension's project that offers free soil testing in high tunnels and fields at 100 vegetable farms across the state. As a result of soil tests they did on my farm, I'm working on rotating crops in the high tunnels and taking the plastic off my hoop house every few years to expose it to the elements."

Grant Programs for Urban Ag

"There's actually getting to be a fair amount of resources available through agencies like the Natural Resources Conservation Service and U of M Extension for urban agriculture.

"For example, I used cost share funds from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to build my second hoop house. And because I built a fairly small hoop house, the funding that I got was able to cover the entirety of the structure, which is really, really great for me. I have also received funding through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's demonstration grant program and through nonprofits like the National Young Farmers Coalition."

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"I do think there's more awareness of urban farming being a real version of farming, and that feels really good."

— Elyssa Eull

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Making a Living in Urban Ag

"This is my income for the whole year. The income is all made mostly in the summertime, with a little bit in the winter because of the CSA. That income lasts me for the whole year and I pay two part-time employees. So margins are very tight but it can make money. And every single year we look into what kind of grant funding we can gain access to.

"I don't have a mortgage and I'm low income enough that I don't have to pay for my student loans. So it's sort of what works for you. It does work for me. It does pay the bills."

Why Farming?

"I did not come from a farming background, and I think originally what connected me to farming was food, cooking, and just having a growing connectedness with my food and where it comes from. I also took international studies in college and I learned a lot about industrial farming and how food is shipped around the world and gets processed in so many different ways. I became very frustrated about what felt like an extremely inefficient system that was very extractive.

"And about seven years ago, I took my first job at a diversified vegetable farm in Cannon Falls, Minnesota, and I think I knew pretty quickly into that job that not only did I love to grow food, I loved how varied farming is. It really helps me wrestle with some of these big questions of social issues around land access and climate. I just think it puts me in a place where I get to think about some of those really big and tough questions while also just getting in the

California, *see page 22…*

…California, *from page 21*

dirt and working with my hands and putting my head down.

"I had been farming in Massachusetts for a couple of years and when I moved back here I felt I needed to take a course like Farm Beginnings to connect with other farmers in this community and to learn things about money and business planning and marketing. And it just helped me get connected to so many people who I consider peers as well as mentors. It continues to just weave this web for me. That all helps support me; it's part of my insurance.

"And I was connected to the folks who sold me this farm, so ultimately, the Farm Beginnings network was essential for me starting my own farm business."

Urban Ag's Moment

"I do think there's more awareness of urban farming being a real version of farming, and that feels really good. I think that part of the prejudice around who's a farmer and who's not gets passed down to all of us, even us urban farmers. And it can be easy to think like, 'Oh, I'm not a farmer. I'm a gardener or, you know, like at what point do I qualify as a farmer?'

"But I think that if you're growing food for other people and you're curious about what programs are available to support that, you should register your farm with the USDA so they know you're out there and you can start understanding what kind of funding opportunities might be available.

"There are so many people who are interested in how we make changes to positively impact the climate. Farming is a huge player in making those changes, and urban farming feels approachable to people in a way that large-scale farming doesn't.

"If anything, urban farming is more visible to the general population because it's right here where they're walking their dogs and walking their kid to school and they see it when they drive to work. They're like, what's going on? I absolutely think that urban agriculture is having a moment. I hope it's having a moment —that would be beneficial for all of us." ❒

Interested in Urban Ag?

For links to urban farming resources related to the Sustainable Farming Association's Twin Cities Growers Network and USDA urban agriculture programs, see landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-348-urban-agrarian.

Farm Beginnings Profile

The Other 80%

From Disney World to the Real World

By Brian DeVore

Before jumping into agriculture, Kevin Keene worked as a data science consultant for 11 years. So it makes sense that he describes farming success in terms of a mathematical calculation.

"The way I think about it is there's an equation," he says on a mid-September morning while sitting in the midst of rows of produce thriving in the late-summer heat. "Growing stuff turns out to be 20% of that equation."

That other 80% leaves a pretty big gap.

"That's right," the 40-year-old farmer says. "If you want to be able to make it real, be able to run a business, you gotta know about marketing, you gotta know about distribution, you gotta know about finance. There's *a lot* that goes into this."

That's why, after learning the basics of raising produce through an innovative mentorship program at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, Keene enrolled in the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course (*see page 20*), which provided him the business planning and marketing acumen needed to take the growing skills he was acquiring to the next entrepreneurial level.

Such skills helped him deal with the ups, as well as the downs, of his first growing season on land he owns in Minnesota's Carver County, just west of the Twin Cities. On the plus side, through his stand at a local farmers' market in 2024, Keene learned firsthand that there was a demand for fresh, local produce. In particular, Keenes' Greens has become known for its delicious tomatoes and strawberries, and, using a cottage food license, he's developed some value-added products like pickles and jams. The farmer also got his basic infrastructure set up in the midst of a 20-acre hay field — half-an-acre of growing plots, along with a high tunnel and a well — and was able to improve the heavy clay soil with the use of compost and cover crops. Plus, the farm now has a website (keenes-greens.com) and logo.

"If you want to be able to make it real...you gotta know about distribution, you gotta know about finance," says Kevin Keene, shown on his vegetable operation west of Minnesota's Twin Cities. (*LSP Photo*)

"I feel like I checked off a lot of milestones that I wanted to get done my first year," Keene says.

Keenes' Greens presence at a local farmers' market that first year wasn't a financial bonanza, but it provided a treasure chest full of knowledge about what eaters prefer, which may not necessarily always be what the farmer likes to grow.

"They want tomatoes, they want green beans, they like the strawberries, they want onions," he says of the customers. "I was bringing kohlrabi and shishito peppers and they were like, 'What are those?' But I brought my stuff to market and I sold out at market."

Keene bought his land in

80%, *see page 23…*

…80%, *from page 22*

2019 from a farmer who was willing to carve out the 20 acres from a larger parcel; it's a 30-minute commute from his home in Excelsior, Minn. Starting a farm in an open field is no easy task. For one, it was clear he would need irrigation, so that's why a well was a requirement. It also needed a driveway, something that would have cost another $20,000 to have done; Keene ended up constructing it himself.

Wild Ride

Keene's first growing season on his own was also full of bumps in the road. That well cost $22,000, his plots were flooded out early in the season and several farmers' market days were canceled due to inclement weather. And although he received funding through the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to put in the high tunnel, he was unsuccessful in getting a Farm Service Agency loan for the irrigation well. He was also turned down for government grants related to food safety and preparing for extreme weather. To Keene, the local USDA office seemed more geared toward servicing larger corn and soybean farmers than a small produce start-up raising dozens of crops. It can be frustrating that many grants require at least $5,000 in annual sales in order to qualify, and yet they are supposedly targeted at "beginning farmers."

And when he approached local zoning officials about getting an address for his farm, their first question was, where's the building permit? In an area where McMansions are sprouting on former ag land, they were perplexed that someone was reversing the development trend and establishing a farm.

"It's like the system is not made for me," says Keene with a laugh. "For every one 'yes,' I get 20 'nos.' "

The former college baseball player grew up in Florida, and he sees his transition from being on an incubator vegetable operation to managing his own farm business as similar to spending the day at a certain amusement park in the Sunshine State — and then exiting the gate to return to the real world.

"It's kind of like you're at Disney World," he says. "You've got all the tools and the fun stuff at your disposal, but when you get to reality, it's a little different story."

One thing that's helped him not feel so isolated is that through Farm Beginnings he was able to connect with Red Kirkman, who runs Fox and Fawn Farm, a vegetable enterprise just a few miles from Keene's operation. Kirkman has shared knowledge as well as equipment.

And Keene is willing to put up with a few "nos" for the sake of building a career he's passionate about: feeding people healthy, local food. He's long been interested in the source of his food, and while working as a data consultant gardened on a small scale at his home in Excelsior between work Zoom meetings. His wife, Courtney, is a vegan, which also sparked Kevin's interest in growing fruits and vegetables for local consumption. (They have three young children and Courtney runs her own recruiting company, which Kevin helps with.)

The Arboretum program, which he was involved with during the 2022 and 2023 growing seasons, "did a great job of getting you next to some world class growers," Keene says. And he was able to gain this experience without investing in infrastructure or having to worry about marketing.

Taking the Farm Beginnings course during the winter of 2023-2024 helped him figure out how to fill in that "other 80%" in running a farm business: marketing, financial management, goal-setting, and planning.

Through the class, Keene was exposed to holistic business planning, which provides a big-picture view of farm management by putting the land, finances, community, and a farmer's quality of life on the same level of importance. Farmers and experts in the area of finance, legal issues, and insurance, for example, presented during the class. He says he found it particularly helpful to hear how established farmers were using platforms like Facebook Marketplace to sell niche products such as hay to horse owners. Keene was impressed with how these farmers structured their businesses around what customers in the area wanted and found efficient ways to distribute the product.

While he still has a table at the Excelsior Farmers' Market during the 2025 season, a key goal is to diversify his distribution channels. The farmer has recently taken significant steps to do just that. He has partnered with a local school district to provide produce for its cafeteria during the 2025-2026 school year. The farmer has also connected with a local business that provides a fall porch decoration service; Keene is growing pumpkins and squash for the service.

Knowledge is Power

Entering new markets means planning, and the "data guy" in Keene emerges when he describes how he strategizes what and how much he will grow. He works on the basis of 100-foot growing beds and calculates the amount of "bed feet" he will need to plant to each crop to meet demand. His wintertime calculations allow Keene to take some of the decision-making out of the picture when he's in the heat of the season. But his system has enough flexibility built in to pivot when unplanned events occur, like when heavy rains washed out his early plantings and he had to buy plants from a nursery. Keene also knows such proactive planning will become easier, and more effective, with each passing growing/marketing season, and the experience-fueled data it provides.

"There's more to come," he says as he returns to the harvest. ❒

Farm Beginnings Guiding Principles

The Land Stewardship Project is a member of the Farm Beginnings Collaborative, a coalition of community-based groups that offers the Farm Beginnings course in several states. The Farm Beginnings Collaborative adheres to the following principles for the course:

➔ **Farmer-led:** Class participants will hear from regional farmers about their farms and how they've implemented goal-setting, marketing, and financial management practices.

➔ **Community Based:** Because LSP is best able to provide resources and connections in this area, applicants from Minnesota, western Wisconsin, and northern Iowa will be given priority for our specific Farm Beginnings course. If you are located elsewhere, check out the Farm Beginnings Collaborative website at farmbeginningscollaborative.org to see if there is an organization near you offering Farm Beginnings.

➔ **Racial Equity:** We acknowledge the historical and ongoing racial inequities and oppression in agriculture towards communities of color. We commit to furthering our own understanding of this issue and support farmers we interact with to do the same. We commit to using the power and influence we have across our organization to build more inclusive and equitable agricultural systems and implement changes that make it possible for more farmers of color to be successful.

➔ **Focused on Sustainable Agriculture:** All Farm Beginnings participants are encouraged to create a farm plan that is economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable.

Farm Beginnings Profile

A Beginning Farmer Legacy

Returning to the Classroom a Quarter Century Later

Brian DeVore

In a sense, when the brothers Andy and Ben Klein enrolled in the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course (*see page 20*) in 2023, it was a return engagement for at least one of them.

"I was pregnant with Andy when we took the class," says the brothers' mother, Lisa, with a laugh while loading frozen chickens for a customer on a blustery October day. "That was a rough year."

But that rough beginning helped launch the farming career of Lisa and her husband, Eric — a career that over the past 26 years has evolved into Hidden Stream Farm (hiddenstreamfarm.com), a thriving pasture-based meat and egg production and marketing enterprise. And the connection to Farm Beginnings runs even deeper in the family: Lisa's father, the late Everett Koenig, was part of a group of farmers that called themselves the "Wabasha County Give A Damns," which encouraged LSP to start the Farm Beginnings course in 1998 as a way to train the next generation of innovative, regenerative farmers.

The Kleins have continued to pay back into the beginning farmer training course — after she graduated from Farm Beginnings in 2011, Hannah Breckbill had the opportunity to launch a vegetable enterprise on a piece of Hidden Stream's land. Ben Klein actually helped Breckbill with the operation when he was an adolescent, and she went on to help found Humble Hands Harvest, a vegetable and livestock operation in northeastern Iowa.

So it's no surprise that when Andy and Ben started talking seriously about going into farming, their parents encouraged them to take the course.

"Farm Beginnings is a big legacy thing for me, especially now that grandpa's not here with us anymore," says Andy. "I want that connection and to experience everything that he did to help get people started farming and go after their dreams."

The 26-year-old is saying this while sitting in the warehouse/office that serves as the epicenter of Hidden Stream Farm's meat retailing business. As he talks, Ben, 24, walks in after spending the morning cleaning out a grain bin. Eric stops by to check in before jumping into a truck he's using to haul soybeans to an organic buyer in Wisconsin. "Turn and burn," he says as he heads out the door.

Andy (*left*) and Ben Klein, shown with their parents, Eric and Lisa, and their younger brother, Isaac, at an LSP beginning farmer event in 2009. (*LSP Photo*)

But doing something out of deference to the older generation will only get one so far when it comes to launching a successful farm business that's sustainable economically and environmentally in the long term. The brothers agree that the Farm Beginnings course also helped them develop a business plan, brainstorm new ideas with other beginning farmers, and go through a process that requires participants to outline specifically their strengths and weaknesses, as well as what opportunities and "threats" are out there. Perhaps most importantly, the course allowed the Kleins to network with others who have a similar outlook that they were raised with: successful farming does not need to entail running thousands of acres of corn and soybeans utilizing chemical inputs.

> ***"Farm Beginnings is a big legacy thing for me, especially now that grandpa's not here with us anymore."***
>
> **— Andy Klein**

"There's more than one way to do this," Andy says. "We can farm and still take care of the land — it doesn't have to be one way or the other."

And through the business plan they developed and the goal-setting exercises provided by the class, the brothers were able to give some thought to what avenues they wanted to take to achieve their farm dream.

"There was some pretty deep dives on scenarios and costing stuff out on things you otherwise might not take the time to even think about," says Andy. "We also kicked around new ideas we heard in the class."

For example, through a discussion they had with classmates, Andy's wife, Madison, who often sat in on classes, came up with the idea to renovate one of their large hoop buildings so it could be moved through their chicken pastures. This marked a change from the Kleins' reliance on smaller box-like "chicken tractor" structures popularized by Virginia farmer Joel Salatin. It's less labor to move the one larger structure around and offers the birds more room and protection from the elements, as well as predators.

It was also fun for the brothers to check in with their parents about how the class had evolved over the years. It originally started out as focusing on dairy production; now, enterprises ranging from vegetables and flowers to organic row crop production, along with regenerative livestock raising, are discussed. The class is also now offered as a hybrid of in-person and virtual sessions.

Opportunity Knocks Next Door

Having a background in the kind of planning and goal-setting provided by Farm Beginnings, as well as fortifying one's commitment to regenerative farming, took on even greater relevance when a 120-acre farm came up for sale next door to Hidden Stream, which is located near the southeastern Minnesota town of Elgin. The brothers felt it was a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity, and they scrambled to get credit and other resources rounded up for the purchase. In the end, the process took several months. Ben and Andy appreciate that the owners were willing to give the beginning farmers time to pull financing together for an offer, given that another farmer with a check in-hand was also interested in the property.

Legacy, *see page 25…*

…Legacy, *from page 24*

"You can't negotiate or anything when you've got that hanging," says Andy. "I remember spending New Years doing cash flows on every aspect of our lives trying to make it so the bank would say 'It'll work. Even if it doesn't work great, it'll work.' "

They closed the deal on the farm in April 2023, planted corn, and watched apprehensively as it didn't rain for two months. "So that was interesting — great way to start," says Andy with a wry smile.

Reclaiming Soil

On this October day, Andy and Ben make the short drive over to their new farm to take a look at a partially harvested cornfield, and it's clear that despite the tough start — the 2024 growing season began with record rainfalls and then transitioned into drought… again — they are excited about the potential this land offers for advancing their farming career.

Their plan is to eventually transition it to organic. For now, they are raising conventional corn and soybeans as a way to make land payments; Andy jokes that he wished he had paid better attention when he was taking a college class on ag chemical use.

"I really want to put chickens out on the new farm and see what effect that has on soil that's been beaten up for 40-plus years," says Andy (*left*), shown here with his brother, Ben, on land they recently purchased. (*LSP Photo*)

The farm also offers an opportunity for the brothers to put into action their passion for building soil health. The Klein family has long used cover cropping, rotational grazing of livestock, and diverse rotations to protect and build soil. This hilly parcel on the edge of the Driftless Region has suffered as a result of years of conventional row cropping, and is overdue for exposure to regenerative practices. In fact, a few years ago Eric posted a video on social media showing silt-laden soil washing off the farm onto Hidden Stream's acres.

"There's actually still a mound of dirt in the pasture from that field. I want to take it out and spread it back on that new farm," says Ben, only half-joking.

Back at Hidden Stream's office, Andy pulls up a Google Earth image of a pasture on the home farm where they had used moveable pens to graze chickens in 2024. The pale color of dried out, drought-stressed grass was evident, but where the chickens had grazed were patches of emerald green forage — it was clear the grazing system had built resilient soil. An image from the 2023 drought year showed the same contrast between brown and biology.

"That right there is a testament to getting livestock out there," says Andy excitedly. "I really want to put chickens out on the new farm and see what effect that has on soil that's been beaten up for 40-plus years. I gotta imagine it's going to pop."

SWOTing Ideas

Besides reclaiming the new farm's soil and transitioning it to organic certification, Ben is refurbishing the house and plans to eventually move into it. This, all while juggling working at Hidden Stream Farm fulltime. Andy and one of his sisters, Katy, produce free-range eggs using a flock of 800 hens.

Andy also handles sales and deliveries, which is a significant responsibility — Hidden Stream ships chickens, eggs, pork, and beef to the Twin Cities, as well as to communities in southeastern Minnesota and southwestern Wisconsin. They sell to restaurants and food co-ops, and use delivery services to ship product as far away as California and Florida. Hidden Stream also distributes dairy products and vegetables produced by other farmers.

Ben manages the day-to-day operation of the crop and livestock aspects of the farm. The brothers joke that it's like they have an off-farm job, except it's next door.

"And we get no weekends off," says Ben.

In fact, striking a work-life balance is more on Andy's mind these days. He and Madison have a son, Colson, who's less than a year old. The hiring of a driver and warehouse help has made life a little easier, but it can still be a struggle to avoid burnout while working on an established farm business and launching a new one.

"By the time I get through 12 hours of deliveries, then I don't want to sit in the tractor —I just want to go home," says Andy.

"That's where I shine right now," Ben, who is unmarried, says with a laugh.

As the Farm Beginnings class makes clear, family dynamics can be a major issue in farming. When asked whether they get along, the brothers deflect a bit.

"Sure!" Andy exclaims.

"Let's go with that," Ben quips.

On a serious note, the brothers say while they may differ in their approach, they share the same goals of creating a diverse, resilient farm built on regenerative practices. "It's just trying to agree on *how* to get there," says Andy.

During the Farm Beginnings class they took in 2024, the brothers went through something called a SWOT — "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats" — analysis. Their strengths include being exposed to innovative farming growing up and being able to practice it hands-on. Weaknesses include, as Andy puts it, "The age-old question of how we are going to do it, with little to no money?"

Hidden Stream's distribution system offers a major opportunity to expand sales. A big threat, as the Kleins see it, is dealing with land payments on conventional acres as grain prices drop.

Keeping in mind strengths and weaknesses has served the brothers well as they've grappled with setbacks in recent years, including struggles with raising an input-intensive crop like soybeans under extreme weather conditions, trying alternative crops without consistent access to good markets, and keeping an animal alive that doesn't seem to have the best survival instincts.

"Every year when we move chickens out on pasture, you gotta watch out for that first rainstorm — they're all sitting out in the rain trying to drown themselves," says Andy. "It's just like, 'What are you *doing*?' "

And figuring out family dynamics may become an even bigger factor in the future. Ben and Andy have four younger siblings — besides Katy, there's Sarah, Isaac, and April — and all of them have shown an interest in farming. Maybe Farm Beginnings is in their future?

"Exactly," says Andy. ❒

Farm Beginnings Profile

Staring Down Doubts

How Valerie Hsu Saw Livestock as Part of Her Farm Dream

By Brian DeVore

This is a story about how traffic jams aren't all bad, the powerful draw of regenerative agriculture, an MBA project, and how one woman living in the suburbs got over imposter's syndrome, in the process flipping her view of what a future on the land can look like.

"It's kind of wild — when I started Farm Beginnings, I was pretty sure I needed to eliminate cattle from the farm when I take over," Valerie Hsu says.

These days, bovines play a key role in the 37-year-old's plans for continuing an economically and environmentally sustainable legacy on 100-plus acres of rolling farmland northwest of New Ulm, in south-central Minnesota. Hsu sees raising cattle on grass using managed rotational grazing as a way to continue building the soil and to protect natural habitat on this scenic land, all while providing food for people in a way that contributes to a vibrant community.

"Bringing cattle back onto the land has really brought life back onto the farm, and has really connected our family in a different way," she says.

Hsu is making this statement over a year after giving a presentation to her fellow Farm Beginnings classmates about her plans for taking over the farm, which has been in the family since 1920. During that presentation, she was clearly hesitant to carry on the grass-finished cattle business her uncle, Keith Boettger, has been running. She wasn't sure if she could handle the large bovines, and was interested in other aspects of farming, like raising u-pick berries, flowers, or even vegetables. But when she looked at the land, her family, and the community, the cattle kept calling to her.

Traffic Jams & MBA

Boettger had mostly raised row crops on the farm over the years but had fond memories of being around cattle in his younger days when the operation was a dairy. Around a decade ago, while running a livestock hauling business, he often found himself stuck in traffic. Through the hauling enterprise, he was seeing firsthand how the bulk of livestock were not being raised out on pasture, and he didn't like it. To make use of his traffic jam downtime, Boettger began Googling information on raising beef cattle utilizing methods like managed rotational grazing of perennial pastures.

That eventually led to the return of cattle to the farm, and eight years ago he launched a grass-finished beef business with his sister — Valerie's mother — Kay Steffl. Today, Boettger and Steffl have a 50-cow herd consisting of Angus, Shorthorn, Hereford, and Gelbvieh breeds.

"It's kind of wild — when I started Farm Beginnings, I was pretty sure I needed to eliminate cattle from the farm when I take over," says Valerie Hsu, shown here with part of her family's beef herd. (*Photo courtesy of Valerie Hsu*)

Hsu grew up in New Ulm and has lots of good memories of visiting the farm when she was young, but for a time didn't see a future there. After high school, she went to college and moved away.

"I never saw any way that I could be involved with the farm, because no one was telling me, 'Hey, you should be getting on the tractor,' " she recalls. "Probably because I'm a girl too, right?"

However, while getting a master in business administration, Hsu took on development of a marketing and branding plan for the family's beef herd as her capstone project. Through that work, she realized there was a growing demand for a regeneratively-raised product like grass-fed beef. Stormy Creek Beef Farm (stormycreekfarm.com) now markets directly to eaters, as well as to a food co-op in New Ulm and a local restaurant; they can't keep up with the demand.

"So every year it seems like our New Ulm customer base is growing, and that's so exciting for us," she says. "People are seeking out local food."

In addition, Hsu, who stopped eating beef for a time because of concerns around how conventional cattle were treated and the impact they were having on the environment, was struck by how the rotational grazing of the animals was building the land's soil health and creating natural habitat for birds and pollinators.

An idea took root: could a farm that wasn't focused on just raising corn and soybeans actually contribute to improving the environment, all while allowing an opportunity for her to continue her family's legacy? Just as importantly, could it have a positive impact on the fabric of the New Ulm community by providing healthy, local food and being a cog in the economy?

"I want this to be a place of rural opportunity," says Hsu. "I was a rural kid, and with corn and soybeans surrounding us, there wasn't much opportunity to utilize the land for the enjoyment of our own communities or eat foods grown locally."

A couple years ago, she started talking to her mom about the idea of returning to the farm. Steffl then mentioned it to her brother. To put it bluntly, he was shocked.

Hsu knew that in order to be taken seriously, and to get over what she calls a feeling of "imposter's syndrome," she needed to

Stare, *see page 27…*

…Stare, *from page 26*

go beyond just talking about how wonderful it would be to move from the suburbs to a scenic farm in rural Minnesota. So, in 2023 she enrolled in the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings class (*see page 20*). Hsu was attracted to the course because of its emphasis on how holistic business management can help a farm strike a balance economically, environmentally, and from a quality of life point of view. She says it was also key to be in the same space with other people who were interested in developing businesses that are not part of the conventional system.

"I think seeing other people who really want to be a farmer and also are at different stages in the process, I felt like less of an imposter," says Hsu.

The Farm Beginnings experience also introduced Hsu to a network of established farmers who are making a go of it with various enterprises, from vegetables and u-pick berries to flowers. Since taking the class, she has even spent time working on 10th Street Farm, a vegetable operation in the Twin Cities area run by Ashley Thorfinnson and Chris Barth, who are Farm Beginnings grads.

"Without taking the Farm Beginnings course, I don't know if I would have had the confidence to reach out to all these farmers," she says. "Being able to say, 'I went through the Farm Beginnings Program,' they were like, 'Oh, yeah, absolutely, come on over.' "

But perhaps most importantly, Hsu feels the course gave her the language she needed to talk about transitioning the farm to the next generation. Continuing her family's legacy of producing food in a regenerative manner is important to her, but so is making sure her parents and uncle have an opportunity to stay on the farm via intergenerational housing as long as they are able. Through the holistic planning and goal-setting processes, as well as via sessions on using these tools to communicate with family members and partners, Hsu feels better prepared to have the discussions that need to be had as she steps into the operation.

"I see my interest is not only to keep the farm in the family, but making it a place where my family can continue," she says. "My family is very southern Minnesota — it's hard to talk about things. Farm Beginnings gave me more confidence to really have the conversations that we need to start having now."

And one of those hard conversations was an internal one Hsu was having about the role cattle will play in the farm's future. By the time she wrapped up her time in the Farm Beginnings course, she decided that the grass-based livestock enterprise plays too important a role in the farm and community to let go. One thing that helped her get over her hesitancy over working with livestock was a grazing school LSP held in southeastern Minnesota during the summer of 2024. Through that course, she was exposed to ideas related to pasture improvement and innovative fencing and watering techniques, as well as financial management and soil health monitoring.

"I find the link between grazing, soil health, and ecosystem health — birds and insects — completely and absolutely fascinating," she says.

Hsu sees her family's farm as a way to raise food in a regenerative manner while being a positive presence in the community. "I want this to be a place of rural opportunity," she says. (*Photo courtesy of Valerie Hsu*)

Decision Time

Hsu currently works as a communications specialist for Ramsey County, and she lives with her husband, Tristin, and their two young children in the Twin Cities suburb of Woodbury. She feels the clock is ticking and in the next few years some major decisions will need to be made when it comes to the farm, like when will her family move onto the land and how housing for all the extended family members will be handled. Tristin is from Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia and home to over two million people. Moving to a farm would be a big adjustment, but Hsu jokes that conversations around such a step have gone from a "no way" response to an acceptance that this is in the family's future. "It's definitely not a 'hell no' at this point," she says with a laugh.

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"I find the link between grazing, soil health, and ecosystem health — birds and insects — completely and absolutely fascinating."

— Valerie Hsu

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By early 2025, Hsu was applying for a USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program grant to increase grazing infrastructure on the farm, making plans to improve some worn-out pastures and perhaps manage the woodlands utilizing silvopastuturing, and working on establishing pollinator plantings.

But another thing Hsu learned through the Farm Beginnings course is that in order to be happy on the land, she needs to consider what enterprises *she's* interested in, and not just what family, the community, and the markets expect. So, she's also identified a couple acres where she wants to plant apple trees and u-pick berries. When she and her uncle took soil samples from that parcel they found evidence that whatever is planted there will do well.

"The topsoil was so soft, deep, and black, and really showed the benefits of his conservation practices for the last 10 years," reports Hsu. "I'm looking forward to getting the test back." ❐

More Beginning Farmer Stories

Interested in more stories where Farm Beginnings graduates talk about the challenges of launching a farm business, how the course got them started on their agrarian path, and what their future goals are?

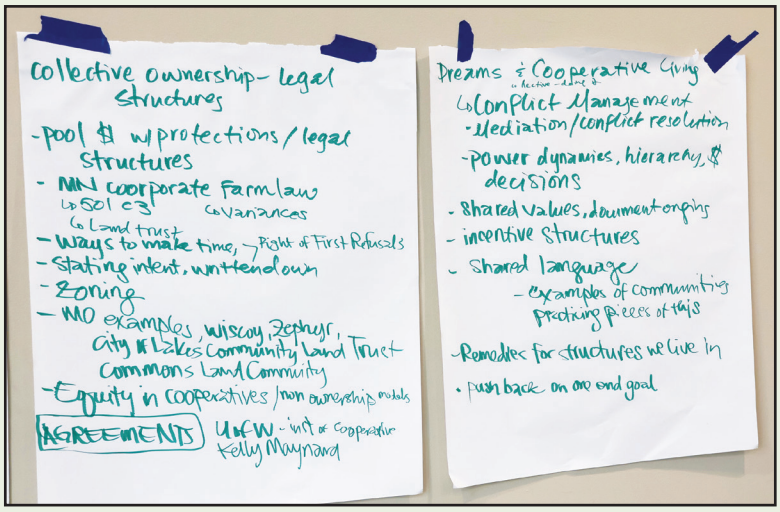
You can read profiles at landstewardshipproject.org/category/farm-beginnings-profiles. The Land Stewardship Project's *Ear to the Ground* "Fresh Voices" podcast series also features interviews with beginning and emerging farmers: landstewardshipproject.org/fresh-voices.

Land Mixer Discussion

On a Saturday in March, over two dozen farmers and prospective farmers gathered in Minneapolis for a Land Stewardship Project discussion on accessing farmland and operating farms via strategies such as cooperative ownership.

During the past quarter-century, LSP's Farm Beginnings course (*see page 20*) has gained national attention for its innovative approach to training the next generation of farmers. However, it's become clear that access to affordable farmland is a major barrier for even the best trained beginning farmer.

During the March "mixer," folks brainstormed ideas related to how to "de-commodify" land, collectively accessing and managing land, building equity under collective partnerships, setting up and operating cooperative living/farming arrangements, legal and financial resources that are available for alternative approaches to land ownership, and conflict resolution.



"A lot of what we're trying to do hasn't been done yet," said one mixer participant.

That statement pretty much summarizes the situation — all of this is still very much in the discussion and brainstorming stage.

Interested in joining the discussion? Contact the Land Stewardship Project's Robin Moore at rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org or Nick Olson at nicko@landstewardshipproject.org.

Making Room for Emerging Agrarians

For Ka Zoua Berry, farming has always been inextricably linked to food and family. When she was 2, she immigrated to America with her parents, who were originally from Laos. Berry has fond memories of helping them out in their vegetable plots and at the farmers' market. So, it's no surprise that after moving to Minnesota, Berry sought out ways to get involved in a way of life she sees as critical to creating vibrant, healthy communities.

Like many emerging farmers, she and her husband got their start at Big River Farms, an incubator program for beginning organic growers operated by the Food Group. Today, they have a small-scale farm in Maplewood, Minn., and Berry is the Food Group's farm director. In that position, she oversees such initiatives as the Big River Farms education program. She also coordinates the annual Emerging Farmers Conference (*see page 29*), an event that has evolved over the years into a major venue for new immigrants, farms of color, and other emerging food producers to get together and learn how to build and sustain viable farming operations in the region.

Berry's personal and professional background has provided her with an excellent vantage point to observe the opportunities and challenges faced by new immigrant and farmers of color. Not surprisingly, they face many of the hurdles that get in the way of their white counterparts, such as access to affordable land and consistent, profitable markets.


Ka Zoua Berry

But emerging farmers must also often grapple with racism, both within the government bureaucracies that service and regulate the agricultural sector, as well as in communities that aren't used to seeing anyone who isn't white owning farm

Emerging, *see page 29…*

…Emerging, *from page 28*

businesses and working the land.

Berry recently sat down to talk with the Land Stewardship Project's Brian DeVore about the growing number of emerging farmers in the region, and the benefits they can provide the land, our food system, and our communities. Below are excerpts of that conversation; to listen to the entire interview, see episode 369 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-369-emerging-agrarians.

Challenges for Emerging Farmers

"A lot of land near the Twin Cities is very, very pricey, so farmers are forced to go further out, maybe an hour-and-a-half, two hours. And oftentimes some of those communities are not accepting of new farmers, farmers who don't look like that community… I've heard from plenty of farmers who have to live in those spaces because they bought land and they share stories with me about their kids and the racism and all that they face. And that makes it really challenging for farmers."

Growing Interest in Farming

"In the past, farming in the immigrant community was associated with lack of education. But I love seeing the influx of folks who come from IT backgrounds, who come from medical backgrounds, that are turning to farming because they see there is a need to have diversified strength and skills in this space to grow food for our community."

Transitioning to Fulltime Farming

"Farming is a lifestyle. Farming is not something you quote, unquote, can do part-time. We have a lot of farmers currently in our program, they're working fulltime, and then they're going to the farm 20-plus hours in addition to their workload. That in itself is a barrier and a challenge. Can they transition into being a fulltime farmer, a farmer who can farm at a scale that provides support?"

Why Renting Land to Emerging Farmers isn't Enough

"Those farmers, when they come in to farm your land…they are building a new ecosystem. They are building their business, and if they are practicing regenerative agriculture, they are especially helping with that land. And so, if they don't have ownership in it, how much can they actually put into it? I think there is a lot of value to an equity-based mindset. Wouldn't it be awesome if you split up your land and sold a parcel to one of these farmers so they could be your neighbor? Then you could build that relationship with them, and diversify the

• • •

"I think that if you are able to help change the food system by transitioning your land to more diverse communities in such a way where it is equitable and supportive of our system, that is a huge win."

• • •

economy. Because it's beyond just that soil and land that they're farming — it's really about building a more food secure community.

"Most farmers are on a year-to-year lease, and often farmers get displaced without even notification. I'd encourage landowners who are transitioning to think about the kind of legacy that they want to leave... moving forward. Maybe part of that legacy is supporting communities of color and our indigenous communities to create a more diverse system. And even if your name is not known, know that the memories that the wind carries are infinite. I think that if you are able to help change the food system by transitioning your land to more diverse communities in such a way where it is equitable and supportive of our system, that is a huge win."

What Can Be Done?

Renewing the Countryside, through their Land Navigators, works with getting farmers access to land. And LSP, you do a pretty good job of trying to connect landowners and beginning farmers. Of course, there can be ways to strengthen that. One thing I'd like to see is more concrete pathways and things that are happening in ways that are duplicable or meaningful for farmers, and we're not just having conversations about it. We've been having conversations for a very long time, and I think it's time to start creating some solution-oriented concrete things that can move forward.

"More than anything, it's important for us to de-silo ourselves. I think there's room and space for commodity farmers, but there needs to be more room for specialty crop producers and people who are farming on a small scale. At the moment there's not a lot of subsidies to support farmers that are at the scale we work with. There's a lot of subsidies and financial assistance for commodity and row crop growers, but how do we create and elevate a system that actually feeds human beings?"

The Future

"For sure, we have a lot of work to do. I think when I zoom out systems-wise, I don't feel good about the system. It's getting worse and I think it will probably collapse. But, as I zoom in, and work with the day-to-day farmer, they are still growing. Mother Earth is going to survive with or without us. So, I feel good about leaning into community resilience. I think that with all of these systems that are at risk when it comes to food insecurity, farmers are going to step up to grow food. I just hope we are ready to support those farmers when that time comes." ❐

Emerging Farmers Conference Nov. 7-8

The 20th Annual Emerging Farmers Conference will be held Nov. 7-8 in Brooklyn Center, Minn. The conference focuses on success and sustainability of farmers — including immigrant farmers and farmers of color — who traditionally face barriers to the education and resources necessary to build profitable agricultural businesses.

Details are at emergingfarmers.org. ❐

Resources for Retiring & Beginning Farmers

The Land Stewardship Project has various tools and support available to help beginning farmers, as well as retiring farmers and non-operating landowners, navigate the transition of land and other agricultural resources to the next generation. For details on publications, workshops, tax credits, and other LSP transition resources, see landstewardshipproject.org/land-transition-tools. In the southeastern Minnesota region, contact LSP's Karen Stettler at stettler@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-767-9885; in western Minnesota, contact Alex Kiminski at akiminski@landstewardshipproject.org or 320-269-2105.

Are you a landowner who would like to set up a lease agreement that promotes and supports good conservation practices? See landstewardshipproject.org/conservation-leases for resources, including sample lease agreements. You can also contact LSP's Robin Moore at rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org or 320-269-2105.

Farm Transitions

Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse

Are you a beginning farmer looking to rent or purchase farmland in the Midwest? Or are you an established farmer/landowner in the Midwest who is seeking a beginning farmer to purchase or rent your land, or to work with in a partnership/employee situation? Then consider having your information circulated via the Land Stewardship Project's ***Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse***. To fill out an online form and for more information, see **landstewardshipproject.org/farmland-clearinghouse**. You can also obtain forms by e-mailing LSP's Karen Stettler at stettler@landstewardshipproject.org, or by calling her at 612-767-9885. Below are a few recent listings. For the latest listings, see **landstewardshipproject.org/farmland-clearinghouse**.

Farmland Available

◆ Michael Lund is seeking a farmer to rent 5 tillable acres near ***Rochester in southeastern Minnesota***. There is no housing. Contact: Michael Lund, 507-269-4576, michael_t_lund@hotmail.com.

◆ Ezra Hinton is seeking a farmer to rent 12 tillable acres in ***Clear Lake in northwestern Wisconsin***. No house or outbuildings are available; $100 per acre. Contact: Ezra Hinton, ezra.hinton@gmail.com.

◆ Masih Siddiqi is seeking a farmer to rent 40 tillable acres in ***north-central Wisconsin's Taylor County***. The land has not been farmed in years and there is no housing available. Contact: Masih Siddiqi, 630-302-6274, masihsiddiqi@sbcglobal.net.

◆ Robert Hallett is seeking a renter for 115 certified organic tillable acres in ***southern Wisconsin near New Glarus in Green County***. There are 105 open acres; 10 acres adjacent just across the driveway. No house, outbuildings, power, or water are available. Contact: Robert Hallett, 608-289-6159, thedirigiblefactory@icloud.com.

◆ Wendy Schoen is seeking a renter for 3 grazing acres in ***east-central Minnesota's Wright County***. There is a potential for rental housing, a barn, and a chicken coop. There is also some fencing and closer to the house there is a well for watering. Rent negotiable. Contact: Wendy Schoen, 320-310-2674, wenschoen@gmail.com.

Seeking Farmland

◆ Pa Vang is seeking less than an acre, preferably near ***Rochester in southeastern Minnesota***. No house is needed — just a space big enough to raise 10 chickens. Water and electricity would be nice. Contact: Pa Vang, 612-546-5005, buttervaj@gmail.com.

◆ Rose Motieri is seeking to rent certified organic pasture and tillable acres in ***Minnesota***. No housing is necessary. Contact: rkerubo93@yahoo.com, 507-318-3386.

◆ Jeffrey McMahon is seeking about 15 certified organic acres (tillable, pastured, and forested) in ***Minnesota***. A house is not needed, but a pole barn would be preferred. Contact: Jeffrey McMahon, 651-356-2300, sensimedics@gmail.com.

◆ Nikki Gaffaney is seeking 5 acres of land (3 tillable) in ***Minnesota***. Preferably land that has a barn or shed, but no house is necessary. Contact: Nikki Gaffaney, 734-678-7414, akenx003@gmail.com.

◆ Eric Hanson and Appy are seeking 20 acres of certified organic land and a house in ***Wisconsin*** to lease or purchase. They are experienced regenerative farmers. Ideal land criteria: pasture-based or partially wooded land suitable for rotational grazing; water access and good fencing (or potential to install). Open to flexible lease terms or a sale that prioritizes keeping the land in sustainable production. Contact: Eric Hanson, 262-215-0086, ehanson05@gmail.com.

Community-Based Food Systems

Eating Home Cooking

Community Food Systems Require Not Just Local Farmers, but Local Eaters

A local food system needs local farmers, of course. But it also requires people in the community who will buy that locally produced food on a consistent basis. Guess what — even people in rural areas need to eat.

"There are people living in this region," said University of Minnesota Extension educator Ryan Pesch during the 2025 Land Stewardship Project Western Minnesota Food Forum, held in February. The region he was referring to is the five-county Upper Minnesota River Valley. "Yes, there's greater density in South Minneapolis than in these five counties, but still, they eat. There is a market for us to feed our own communities."

To back up his statement, Pesch cited figures showing that the five counties — Big Stone, Lac qui Parle, Chippewa, Swift, and Yellow Medicine — have a combined population of around 44,000, which spends around $66 million annually on food.

And those people, when given a chance, want to support a food system that doesn't just feed them, but that benefits the local economy. "Why do people buy local? Whether it's urban or rural, the reasons are the same: freshness and quality, and supporting the local businesses in the community," Pesch told the farmers, business owners, educators, students, and local government officials who were gathered for the Forum at the University of Minnesota-Morris. Besides LSP, the event was sponsored by the University, the Southwest Regional Sustainable Partnership, and U of M Extension. This is the third year LSP has held a food forum in the region to highlight ways of creating a local food system in the Upper Minnesota River Valley.

Discussions at this year's forum centered around how to develop a food system that isn't completely reliant on markets from outside the region. Research conducted by LSP and other groups in recent years has shown that farmers in the Upper Minnesota

Home Cooking, *see page 31…*

…Home Cooking, *from page 30*

River Valley interested in producing food outside of the conventional commodity system face a significant challenge given the distance they are from major markets like Minnesota's Twin Cities. However, as Pesch and other presenters at the forum made clear, that geographic barrier could also be turned into an advantage by creating a more self-supporting food economy that connects local farmers and eaters.

Pesch, who, besides providing business management support for farmers who are direct-marketing, raises vegetables on a commercial scale in Minnesota's Ottertail County, sees exciting opportunities for people who are raising produce and livestock products that aren't part of the export-driven commodity system. It's all a matter of bringing willing buyers and willing sellers together. Such connections require basic infrastructure such as grocery stores that are willing to stock local food, he said.

That's become a major challenge as the grocery trade in the region becomes increasingly consolidated and controlled by outside mega-corporations. Ed Brands, who teaches environmental studies at U of M-Morris, shared the results of a rural food assessment students conducted in the region recently. It turns out only 23% of food is purchased at stores not owned by Walmart, Aldi, Cub, or Target. And 75% of groceries are purchased in Douglas County, which is home to Alexandria, a regional hub. According to the assessment, approximately a third of the region's residents are considered "food insecure" on some level — which is classified as a situation where individuals lack consistent access to enough food for a healthy and active life. Not surprisingly, affordability is identified as the number one barrier to obtaining food, but the number two reason was the distance that had to be traveled to obtain food, according to the assessment. Brands showed a bar graph outlining how between 1990 and 2024, the number of grocery stores in the region dropped by roughly half. Of 30 towns of population less than 1,000 people, only six still have an operating grocery store.

That limits opportunities for farmers wanting to market in their community. LSP organizer Scott DeMuth talked about how the organization has, during the past three years, been working with groups like the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission and Countryside Public Health to connect farmers with buyers.

During the forum, participants discussed various strategies for connecting farmers, processors, distributors, and eaters in the region, including developing an updated food producers' directory, developing "meal kits" that are sourced from local foods, connecting farmers and food shelves, and partnering with grocery stores and convenience stores to study food waste and divert still usable foods to those who can use it.

Participants in the Western Minnesota Food Forum discussed ways to connect farmers and eaters in the region. (*LSP Photo*)

During a break-out session on the impact industrialized agriculture is having on rural regions, U of M-Morris anthropology professor Cristina Ortiz talked about how communities need "third spaces" — public areas not controlled by private entities. This is particularly important for people new to the community, such as immigrants, said Ortiz, who added that gathering in such areas can be a way for people to discuss alternatives to the corporate-controlled, industrialized farm and food system.

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"There is a market for us to feed our own communities."

— Ryan Pesch

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Such connections are critical, said Pesch, adding that in a world where people feel increasingly disconnected, "food is one place where they can be connected."

A few years ago, after a career in the military, Kris Shelstad returned to Madison in western Minnesota and bought a 50,000-square-foot former lumberyard and hardware store that sits in the shadow of the grain handling facilities of the local co-op elevator. Her plan was to make the shambling building into something called Madison Mercantile — a coffee shop and art space. Then she started talking to farmers and others in the community. It was clear there was the need to develop a space that fostered community on a wide scale while building and keeping wealth local in a region known for producing commodities that are exported all over the world. Creating a local-centric food system seemed to be a prime way to do just that.

"I was just going to have a little art gallery and coffee shop, but realized the way I was going to have the biggest impact was through food," Shelstad said during the February forum.

Working with the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships and LSP, Shelstad is creating space at the Madison Mercantile for cold storage, a commercial kitchen, and food aggregation. But just as importantly, she wants to make the building one of those third spaces Ortiz talks about — a place where farmers and others can connect with each other and the resources they need to be successful.

Because, said Shelstad, "it's not just about food — it's about the resiliency of the community as a whole." ❐

More on LSP's community-based food systems work is at landstewardshipproject.org/community-food.

Food Stories

For Land Stewardship Project *Ear to the Ground* podcasts featuring farmers, business owners, and others who are working to build resilient food systems, see our "Ear Bites" series: landstewardshipproject.org/earbites.

Reviews

Sea of Grass
The Conquest, Ruin, and Redemption of Nature on the American Prairie

By Dave Hage & Josephine Marcotty
349 pages
Penguin Random House
penguinrandomhouse.com

Reviewed by Brian DeVore

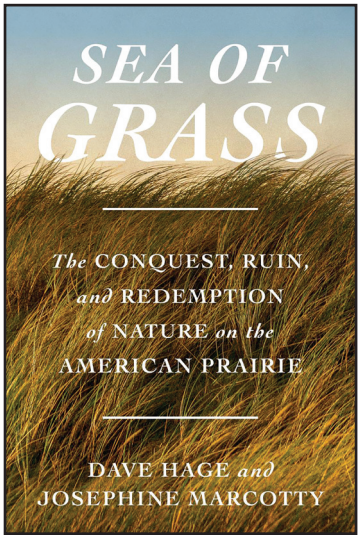
The key to a regenerative, resilient future is to appreciate how critical a component of the ecosystem is before it's too far gone to save. Or, as Aldo Leopold once put is so eloquently: "The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to keep all the pieces."

Sea of Grass: The Conquest, Ruin, and Redemption of Nature on the American Prairie accomplishes that goal in its opening pages as the authors, Dave Hage and Josephine Marcotty, make the case that native grasslands are one of the richest ecosystems on Earth, and can serve as conduits for cleaning up our water, sequestering carbon, providing wildlife habitat, and even revitalizing the economies of rural communities.

Veteran journalists — both worked for several years at the *Minnesota Star Tribune* — the authors have done their homework digging up the latest science on prairie ecosystems, particularly those found here in the Midwest and West. These pages are full of amazing facts about a natural habitat that is so easy to overlook as one buzzes by it at 65-miles-per-hour. It turns out a cubic yard of tallgrass prairie is on par with the tropical rainforest for biological diversity, for example. The 180 million acres of shortgrass prairie that lie between Sioux Falls, S. Dak., and Missoula, Mont., is home to 220 varieties of butterfly, 1,600 species of grasses and flowers, and some 1 billion grassland birds.

But the other facts associated with prairies and native grasslands aren't so fun. It turns out this is one of the most endangered habitats in the world. For good reason: all that biological activity taking place beneath the hundreds of grass and forb species that make up a native prairie has cooked up some of the most fertile soil found anywhere. A geologist once told me that one way to describe the march of European-style agriculture across North American in the 19th and early 20th century was to see it in terms of farmers "chasing nitrogen" from one end of the continent to the other. Before the Haber-Bosch process made it possible for humans to manufacture their own nitrogen fertilizer, food production relied on natural resources such as deep, grassland-based soils. And oh, what a plentiful pantry the prairie has been.

"In contrast to much of the world — farmland in Europe that had been cultivated for centuries, the poorer soils in the eastern U.S. and the nitrogen-depleted plantations in the South — the freshly plowed prairies contained tons of innate nitrogen in every acre," write Marcotty and Hage. "Farmers had no need yet for synthetic fertilizer. Grain yields in Kansas, for example, were twice what they were in Europe."



In other words, prairies may have been their own worst enemies. The authors nicely lay out how a perfect storm of forces came together — John Deere's moldboard plow, the genocide of Native Americans, government policy that placed homesteaders on the land, and the decimation of bison — to create a landscape transformation of perhaps unequaled proportions.

In less than a century after 1820, we plowed up 300 million acres of grass. By the middle of the 20th century, just 1% of the eastern tallgrass prairie remained. Minnesota once had 18 million acres of tallgrass prairie; today it has 250,000 acres, and that's in constant threat of shrinking further.

> ***The "sharing strategy may be the best hope for protecting the environment by creating a form of agriculture that mimics the performance of a native prairie."***
>
> **— from *Sea of Grass***

And all that grass was replaced with crops — the number of grain acres nearly doubled between 1850 and 1860, and then quadrupled again by 1900. Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas added more than 50 million acres of farmland between 1880 and 1890.

Such a transformation accelerated the settling of the Midwest and ushered in an era that made this region the breadbasket of the world. The City of Minneapolis emerged from this, as its mills on the banks of the Mississippi River processed wheat and other grains for a hungry world. But, as the authors document so well, when the grass went, so did habitat for grassland birds and waterfowl, as well as other forms of wildlife that rely on this type of habitat. John Deere's plow, replacing biological activity with chemicals, and government policy that encourages production of monocrops above all else have created an industrialized farming system marked by erosion, polluted water, and empty rural Main Streets.

And there's more bad news. As the authors point it, "Now the plows are moving west again." Between 2015 and 2021, over one million acres a year of new cropland was tilled up from Texas through Kansas and Nebraska and into Alberta and Saskatchewan. Up until the late 20th century, the western plains were considered too dry for cropping and only suitable for grass and cattle. But during the past two decades raising a crop like corn west of the 98th meridian — roughly the eastern edge of the Dakotas — has become profitable as hybrid seed and pesticide technology have advanced, and programs like federally subsidized crop insurance reduce the risk of farming land that would have previously been considered too marginal. And another big factor, Hage and Marcotty point out, is the massive market for corn the ethanol industry represents — 40% of the nation's corn crop now goes to making the fuel we burn in our automobiles. The Midwest, and increasingly the West, are becoming less breadbaskets and more fuel farms.

At one point in *Sea of Grass*, South Dakota rancher Jim Faulstich ticks off all the cattle operations that have disappeared in his neighborhood as grass is replaced with corn and soybeans. "No fences," he says while driving past a parcel of corn stubble prone to erosion and washouts. "That means they'll never put livestock on that ground again."

So, have too many pieces been lost to tinker the prairie back into functional existence? After reading this book, my conclusion is, "It depends." In my lifetime, we will never gaze upon a sea of grass across the mid-section of the United States. People need to be fed, and farming in places like Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, and Kansas is here to stay.

Sea, *see page 33…*

…Sea, *from page 32*

Hage and Marcotty are aware of that — they've interviewed enough farmers, ranchers, and other members of the agricultural community to realize there is a third way that goes beyond the dichotomy of either plowing up every last inch of land or setting aside wilderness areas. (Although the latter approach is important — we need examples out there of what to strive for, if not perfectly achieve.)

That's why it was good to see the authors devote so much space to the role regenerative farming can play in creating a system where working farms and natural habitats can at least "share" the same real estate to the benefit of both.

The "sharing strategy may be the best hope for protecting the environment by creating a form of agriculture that mimics the performance of a native prairie," the authors write. It's not as farfetched as it sounds. In recent years, I've interviewed a number of farmers interested in building soil health profitably who, unprompted, bring up the prairie ecosystem as the model they are striving for in their production system. Perhaps rather than *make* a prairie, we need to figure out a way to *think* like a prairie.

What does that look like on the ground? For a livestock producer, it's grazing animals on a diverse mix of grasses and forbs in a rotational manner that mimics somewhat the movement of bison on the prairies of yore. For crop farmers, it's diversifying beyond the corn-soybean duo culture and maintaining living roots in the soil year-round using cover crops and perennials.

It also means recognizing when a part of the farm perhaps isn't fit for crop or livestock production, and that leaving a wild corner here and there can have its own benefits such as providing habitat for birds and insects that benefit food production by feeding on pests or providing pollinator services. And overall, it means monitoring the land in a manner that one can rely less on mechanical and chemical interventions and more on biological interactions.

Such a strategy has turned Jim and Carol Faulstich's ranch into "a festival of nature," write Hage and Marcotty. "Cattle, corn, and sunflowers still pay the bills from one year to the next. But the foundation is a healthy grassland ecosystem, a place that echoes the riot of diversity that reigned in the Dakota prairie three centuries ago," they write.

This "sharing" concept heavily influences the part of the book where Marcotty and Hage lay out possible ways to make room for at least a little more prairie thinking on the land: reform the federal crop insurance program, make water polluters accountable for the costs they impose on society, support land grant research like the University of Minnesota's Forever Green Initiative and the Iowa "prairie strips" technique that interlaces natural habitat into corn and soybean fields, build markets for products like grass-finished beef, and develop reciprocal relationships between groups like The Nature Conservancy and farmers/ranchers. And when it comes to our biofuel policy, the authors leave little doubt where they stand. "The single, most immediate change in federal farm policy would come from eliminating, or just reducing, the federal subsidy for corn ethanol," Hage and Marcotty write.

Prairies can be deceptively simple, even bland, looking. But once one wades into that sea of grass it becomes clear this is a complex biome that's just beginning to teach us lessons about creating a more resilient, regenerative way to farm. It's time we learned our lesson before it's too late. ❒

Brian DeVore is the editor of the Land Stewardship Letter.

Sea of Grass Event Aug. 2 in Western Minnesota

On Saturday, Aug. 2, join Dave Hage and Josephine Marcotty, the authors of *Sea of Grass: The Conquest, Ruin, and Redemption of Nature on the American Prairie*, for a Land Stewardship Project "Prairie Walk & Author Talk" at Lac qui Parle State Park in Watson, Minn. For more information, check out our events calendar at landstewardshipproject.org/upcoming-events, or contact LSP's Melody Arteaga at marteaga@landstewardshipproject.org. ❒

Poetry

Winter Letter from the North

In memory of my father

Late February, Dad, and as always
Still brittle-cold, any spring hidden, underground.
All color slashed.

Frost ferns, frost stars glitter on the window
Panes. Out the windows, the structure
Of every tree revealed, a boldness, finite

Or infinite. You would be, of course, planning:
Your peas and beans, even, some years,
Corn. Tomatoes essential. A new rose. And also

How to approach the farmers who don't dislike
You but resist the words you carry
To them: cover crops, crop rotation. You'd spread

Out the aerial photos of their farm,
Map the transposition of fields, visit them on their frozen
Ground. Make a proposal now, when they are planning, too.

What can I know about
The world you've come to live in? Are you still
Hoping to come in from the cold, take off

The parka of the past, find Mom, give her
A little kiss, bring me a red-faced
Whisker rub? And my grandchildren, too?

— Suzanne Swanson

Land Stewardship Project member Suzanne Swanson's poems have appeared in numerous publications, including Water~Stone Review*,* Salamander*, and* Poets Reading the News*, as well as the anthology* All You Need Is One Avocado. *She has roots in southwestern and northwestern Minnesota, and now lives in Saint Paul.*

LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

Membership Update

New LSP Office Space

The Land Stewardship Project hosted a pair of open houses this spring to showcase the organization's new work spaces in the Minnesota communities of Lewiston and Montevideo. In the case of the Montevideo office (*right photo*), we have a whole new address, with the organization's western Minnesota work now based in a former railroad hotel. The southeastern Minnesota office (*left photo*) is still in the same location on Lewiston's Main Street, but it has received a significant makeover, with our public meeting room greatly expanded.

The Lewiston office is at 180 East Main Street (phone: 507-523-3366); the Montevideo office is at 111 North 1st Street (phone: 320-269-2105). ❒

Get Current With *LIVE WIRE*

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

Jo Anne Rohricht: 1935-2025

Jo Anne Rohricht, who led the Land Stewardship Project's board of directors at a pivotal time in the organization's history, passed away Feb. 26. She was 89.

Rohricht, who was born and raised in North Carolina before moving to Minnesota in 1963, had a passionate interest in issues related to regenerative farming, community-based foods, social justice, and using storytelling to bring about positive change.

After becoming an LSP member, she got involved in numerous initiatives related to community-based foods and regenerative farming practices, and served on the organization's board of directors from 2001 to 2006. While she was board chair, LSP deepened and expanded its work related to beginning farmer training, community-based foods, federal agriculture policy, protection of local democracy, anti-factory farm organizing, land grant research into regenerative farming practices, rural economic development, and farmer-to-farmer education.

Jo Anne Rohricht

Rohricht practiced what she preached: she and her late husband, Tom, were active members of Common Harvest Farm, a pioneering Community Supported Agriculture operation in the Twin Cities region, and she worked extensively to help a grocery store in her Saint Paul neighborhood procure locally produced sources of food. ❒

Mary Rowekamp: 1928-2025

Mary Rowekamp, who, along with her husband, Leo, was active with the Land Stewardship Project virtually from the organization's launch over four decades ago, passed away Jan. 20. She was 96.

The Rowekamps were longtime conservation farmers in Winona County, Minn. In 1983, they attended one of the first public meetings on land ethics LSP held in southeastern Minnesota. After that, they were active with numerous LSP committees, including the Winona Model County Program steering committee and the Stewardship Farming Program advisory committee. The latter committee served as the precursor to the Sustainable Farming Association. In 1985, Leo, who died in 2009, was elected to LSP's board of directors.

Mary Rowekamp

In 1987, Mary and Leo traveled to Nebraska to accept an award on behalf of LSP from the National Arbor Day Foundation. At the time, the organization was being recognized for leading an effort that involved engaging 975 school children in the planting of 23,400 tree seedlings in Winona County.

In a 1991 *Land Stewardship Letter* article, Mary summed up why she and Leo were so involved with LSP: "Really, it is almost a religious or spiritual thing for us. It's always been a part of our life to preserve the land, and protect it for future generations." ❒

Nancy Paddock: 1942-2025

The Land Stewardship Project family recently lost a passionate voice for keeping the land and people together when Nancy Paddock passed away May 5. She was 82.

Paddock and her husband, Joe, were there at the birth of the organization as they worked with farmers to put the "culture" back into agriculture. An award-winning poet and teacher, Paddock served as a humanist with the 19-state American Farm Project, beginning in the late 1970s. Working with LSP co-founders Ron Kroese and the late Victor Ray, she and Joe led regular sessions with farmers on art and literature and how it intersects with farming and rural life. In 1982, LSP evolved out of that project.

Nancy Paddock

Nancy went on to write *Planting in the Dust*, a one-woman LSP play on soil stewardship that was performed hundreds of times across the U.S. and abroad. In 1986, with her husband and Carol Bly, she co-authored *Soil and Survival: Land Stewardship and the Future of American Agriculture*, which described the threats our soil faces and why the work organizations like LSP is doing to advance stewardship is so important. In 2012, her memoir about caring for her parents, *A Song at Twilight: Of Alzheimer's and Love*, won a Minnesota Book Award. ❒

Alan Perish: 1948-2025

Alan Perish, a stalwart champion of family farming and local democracy, passed away May 14. He was 76.

Perish, a fourth-generation farmer, dairy farmed in central Minnesota's Todd County for many years. He served as president and manager of the township he lived and farmed in up until his death.

Alan Perish

Over the years, Perish was integral to the Land Stewardship Project's work related to protecting and strengthening local democracy on the township and county level. He served on LSP's State Policy Steering Committee, and helped develop policy positions related to local democracy, as well as support of small and medium-sized farms, among other issues. Perish often spoke in public about the importance of local control in rural communities. At one point, he was featured in an LSP campaign advocating for protection of township rights and testified at the Minnesota Legislature.

For LSP's 40th anniversary oral history, *Making Change from the Ground Up*, Perish recalled his experience testifying at the Legislature: "I know on one particular day I made a difference…they kind of figured out they couldn't have it their way as far as weakening local township and county government." ❒

In Memory & in Honor…

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

In Honor of Dana Jackson
◆ Sue & Wendell Fletcher

In Honor of Mark Schultz
◆ David Nocenti

In Honor of Shea-Lynn Ramthun
◆ Diane C. Johnson

In Honor of George Boody
◆ John & Linda Hickman

In Honor of Joshua & Maddie Hansen
◆ Jane Connell

In Honor of Patty Wright & Michael Racette
◆ Erica Perl & George Socha

In Honor of Rob & Melissa Gordon
◆ Dale Hadler

In Honor of the Soo Line Garden
◆ Kedar Deshpande & Jess Kochick

In Memory of Les Young
◆ Chris Young

In Memory of Earl Huckenpoehler
◆ Marilyn Huckenpoehler

In Memory of Jacalyn Fleming
◆ Jackie Collier

In Memory of Jim Holcomb & Uncle Marv
◆ Sandra Holcomb

In Memory of Emery Weber
◆ Melonie Rieck

In Memory of Robert H. Dunsmore
◆ Elizabeth Reishus

In Memory of Doug Pirkl
◆ Melonie Rieck

In Memory of Sister Mary Tacheny
◆ Jolee Tacheny

In Memory of Elwood Lips
◆ Marcia Barrett

In Memory of Judith Fitzgerald
◆ Anonymous

In Memory of Jo Anne Rohricht
◆ George Boody

In Memory of Nancy Paddock
◆ Denise Scharlemann & Robert Cochrane

To donate to LSP in the name of someone, contact Clara Sanders at 612-400-6340 or csanders@landstewardshipproject.org. Online donations: landstewardshipproject.org/join.

Membership?

If you have questions about your Land Stewardship Project membership, contact Clara Sanders at 612-400-6340 or csanders@landstewardshipproject.org. To renew, mail in the envelope included in this *Land Stewardship Letter*, or see landstewardshipproject.org/join.

New Address?

To update your address, see landstewardshipproject.org/address. Make sure you use the e-mail address you have on file with LSP so your data updates correctly.

Volunteer for LSP

LSP could not fulfill its mission without volunteers. They help us do everything from stuff envelopes and make phone calls to enter data and set up meetings. Remote opportunities are available.

To volunteer, go to landstewardshipproject.org/volunteer-for-lsp, or contact Clara Sanders at csanders@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-400-6340.

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Stewardship Calendar

➔ *JULY 24* — **Land Stewardship Project Twin Cities Cookout & Potluck** (*see below right*)
➔ *AUG. 1* — **Early Bird Discount Deadline for 2025-2026 LSP Farm Beginnings Class** (*see page 20*)
➔ *AUG. 2* — **LSP Small Grains Field Day & Discussion**, Canby & Madison, Minn. (*see page 18*)
➔ *AUG. 2* — ***Sea of Grass* "Prairie Walk & Author Talk,"** Lac qui Parle State Park, Watson, Minn. (*see page 33*)
➔ *SEPT. 1* — **Final Deadline for 2025-2026 Farm Beginnings Class** (*see page 20*)
➔ *SEPT. 20* — **40th Anniversary Farm Aid Concert & Festival**, Minneapolis, Minn. farmaid.org/festival
➔ *NOV. 7-8* — **Emerging Farmers Conference**, Brooklyn Center, Minn. (*see page 29*)
➔ *DEC. 6* — **1st Session of 2025-2026 LSP Farm Beginnings Class** (*see page 20*)
➔ *WINTER 2026* — **LSP Farm Transition Workshop**, online. Contact: Karen Stettler, LSP, stettler@landstewardshipproject.org

Latest LSP Events:
landstewardshipproject.org/upcoming-events

The New LSP t-shirts are Here!

The Land Stewardship Project's new t-shirt was created by graphic designer Meg Studer. It's a visual representation of some of LSP's strongest qualities: bridging communities across geographies, keeping the land and people together, and representing a diverse cross-section of farmers. The shirts are made of high quality organic cotton and are selling for $25.

To order a t-shirt and other LSP-themed merchandise — caps, bandanas, bumper stickers, barn signs, and more — visit our online store at landstewardshipproject.org/shop, or call the Minneapolis office at 612-722-6377.

LSP Twin Cities Cookout & Potluck July 24 in Minneapolis

The date has been set for the best potluck in Minnesota: LSP's 2025 Twin Cities Cookout & Potluck will be held the evening of Thursday, July 24. As in the past, this event will be held in the yard at LSP's office in South Minneapolis (821 East 35th Street).

Bring a dish to share and plan on taking part in the pie raffle. You'll also get an opportunity to connect with other members and allies, and to hear about LSP's work to build a new farm and food system.

To reserve a spot for the potluck, see bit.ly/2025potluck. ❐

Land Line Blog

Land Line is a twice-monthly round-up of local, regional, and national news that touches on the work of the Land Stewardship Project and our allies. You can check out back issues on our blog page at landstewardshipproject.org/category/blog.

If you'd like to have *Land Line* sent straight to your e-mail inbox twice-a-month, subscribe at bit.ly/LSPlandline.