The Land Stewardship Letter

LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

41 Years of Keeping the Land & People Together

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On the road to regenerative success (*page 16*).

Photo by Maura Curry

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Land
Stewardship
Letter
Keeping the Land & People Together
Volume 41—Number 2, 2023

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

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Speaking Up for Integrity

LSP's Members Offer a Powerful Voice at a Critical Time

By Scott Elkins

When I became the Land Stewardship Project's new executive director in June, it was a bit of a homecoming for me — I had worked as an organizer for the organization back in the 1990s. A lot has changed in the intervening years, but one constant is that LSP has always emphasized engaging farmers and others in a way that gives people a powerful, collective voice. Making that voice heard is more critical than ever, and LSP is in a prime position to do exactly that.

For example, there's the issue of food with integrity. We have a world where people feel increasingly disconnected from the origins of their food. Basically, what are Cheetos? They have some root in things that grow from the ground, but at their core they are an industrial product. The value-added of that product and where the money is going to when a person buys that product is not in the hands of farmers. It's in the hands of manufacturers and marketers and industrialists who have an agenda to separate the consumer from as much money as they can; and to separate the farmer from as much of their income as they possibly can.

I think about the systems that we've set up that are going to keep pushing people in the direction of the Cheetos side of the food economy. What kind of solutions can LSP and its members provide to help drive things in a different direction? Our recent revamping of LSP's Community Food Systems (*see page 14*) initiative and its work to develop community food webs is an exciting step toward creating a system based on integrity.

Another important issue is climate change. No doubt farmers are experiencing the impacts of climate — we saw that in particular during the record-breaking summer we just had. Agriculture accounts for, depending on how you gauge it, 15% to 30% of climate-relevant emissions. So, farming is not only impacted negatively by climate change, it's also one of the sources of this problem. As a result, I believe over the next five to 10 years there's going to be a revolution in agricultural policy and funding that's going to be driven by the demands of climate change. Small and mid-sized farmers using regenerative practices hold the key to building a climate-smart food system.

We can choose a future that's about small and mid-sized farms proliferating, as well as vibrant communities that engage people from all sorts of cultures, races, and backgrounds, and that feed all of us healthy food with integrity. (*LSP Photo*)

Now, corporate interests have a game plan when it comes to addressing climate change. Some of those solutions may have merit, and some may not. But if all we're thinking about is reducing climate emissions and the only voices that we're listening to are corporate voices, we're going to see increased consolidation and more squeezing out of small and mid-sized farmers.

There's great opportunity for an organization like LSP to talk about climate solutions that increase the number of small and mid-sized producers, that push us away from consolidation and more towards regional food systems and innovative production strategies that fundamentally get to the heart of issues while also building up and restoring rural economies and rural culture.

Our work around soil health *(see page 16)* is a good example of how listening to the voices of farmers can lead to real results. In recent years, we have been successful in building networks that are engaging farmers who are interested in adopting practices that build resilient, regenerative soils. These networks have also made great progress in reaching out to conventional farmers who may not see themselves as part of the so-called "regenerative ag movement," but nonetheless know change is needed on their own farms, and in agriculture in general. This work has its roots in farmers telling us they needed such support in transitioning to a different approach to producing crops and livestock.

But we also need to keep in mind that changes in agriculture don't happen in a vacuum. I was recently visiting a farmer in western Minnesota who's doing all the right things and engaging in all the practices that build healthy soil. He talked to me about standing on the fenceline he shares with the neighboring farm, which is doing row crops in a purely conventional way, and thinking to himself about how that farmer is making more money and doing less work on a week-to-week basis than he's having to do.

Doing the right thing should not be that much of an uphill climb. That brings up the issue of how we can shift policy on the state level so that farmers who are being innovative while addressing climate change and building up rural economies are the ones who are on the receiving end of the bulk of federal and state incentives and subsidies. Shifting policy in that way serves the interest of not only the climate, but rural economies and rural communities. Again, by engaging the voices of our members at the Minnesota Legislature, LSP has attained some major victories in recent years when it comes to public support of regenerative farming and community food systems (*see page 10*).

However, we must face the fact that we're living in a country where it's getting harder and harder to get important stuff done

Voices, *see page 4…*

…Voices, *from page 3*

when it comes to policy, including when it comes to the Farm Bill that's currently being debated in Congress (*see page 12*). We are increasingly seeing issues that should cut across political divides actually getting shoved into corners, and getting caught in that chasm separating Democrat and Republican, populous, progressive, conservative — however you want to label those things.

That's keeping us from doing good stuff no matter what side of the aisle you're sitting on. And I think those divides are showing up in a lot of different ways. For example, there's geography — the urban and rural split. It feels like LSP, with a balanced membership of rural residents and farmers, and urban and suburban folks who are interested in rural policy, is an organization that can reach across such a split and get things done.

So, how do we start doing that? I think we do that by making something like agriculture relevant to folks, even if they aren't farmers. We need to talk about the impacts it has on the choices they make in the supermarket and the quality of the air and water in their communities, while tapping into the idea that rural communities play a key economic and cultural role in the foundation of American society.

I think the other thing we have to own up to is how differences of race, immigration status, political affiliation and other forms of identity are being exploited by interests that benefit from endlessly escalating conflict. We can't allow that to happen. Creating a future for rural spaces has to start with pushing back against division, and by boldly identifying and taking apart the barriers that keep many folks from feeling that they are welcome and able to thrive in rural (and urban) spaces. Black and brown folks, Indigenous folks, recent immigrants, and other people who bring unique identities and ideas are all essential partners in our shared and vibrant rural future.

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Making people's voices heard is more critical than ever, and LSP is in a prime position to do exactly that.

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Along those lines, I'm excited about the surge of interest we're seeing by folks from diverse racial and cultural identities in our Farm Beginnings (*see page 27*) course. And I'm inspired by the way our Farm Beginnings staffers are learning and shaping the curriculum to be responsive to an expanded set of perspectives and needs. That growth is also happening among Farm Transitions organizers as they develop land access initiatives that build opportunities for people to have an ownership stake in landscapes that they didn't feel welcome in previously (*see page 7*).

LSP farmers and members recognize and appreciate the idea that diversity of farming practices is strength. Well, diversity of backgrounds, along with diversity of cultures and insights, is also a strength. Keeping our minds and hearts open to change and growth is a challenge, and it's what will turn our boldest dreams into reality.

As LSP wraps up its 41st year of working to "keep the land and people together," we face a choice: we can have a rural America that is about consolidation, depopulation, and industrial-scale agriculture — or it can be a future that's about small and mid-sized farms proliferating, as well as vibrant communities that engage people from all sorts of cultures, races, and backgrounds, and that feed all of us healthy food with integrity.

I'm proud to be leading an organization that is making the latter choice. ❒

Scott Elkins can be reached at selkins@landstewardshipproject.org.

Give it a Listen

Episode 319 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* features LSP executive director Scott Elkins talking about why the organization is well-placed to make a positive difference in creating a farm and food system based on integrity: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-319-right-place-right-time.

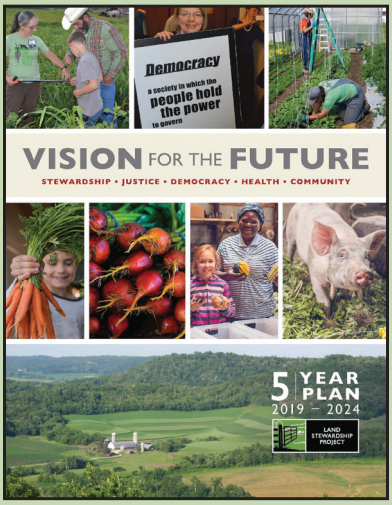
LSP's Long Range Plan: 2019-2024

The Land Stewardship Project has outlined its long range goals and how we will go about achieving them in *Vision for the Future: 5 Year Plan 2019-2024*. The plan is based on five core values:

➔ **Stewardship** is the value of living in right relationship with the land and all that is connected to it: the soil, the water, the air, the plants, microorganisms, animals, and our climate. It means giving to the land and receiving from it, and caring about the entire biotic community. Conservation-minded farmers who live on the land, farm it, and care for it are essential to stewardship of farmland.

➔ **Justice** means there is economic, racial, and gender equity for farmers, workers, and all those who are engaged in the food and agriculture system. It means the achievement of related rights like food sovereignty for all communities, and high quality healthcare for everyone.

➔ **Democracy** means a society in which the people hold the power to govern, in which those people directly impacted by issues name solutions, set priorities, and win change. It means the health and well-being of people and the land are put before corporate profits.



➔ **Health** is the value of nourishing the beauty, function, and vitality of an ecosystem made up of people, landscapes, plants, animals, soil, and water. The health of the land is a gift that current generations are obligated to provide for future generations.

➔ **Community** is the value of understanding our interdependence and caring for the relationships that sustain each of us. Living in community we are more resilient, creative, resourceful, and powerful — we have greater ability to be the change we seek in the world.

The plan is at ***landstewardshipproject.org/long-range-plan****. For paper copies, call 612-722-6377.*

Myth Buster Box

An Ongoing Series on Ag Myths & Ways of Deflating Them

➔ *Myth:* Nitrogen Fertilizer & High Yields are Inextricably Linked

➔ *Fact:* When German chemists Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch developed a way to manufacture nitrogen fertilizer in the early part of the 20th century, they truly revolutionized the way agriculture is undertaken on the planet. Nitrogen makes the biological world go 'round. Just about every ecosystem in the world — from pristine wilderness to a Midwestern cornfield — has its productivity limited by the amount of nitrogen available to it. There's always been plenty of nitrogen present in the atmosphere, but it needs to be converted to ammonia before it is accessible to plants. In fact, for most of the world's history, only lightning or specialized bacteria had the ability to convert atmospheric nitrogen into biologically usable forms. Animals can also produce ammonia by eating plants and excreting manure.

The Haber-Bosch process changed all that: for the first time, humans had the ability to bypass natural sources of nitrogen-based fertility and crank it out on a massive, industrial scale. Humans have taken over a once natural cycle, and as a result there is roughly double the rate of nitrogen input into the terrestrial nitrogen cycle. A huge chunk of that increased input is the result of crop farming's reliance on nitrogen fertilizer. Corn, in particular, is a nitrogen hungry plant. High corn yields are so closely tied to the amount of nitrogen available that farmers are often tempted to over apply fertilizer as insurance. This is a problem: annual crops take up only about half of the nitrogen applied to a field, according to studies done in agricultural regions around the world. As we report on pages 22-26 of this *Land Stewardship Letter*, lost nitrogen makes its way through the soil profile and into our water, where it becomes a pollutant in the form of nitrate.

That's one reason why, in April 2023, the Land Stewardship Project joined 10 other groups in filing a petition calling on the Environmental Protection Agency to use its emergency authority under the Safe Drinking Water Act to address nitrate pollution in the karst region of southeastern Minnesota (*see page 25*).

How Much is Enough?

In recent years, due to more accurate soil tests, advances in precision application technology, and general awareness of the economic and ecological costs of applying too much fertilizer, land grant universities have reduced their recommendations for how much nitrogen corn farmers need to apply. However, take a look at any extension service bulletin on corn production, and it's clear the same narrative rules: more nitrogen fertilizer equals higher yields, and thus higher profits.

However, a recent field trial by, of all places, the seed giant Dupont Pioneer, is throwing a wrench into that equation. A 17-year study experimented with varying how much nitrogen was applied to corn. The rates ranged from the full land grant university recommendation to zero. Both continuous corn and corn rotated with soybeans (soybeans in the rotation can add nitrogen to the soil naturally) were tested.

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After the tenth year, rotated corn that received no nitrogen fertilizer had virtually* no difference in yield *when compared to its fully fertilized counterpart.

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Not surprisingly, corn yields on the zero nitrogen plots took a major hit the first several years. Even when rotated with soybeans, not applying nitrogen to corn caused yields to plummet by 40%. However, in a turn of events that surprised Pioneer agronomists, after the tenth year of the study rotated corn that received no nitrogen fertilizer had virtually *no difference in yield* when compared to its fully fertilized counterpart.

Pioneer is quick to not draw too many conclusions from this study, and it admits that this is a non-replicated trial. However, in a written update on the study, company researchers took great pains to make it clear it was carefully done. "This outcome is unusual and the reason for it is unknown," they reported, adding that, "Further investigation is warranted. This study remains ongoing."

Let's be clear: studies like this do not discount the idea that plants need nitrogen to thrive. But they help highlight the fact that rotating crops provides huge benefits and sometimes we don't give soil and natural processes in general enough credit for generating fertility. That's not surprising, given how historically purchased fertilizer has been relatively affordable, as well as easy to obtain and apply.

One clue to Pioneer's surprising results may have emerged from a set of four University of Illinois studies showing that, on average, 67% of nitrogen-based fertility corn gets is sourced naturally from soil, not fertilizer. This has major economic implications: one of the reasons an increasing number of "conventional" crop farmers have been showing up at soil health workshops put on by LSP and other groups is that they are looking to cut their reliance on nitrogen fertilizer, which, because it is derived from fossil fuels, has experienced sharp price spikes in recent years.

As the "Soil Health" section on pages 16-26 of this *Land Stewardship Letter* shows, the farmers who belong to LSP's Soil Builders' Network have been utilizing cover cropping, rotational grazing, no-till, diverse rotations, and cutting-edge composting methods to build soil's innate ability to create its own fertility. They are also utilizing biologically-based soil tests that go beyond conventional nitrogen-phosphorous-potassium (NPK) monitoring to determine exactly what life is present in their fields and what role it can play in growing healthy, productive plants.

In other words, we may have taken over the nitrogen cycle, but that doesn't mean we can't give back some control.

More Information

- "How Much Nitrogen Fertilizer Does Corn Need?" Aaron Smith, University of California-Davis, https://bit.ly/47gqFyG
- "How much nitrogen does corn get from fertilizer? Less than farmers think," University of Illinois, phys.org/news/2023-05-nitrogen-corn-fertilizer-farmers.html

Myth Buster Series

Tired of accepting "conventional wisdom" as gospel? Check out LSP's *Myth Buster* series on a variety of topics at landstewardshipproject.org/myth-busters.

LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

LSP News

LSP Staff Update

Pam Hartwell has joined the Land Stewardship Project's Policy Team as an organizer. Hartwell is a graduate of LSP's Farm Beginnings course (*see page 27*), and currently farms in southeastern Minnesota's Winona County. She has a bachelor's degree in communications from Augsburg University and a master's degree from the San Francisco Theological Seminary. Hartwell has a long history of working with and running a wide variety of nonprofits in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California, and has worked on issues related to rape crisis work, sustainability, urban agriculture, public banking, and housing advocacy. For a time, Hartwell served as the mayor and as a city council member in Fairfax, Calif. She is based out of LSP's southeastern Minnesota office in Lewiston and can contacted at phartwell@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-767-9886.

Pam Hartwell

Taya Schulte

Taya Schulte has joined LSP's staff as organizer of the 2024 Family Farm Breakfast (*see page 10*). Schulte is a Farm Beginnings graduate and, with her partner Seamus Fitzgerald, owns and operates Growing Lots Farm in Wheeler, Wis. She also works as the community engagement coordinator at Hope Community, Inc. Schulte participated in an LSP fly-in to Washington, D.C., in spring 2023, where she and other LSP members called on Congressional agriculture leaders to be champions in backing programs that support farmers and rural communities dealing with climate change. Schulte also participated in the "Farmers for Climate Action: Rally for Resilience" march in D.C. She can be contacted at tschulte@landstewardshipproject.org.

Sarah Goldman has left LSP's staff to attend law school. Goldman joined the Policy Team in 2021, and during the past two years did organizing work focused on federal policy (*see page 12*). She worked with members of LSP's Federal Farm Bill Committee to create the organization's 2023 Farm Bill Platform and facilitated fly-ins to D.C., where farmers met with Congressional ag leaders. In the winter and spring of 2022, Goldman worked with groups such as the National Young Farmers Coalition and Midwest Farmers of Color Collective to conduct a survey on farmers' attitudes related to federal policy.

Sarah Goldman

Pilar Ingram has left LSP's Farm Beginnings Team to do operations and event coordination for a national organization. During the past year, Ingram worked extensively to facilitate the Farm Beginnings course, helping, among other things, to build a more inclusive curriculum. She also worked with specialty crop farmers on climate resiliency and helped organize LSP's series of 40th Anniversary bonfires. ❒

Pilar Ingram

Borrud & Bryceson Join Board

Aleta Borrud and **Josh Bryceson** have joined the Land Stewardship Project's board of directors.

Borrud is a retired physician from Rochester, Minn., and has long been involved in LSP's policy organizing work. She served on LSP's Healthcare Steering Committee and was a participant in the first social justice cohort the group organized. Borrud has frequently spoken at organizing meetings and testified at the Minnesota Legislature. This marks a return to the board for Borrud; she stepped down in 2021 to serve a temporary role on LSP's staff as an organizer during the state legislative session.

Aleta Borrud

Bryceson, along with his wife, Rama Hoffpauir, owns and operates Turnip Rock Farm and Cosmic Wheel Creamery in Clear Lake, Wis. The farm produces vegetables, cheese, and pastured meat. Over the years, Bryceson and Hoffpauir's farm has served as a training ground for several beginning farmers, and they have hosted LSP on-farm education events and tours. Bryceson has also hosted participants in LSP's Journeyperson course and served as a panelist at Community Supported Agriculture and organic farming conferences. ❒

Josh Bryceson

Want Someone to Speak about LSP's Work to Your Group?

Would others in your community or a group you're a part of be interested in learning about the Land Stewardship Project's work? Staff members are available to speak about our various initiatives. Contact us at info@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377 to learn more and to get something set up. For details on other ways to connect with LSP, see landstewardshipproject.org/connect-with-lsp.

Get Current With LIVE WIRE

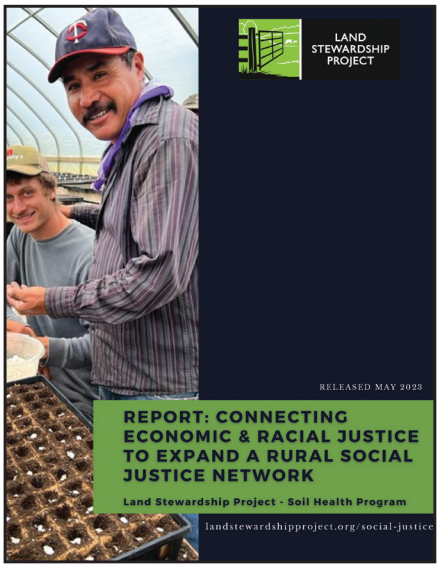
Sign up for the *LIVE-WIRE* e-letter to get monthly updates from the Land Stewardship Project sent straight to your inbox. Details are at landstewardshipproject.org/live-wire-sign-up. ❒

LSP Develops Resource for Groups Working to Grow Social Justice Networks

By Alex Romano

The Land Stewardship Project envisions a food and farming system that works for everyone, no exceptions. Racism, gender inequality, and economic injustice are major barriers to accomplishing LSP's mission.

That's why the Land Stewardship Project has developed *Connecting Economic & Racial Justice to Expand a Rural Social Justice Network* as a reference document for any group, agency, or organization looking to establish and grow a social justice network in their locality. This report is also intended to guide other social justice networks through discussions and activities that draw out their values, experiences, and ideas for influencing social change in their communities.



To download the report, see landstewardshipproject.org/social-justice. More information is available by contacting me at 641-220-6000 or aromano@landstewardshipproject.org. For more on LSP's work related to social and racial justice, see landstewardshipproject.org/social-justice-stewardship. ❒

Alex Romano is an LSP soil health organizer based in Lewiston, Minn.

LSP Fact Sheets

The Land Stewardship Project has available a series of well-researched fact sheets on everything from regenerative agriculture's relationship to a resilient environment to ways people are working together to improve their communities.

Check them out at landstewardshipproject.org/fact-sheets. ❒

Battling Land Access Barriers in the Upper Midwest

Participants in a networking event held at the Oliver Kelley Farm in Elk River, Minn., had the opportunity to tour the operation's historical crop and livestock infrastructure and learn about the farm's desire to provide land access for small-scale sustainable farmers in the Twin Cities region. Oliver Kelley began farming in the area in 1850, and went on to found the Grange, the country's first successful national farming organization. Farmland Access Hub members LSP and Renewing the Countryside coordinated the event in Elk River. (*LSP Photo*)

The Land Stewardship Project joined other members of the Farmland Access Hub this fall in putting on a series of networking events to help farmers seeking land.

Get-togethers were held in the Minnesota communities of Elk River, Montgomery, and Wadena, as well as in Ripon, Wis. In addition, LSP coordinated a networking event in Scandia, Minn., that focused on members of the East African farming community.

Participants in these networking events learned about financing options and alternative/collaborative methods of accessing land. They also had an opportunity to meet other aspiring farmers and connect with landowners in the region who are interested in making land available to small and medium-sized farmers.

Of the more than 4,000 respondents to the 2022 National Young Farmers Survey who were identified as "young farmers" (under age 40), 59% named finding affordable land to buy as "very or extremely challenging," and 65% of BIPOC farmers ranked finding affordable land to buy as "very or extremely challenging."

The Farmland Access Hub is a consortium of partners such as LSP that works to increase farmland access for beginning farmers in the Upper Midwest. At the core of the Hub are "Farmland Access Navigators," which provide technical assistance to beginning farmers who are seeking long-term, stable, land tenure. For more information, see farmlandaccesshub.org or contact LSP's Robin Moore at rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-767-9480. Looking for land or have land available? Check out LSP's Seeking Farmers-Seeking Land Clearinghouse on page 31.

Digesting the Facts on Digesters

Making Methane from Manure Raises Environmental, Economic Concerns

By Martin Moore & Laura Schreiber

Manure has long been a highly beneficial source of fertility for crops, as well as a way to build healthy soil. If not properly managed, however, manure can have significant negative impacts on water quality, air quality, and soil. In concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), where thousands of head of livestock are kept in centralized barns, millions of gallons of manure are produced. Typically, manure from these large operations is stored in a manure lagoon or pit in liquid form and then later field-applied. However, if manure is applied above agronomic rates, on frozen fields, or before a rain event, it can run off into lakes and streams.

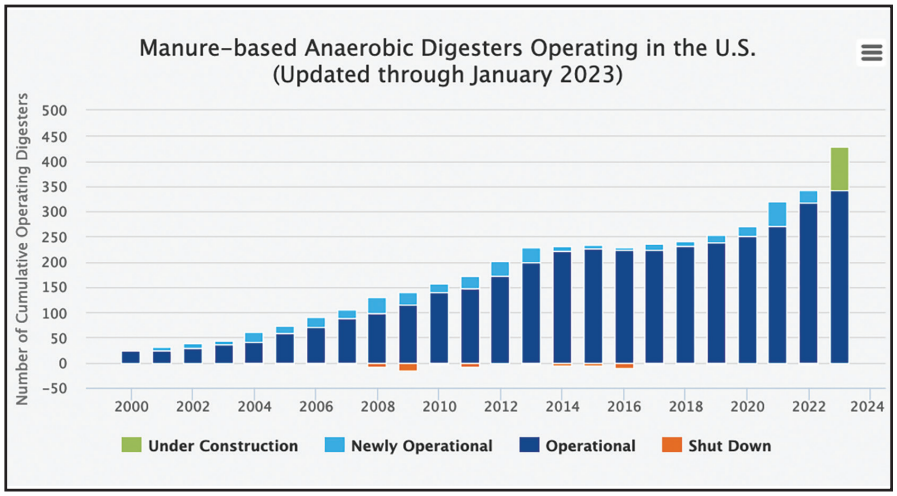
In such situations, a valuable source of fertility suddenly becomes a waste disposal problem. Agricultural runoff pollutes water with nitrates and phosphorus, leading to negative health impacts for humans and wildlife. When manure is collected in lagoons or pits without access to oxygen, creating an anaerobic setting, it causes the release of methane, a highly potent greenhouse gas with more than 80 times the climate warming impact of carbon dioxide over the first 20 years after it is released, according to the United Nations Environment Programme.

Manure management on a large scale is costly. According to the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, in 2020 alone Minnesota farmers received $6.9 million in USDA Environmental Quality Incentives (EQIP) funding to help pay for manure lagoon covers, manure waste disposal, and more. That's over 25% of the total EQIP funding Minnesota farmers received that year.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, manure accounts for 11% of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions. It's clear a better solution to manure management is necessary.

Digester Proposals in the Midwest

In 2023, communities across Wisconsin and Minnesota learned of proposals claiming to solve our region's manure problem. One company, Nature Energy, a Danish subsidiary of Shell Oil, proposed to build large scale, anaerobic manure digesters in Minnesota communities such as Paynesville, Benson, Sauk Centre, Lewiston, and Wilson Township (Winona County), as well as in New Richmond, Wis. These proposals came as a surprise to the communities and left residents asking several questions.



Source: Environmental Protection Agency AgSTAR Livestock Anaerobic Digester Database

At each facility proposed by Nature Energy, the company would collect manure from a 30-mile radius and mix it with food waste and crop residue. The resulting slurry would be pumped into large airtight chambers where anaerobic microbes would break down the slurry and release a mixture of methane and carbon dioxide gas, called biogas. After the biogas is "cleaned" to remove the carbon dioxide, the remaining methane would be sent directly to municipal gas grids or used to keep the digester system running. Finally, the leftovers from this process would produce an end product called digestate, which can be solid or liquid. Solid digestate is typically used as animal bedding while liquid digestate can be transported back to farmers for field application as a fertilizer.

Of the 343 methane digesters operating in the United States as of January 2023, 290 were on dairies and 46 were on hog operations, according to the EPA. The remaining are located on poultry and beef operations.

Digesters are not economically viable without government subsidies. The American Biogas Council and many biofuel companies have spent significant time lobbying for federal subsidies to be included in the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act and incentivized through other programs such as EQIP, REAP (Rural Energy for America Program) and more, according to the *Reuters* news service. Federal dollars typically cover up to 40% of the costs to build a digester, according to the University of California-Davis. A typical on-farm digester can cost close to $1.2 million to build, according to University of Missouri Extension.

The second major form of public support for digesters is a carbon credit system where companies generating "renewable natural gas" can get subsidies from states and the federal government. According to a database developed by North Carolina State University, there are 96 financial incentives for digesters, such as property tax reductions, corporate tax credits, loan programs, grant programs, and performance-based incentives.

Every taxpayer dollar spent subsidizing digesters is a dollar that is not being spent on regenerative agriculture practices such as cover cropping, no-till, and managed rotational grazing. These practices build soil health and the demand for program dollars already far exceeds the supply of funds available to support such techniques. Between 2010 and 2020, just 31% of farmers who applied for EQIP funding and 42% who applied to CSP were awarded contracts, according to an analysis by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

Because of economies of scale, larger producers benefit more from the construction of digesters, says the USDA's Economic Research Service. If more of our public resources go to larger corporate digester companies and the largest CAFOs, then less will be available to small and medium-sized farmers. This disparity will continue to drive smaller farmers off the land. As CAFO own-

Digester, *see page 9…*

…Digester, *from page 8*

ers chase methane digester subsidy funds, this will incentivize the production of more liquid manure, increasing the potential for leaks and air pollution. Ironically, a system that is billed as a solution to our manure problem could lead to making it even worse.

The Impacts

There are a number of environmental concerns related to manure digesters, ranging from increased ammonia and nitrous oxide emissions, to increased wear and tear on roads and dust pollution, to possible spills or even explosions, according to Penn State University and reporting in the *Milwaukee Journal*.

When studies make the claim that digesters "reduce the amount of greenhouse gasses emitted," they are comparing the amount of greenhouse gasses from a digester to the emissions that would otherwise come from the manure management practices of large factory farms. This is not the case of a methane digester on a CAFO providing a net gain in the battle to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Much of the methane produced by a 7,000-cow dairy would not be there in the first place if it wasn't for the fact that it relied on a massive liquid manure system. A problem was created by this system and now the public is being asked to pay for solving it on massive operations that only make this, and numerous other environmental and economic problems, worse

Making Manure a Soil Builder

There are viable alternatives that help make manure what it should be — a valuable source of soil-building fertility.

For example, managed rotational grazing utilizes perennial pastures growing grasses and forbs to provide low-cost feed for livestock such as cattle. Because rotational grazing spreads manure evenly across the landscape and relies on deep-rooted, perennial plants, it can sequester large amounts of greenhouse gasses, according to research in Wisconsin that was recently reported on in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Anaerobic digesters are only a viable option for non-pastured based animal systems where cattle are concentrated in centralized barns and the manure can be collected into a pit/lagoon. A recent EPA "Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks" report describes how, when manure is "handled as a solid" and deposited on pasture, it tends to decompose aerobically, producing little or no methane. In a nutshell, the report is describing why livestock production systems that rely on rotational grazing of cattle or straw bedding for hogs are a climate-smart way to raise animals.

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Every taxpayer dollar spent subsidizing digesters is a dollar that is not being spent on regenerative agriculture practices.

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What Now?

In August 2023, citing rising costs and variable "green gas" prices, Nature Energy and Shell Oil announced they were pausing all projects in Minnesota and Wisconsin. For now, this is good news for local communities, the environment, and taxpayers' dollars.

In September, the Land Stewardship Project organized an informational event in Lewiston in southeastern Minnesota's Winona County. Given the economic and political tailwinds behind these projects, combined with the large number of communities in the Upper Midwest that are close to methane gas pipelines as well as the vast quantities of manure being produced by CAFOs, members in Winona County are concerned that more proposals will be coming in the near future.

Over 40 community members attended the Lewiston event to hear from experts who spoke on topics ranging from the claims made by digester supporters to what it's like to live next to a large-scale digester. Discussions at the event revealed deep concerns from attendees about the risks posed to our rural communities for the benefit of large corporations like Shell Oil.

LSP will continue to monitor this situation and organize local community members who have concerns about these and other corporate-backed projects that benefit a handful of Big Ag special interests. ❐

Martin Moore and Laura Schreiber are LSP policy organizers. If you would like to receive more information or get involved with LSP on the methane digester issue, contact Moore at mmoore@landstewardshipproject.org.

Reporting Anti-Competitive Behavior in Minnesota

In Minnesota and across the country, increasing attention is being drawn to the animal agriculture industry and the anti-competitive practices that are being used to benefit a small minority of people along the food supply chain.

Minnesota has antitrust rules that, when enforced, make it possible for people to combat monopoly power. When these rules are enforced, it is typically through a lawsuit brought by the Attorney General or a legal team. But in order to act, state officials need to hear directly from farmers who are being impacted by anti-competitive behavior.

To share your story with the Minnesota Attorney General's office and/or the chair of the Minnesota Senate Agriculture Committee, Sen. Aric Putnam, see LSP's web page at landstewardshipproject.org/anticompetitiveness. For more information, contact organizer Matthew Sheets at msheets@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-767-9709.

Want to Have a Policy Impact? Connect with Land Stewardship Action Fund

In February 2018, the Land Stewardship Project's board of directors created the Land Stewardship Action Fund (LSAF), a 501(c)(4) partner organization, because they recognized the power that comes with being able to drive forward the mission and goals of LSP with an expanded set of political and electoral tools.

LSAF came out of the realization that our members and leaders could no longer sit on the sidelines in the current political environment, but instead must proactively engage in elections so that we have a say in who is elected and representing us.

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

State Policy

Climate Change, Farm-to-School, Beginning Farmer Support on Tap for 2024 MN Session

By Amanda Koehler & Laura Schneider

Since June, Land Stewardship Project members have been implementing our historic 2023 state legislative session wins and considering what we can build upon during the 2024 session, which convenes in February. LSP's member steering committees (*see sidebar below*) are busy working with our partner organizations to determine our 2024 Minnesota legislative agenda. We still have some work to do before we identify exactly what we will focus on, but so far some common themes have emerged:

1) Advance real climate solutions that truly build healthy soil, clean our water, and steward economic opportunity in rural communities.

2) Scale up the sourcing of local foods in public schools through free school meals and farm-to-school programs.

3) Create opportunities for aspiring farmers to get fairly-paid, hands-on, farming experience.

4) Reduce barriers for building multiple dwelling units on farms for those who would like to farm intergenerationally, cooperatively, or in another form that may need multiple forms of housing.

5) Reform environmental review, permitting, and state agency oversight to ensure rural Minnesotans are heard and have agency in processes that impact their communities, farms, and water.

The 2024 Minnesota legislative session begins on Monday, February 12. Do you have thoughts on what LSP's policy priorities should be? Contact us at policy@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377. You can check out our action alerts and other state policy updates at landstewardshipproject.org/state-policy. ❐

Amanda Koehler is LSP's policy manager; Laura Schreiber is an LSP organizer who focuses on state issues.

Legislative Field Day

In August, Land Stewardship Project members Mike and Dana Seifert hosted lawmakers on their farm near Jordan, Minn., during an LSP field day. The Seiferts provided a tour of the practices they are using to build soil health and described how public programs have helped them adopt and utilize these practices. Dana Seifert also described the need for affordable, quality healthcare in rural communities and how recent legislation is a step in the right direction. In LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast episode 315, Dana describes how the current healthcare system is undermining our farming communities and serving as a barrier to the successful spread of regenerative agriculture: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-315-healthcares-farm-failure. (*LSP Photo*)

LSP Steering Committees

Existing and emerging member committees that guide the Land Stewardship Project's state and federal policy campaigns include:

- The Animal Agriculture Steering Committee
- The Climate Steering Committee
- The Farm Bill Organizing Committee
- The Land Access/Land Legacy Steering Committee
- The Political Steering Committee
- The Regional Food Systems Steering Committee

Are you interested in getting involved in LSP's policy campaigns? Contact us at policy@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-722-6377.

2024 Family Farm Breakfast March 7

Mark your calendars for Thursday, March 7, from 9 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., for LSP's 2024 Family Farm Breakfast and Lobby Day in Saint Paul, Minn. (That's right, we're not doing 7 a.m. this year.) LSP's annual lobby day will follow the breakfast. This is the "Best Breakfast in Town" where hundreds of members and supporters, partners, and public officials gather over a delicious meal featuring locally sourced products from LSP members' farms, hear directly from LSP member-leaders about the issues LSP is organizing around, and learn how we're organizing for change. Learn more and register at https://bit.ly/2024FFB, or contact Taya Schulte at tschulte@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-722-6377.

District Court Supports Winona County's Factory Farm Size Limits

The Minnesota District Court in November denied a large dairy's latest attempt to circumvent a county's rules related to the size of livestock operations. For the past four years, Daley Farm has sought a variance from the 1,500-animal-unit cap that exists in southeastern Minnesota's Winona County in order to expand its Lewiston dairy operation to nearly 6,000 animal units (roughly 4,500 cows). The Winona County Board of Adjustment (BOA) has twice denied the variance, and, despite strong opposition from county residents, including several Land Stewardship Project members, Daley officials have repeatedly turned to legal and other tactics to bypass these local government decisions.

In its latest lawsuit, Daley claimed that the Board of Adjustment was too biased against the dairy to give it a "constitutionally fair hearing" on its variance application because of one BOA member's involvement with the Land Stewardship Project. However, District Court Judge Douglas Bayley ruled that Winona County did its job and adhered to the law when it denied the variance. "…mere membership in an organization that would be affected by a decision, 'is not a sufficiently direct interest' to justify overturning a local government's decision," Bayley wrote in his decision, adding that, "There simply is no evidence of bias, that would justify overturning the Board's legally and factually supported decision to deny Daley Farm's variance request." (The full judgement is available at https://bit.ly/LSPDaleyCourt.)

After the District Court's decision was handed down, a Daley official was quoted in the media saying they planned to file an appeal.

"This is bullying, just like it is for kids in school," says LSP member Richard Ahrens, a retired beef and crop farmer from Lewiston. "Daley knows there is an animal cap and that there are rules, and that in our county we follow the rules. The rules were made to protect the people and the land. That's the bottom line."

Daley Farm's proposal would concentrate the manure of approximately 4,500 dairy cows in a region where drinking water is already plagued by such high nitrate levels that the Environmental Protection Agency recently requested that state agencies take action to protect the health of residents (*see page 25*). Because Winona County has had an animal unit cap in place for over 20 years, Daley Farm was required to request a variance (a permit allowing the operation to go above the limit) from the BOA in order to quadruple the size of its operation.

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"The rules were made to protect the people and the land. That's the bottom line."

— LSP member Richard Ahrens

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"Each community is unique," says Kelley Stanage, an LSP member from Winona and a former public official who was sued by Daley Farms last year, along with other public officials. "Minnesota law allows communities to decide for themselves how their land should be used."

Sean Carroll, LSP's policy director, says animal unit caps have proven to be common-sense avenues for protecting water resources while shielding local communities from the kind of unprecedented consolidation that is putting small and medium-sized farmers out of business and decimating Main Street economies. The Daley proposal would make this operation larger than 99% of all livestock operations in the state, according to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's "Feedlots in Minnesota" database.

"We need a farm economy that does not incentivize the endless expansion of our farms," says Ridgeway, Minn., dairy farmer and LSP member Mike Gilles. "The natural end result of this current system will lead to a Winona County with few farms, fewer farmers, and fragile rural communities. We need a farm economy that works for Winona County, not for expansion."

Daley, backed by supporters of industrialized livestock farming, has repeatedly attempted to circumvent local government rulings. Besides suing over the BOA decision, it also filed a separate lawsuit against individual citizens and LSP in an attempt to silence people who have spoken out against the proposal. That lawsuit, which is similar to SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) strategies utilized by factory farm supporters in other parts of the Midwest to intimidate opponents, was dropped by Daley in March 2023.

Daley's multiple lawsuits are a waste of local public resources that could be better spent supporting a resilient farm economy, says Carroll.

"We have incredible opportunities to support numerous farmers who are building healthy soil and producing food in a way that supports and builds local wealth," he says. "Allowing one special interest to utilize the legal system to gobble up public resources in an effort to advance their own growth isn't good for the community, the economy or the land."

During the past few years, LSP and its allies have learned of several communities in the Midwest that are facing similar intimidation tactics as factory farm proposers and their backers attempt to circumvent local democracy and the will of the people. As a result, LSP is launching a special initiative to collect the stories of rural residents who question the "get big or get out" narrative and the power and bullying tactics wielded by Big Ag (*see below*).

For more information on the Daley Farm legal battle, contact Carroll at scarroll@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-400-6359. ❐

Submit Your Story to LSP Powerline

The Land Stewardship Project is collecting the stories of rural residents who question the "get big or get out" narrative and the power and bullying tactics wielded by Corporate America. The *LSP Powerline Story Center* is seeking firsthand reports and stories from rural residents across the Midwest who oppose the power of Big Ag, and are seeking ways to fight back. Have factory farms or other major unwelcome developments arrived in your community, or are you worried that such developments are being proposed? Is local control and the ability of rural communities to determine their own future important to you? Would you like to talk about a type of food and farming system that relies on small and medium-sized operations that contribute to local economies while building healthy soil?

To submit your story, see landstewardshipproject.org/powerline. If you have any questions, contact LSP organizer Matthew Sheets at 612-767-9709 or msheets@landstewardshipproject.org.

Federal Policy

Conservation's Contradictions

Farm Bill Policy: The Good, the Bad & the Confusing

By Brian DeVore

On a vivid September day, Adam Griebie guides his F-150 pickup down a field road, parks it next to a soybean field, and launches a mini-tour of the many faces of federal farm conservation policy.

"It's really been fantastic," the farmer says of one way policy has manifested itself on his family's land in central Minnesota's McLeod County.

But then, there's the flip side. "It deters farming families from doing these projects — they want to do things that make more sense," he says of another aspect of ag policy.

Welcome to the Farm Bill, the piece of legislation that's responsible for all these reactions on the Griebie farm. Congress is currently debating the next iteration of this law, which is scheduled to be renewed every five years. This massive bill determines what our rural landscape looks like, who's farming that landscape, and what methods they use. Historically, the Farm Bill has promoted monocultural, industrialized systems of farming that aren't good for the land, let alone the farmers and rural communities they live in. That's why the Land Stewardship Project, in its 2023 Farm Bill Platform, is calling for major reforms (*see sidebar on page 13*).

But there are elements of current federal ag policy that have a sound foundation when it comes to promoting the kind of farming that's good for the landscape. A look at how these programs are implemented on one farm provides a few insights into how the Farm Bill can live up to its potential, and where there's room for improvement.

Stewardship Ethic

Adam Griebie has a big incentive to see a more conservation-friendly Farm Bill. As a youth, he spent many days hunting and fishing along Buffalo Creek, which flows through the 1,000 acres his family raises corn and soybeans on. He always had an interest in conservation and ecology, and eventually got a degree in environmental science. Griebie went on to work for a time in the natural resource field, helping do raptor research, among other things.

So when he returned to his family's land around a decade ago, Griebie was set on farming in a way that protected water quality, preserved the soil, and produced good wildlife habitat. He remembers well the time agricultural runoff caused a major fish kill on Buffalo Creek.

Adam Griebie in the prairie he had to replant because of a disconnect between two federal conservation programs. "We did it really well the first time, and the second time we did it good too, but we just shouldn't have to do it twice," he says. (*LSP Photo*)

"If you talk to some of the older folks, they remember swimming in the creek and it never flooding," he says. "Today you'd certainly be pretty apprehensive to go swimming in there and it floods often."

His parents, Joe and Sheila Griebie, had always farmed with a strong conservation ethic, and Adam wanted to continue that legacy, as well as build upon it.

Perhaps because he spent so much time on the banks of Buffalo Creek, water — its quality, quantity, and power to shape the land in ways good and bad — is on Griebie's mind a lot. At one point, he parks his truck next to a water monitoring station set up on his family's land by Discovery Farms, a research initiative that gathers field scale water quality information from different types of production systems.

Putting in place conservation structures and adopting conservation practices can be costly, and today's commodity marketplace doesn't pay farmers for being good stewards. That's why tax-funded conservation programs are key to helping farmers provide public goods like clean water.

Over the years, Griebie's family has utilized numerous government conservation programs to help them steward their land better. For example, they've been enrolled in a couple of Conservation Stewardship Program contracts. Also known as CSP, this initiative was drafted by LSP member-farmers over two decades ago as a system for paying farmers to utilize practices on their working acres that preserve soil, protect water quality, and create healthy wildlife habitat. Griebie has used CSP to support precise applications of inputs, among other things.

The Griebies also have 100 acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which pays farmers to retire working farmland and plant it to perennial habitat such as native grasses. The Griebies have been able to use CRP to protect environmentally vulnerable acres that didn't consistently produce a decent crop of corn or soybeans anyway, often because the land was in an area prone to flooding or washouts.

But there are times when wayward water and working farmland can come to an agreement, of sorts. For example, Griebie has used cost-share funding from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to establish water retention basins in crop fields.

A Step Forward, A Step Back

As he drives past a mosaic of ripening crop fields, riparian habitat, and natural grasslands, the farmer points out several places where Farm Bill conservation initiatives have helped his family strike a balance between protecting the environment and make a living. At the last stop on the tour, Griebie walks through a grassy buffer separating his family's land from a neighboring farm and climbs a small hump of soil the length of a suburban garage and half-a-dozen feet high. It's an almost imperceptible modification to the surrounding topography, which is dominated by the kinds of rolling farm fields that make up this part of Minnesota. But that slug-shaped rise has made all

Conservation, *see page 13…*

…Conservation, *from page 12*

the difference when it comes to movement of water on this part of the farm, as well as the health of the watershed it sits in.

"Before, this would have been all washing out into a giant ravine and flooding out down there," says Griebie as he gestures at the few hundred yards of land that lays between the hump and Buffalo Creek. The farmer describes how some years the water churned away at the soil with such velocity that it would leave a gully deep enough for him to stand in. "We would farm around the gully because it was unsafe to pull a piece of equipment through it."

However, a few years ago this retention basin was placed in a strategic spot in the field, impeding the racing water and slowing it down enough to allow it to soak into the ground. That helps keep soil and fertilizer on the field and out of the river, which eventually drains into the South Fork of the Crow River. And that waterway, in turn, dumps its load into the Minnesota River.

A structure like this may look simple, but it takes engineering and planning. The farmer is appreciative of the technical support he received from the McLeod County Soil and Water Conservation District to put in this and eight other structures like it. He was also able get around 80% of the cost covered through EQIP. That's significant, given that a structure like this can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

"It's improved the quality of our land so much adding those retention basins," says Griebie as a V of Canada geese flies over, honking its way south. And better water management on his family's farm has translated into a public good for the community in the form of less flooding in the watershed.

But then the farmer walks over to a nearby five-acre patch of prairie that represents how, at times, the public is not always served well by the way federal conservation programs are administered. Although the stand, which includes deep-rooted leadplant and big bluestem, seems to be thriving on a fall day, it represents a 2.0 version of this prairie. Previously, it had been established as pollinator habitat under a CSP contract. When that five-year contract expired, Griebie loved the prairie so much that he went to his local USDA Farm Service Agency office and asked if he could simply roll the land into a 15-year CRP contract. Nope, said government officials. It seems that by replacing an erodible piece of farmland with prairie, the farmer had eliminated the kind of "resource concern" that warranted government intervention. The problem is, the Griebies couldn't afford to go without some sort of income on that land. So, to his great chagrin, Adam sprayed the prairie with herbicide, killing the plants and thus re-creating a resource concern. That act re-qualified the land for CRP enrollment.

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"If I could put my tax money towards this, this is where I'd spend it."

— birders' response to the Griebie prairie

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"We did it really well the first time, and the second time we did it good too, but we just shouldn't have to do it twice," says the farmer of the re-establishment of the prairie. "You paid me to destroy a perfectly good prairie, and then you paid me to replant it."

Griebie's experience shows not only the shortcomings of a system that doesn't communicate between programs well, but the need for technical help when navigating the regulatory maze. Since the local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service office is understaffed and lacking in resources, Greibie had to hire an outside consultant when applying to CSP. Farmers need to know there is consistency in how the programs are administered and that technical help is available locally, he says.

It's clear that underfunding of farm conservation programs is having a negative impact on the land. Between 2010 and 2020, just 31% of farmers who applied for EQIP funding and 42% who applied to CSP were awarded contracts, according to an analysis by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. A 2022 update to those figures showed an improvement in acceptance rates, but the USDA still rejects more than three in four farmer applications to CSP. The denials were mostly due to lack of funds, according to IATP, which points out that many of the practices that are under-supported — conservation tillage, cover cropping, and rotational grazing, for example — have the potential to play major roles in making agriculture more climate-resilient.

Griebie says an increasing number of farmers in his neighborhood are showing an interest in establishing conservation practices, but he doesn't see it as a "very good sales pitch" to have a situation where, for example, a farmer is incentivized to put in a pollinator planting that could be destroyed in a few short years. But sometimes the frustration of grappling with public red tape can be trumped by a private pat on the back.

Griebie recalls the day a group of birders visited the restored prairie. "They said, 'If I could put my tax money towards this, this is where I'd spend it.' " ❐

Give it a Listen

On *Ear to the Ground* podcast episode 317, Adam Griebie talks about how his stewardship ethic has been bolstered by federal farm policy, but how there's room for improvement: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-317-policy-on-the-prairie.

LSP & the New Farm Bill

The current Farm Bill was set for renewal during the fall of 2023. However, having missed that deadline, Congress has extended the law to Sept. 30. 2024. In preparation, Land Stewardship Project members and staff are continuing to work to advance the organization's platform priorities. LSP's 2023 Farm Bill Platform addresses: agricultural consolidation; conservation and climate change; crop insurance reform; supporting young, beginning, and BIPOC farmers; and regional food systems. The platform is at landstewardshipproject.org/federal-policy/farmbill2023.

In November 2023, LSP farmer-members and staff participated in a fly-in to Washington, D.C., to talk to Congressional agriculture leaders about supporting Farm Bill priorities such as the inclusion of the Whole Farm Revenue Protection Improvement Act.

"As the impacts of climate change continue to accelerate, our farmers, who are on the front lines of climate change, are at risk — this is especially true for farmers growing food crops. This means the security and future of our farm and food system is at risk," stated a letter signed by 125 LSP farmer-members and delivered to Minnesota Senators Tina Smith and Amy Klobuchar, as well as Minnesota Representative Angie Craig.

During the fly-in, LSP members and allies also lobbied to make the Environmental Quality Incentives Program more accessible to small and medium-sized farmers.

For the latest on LSP's Farm Bill work, see landstewardshipproject.org/federal-policy or contact Amanda Koehler at akoehler@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-400-6355.

Lunchroom Stewardship

Thoughts on Local Food, School Cafeterias…& Pink Coleslaw

Serving locally produced food in school cafeterias, known as "farm-to-school," is one of those concepts that, like puppies and pizza, just about everyone thinks is a good idea. After all, it provides healthier food for young minds and bodies while putting more money directly in the pockets of farmers. What's not to like?

But there are numerous obstacles that stand in the way of connecting local farms and local schools on a consistent basis. For one thing, many of today's schools lack the kitchen facilities and staff to prepare fresh food straight off the farm. In addition, tight budgets make it difficult to pay local farmers what they deserve — major food service companies simply provide a cheaper, if less nutritious, product. And it can be difficult for a local farmer to know how best to approach a school nutrition director about their product, and to know exactly how to match supply and demand while making regular deliveries. Finally, there's the fact that in the Midwest, anyway, the prime growing season for items like fruits and vegetables and the regular school year don't exactly coincide.

During a summer farm-to-school workshop in Hutchinson, Minn., Aimee Haag described how school kitchens receive deliveries from local farms. (*LSP Photo*)

But in recent years, numerous school districts have overcome such obstacles to connect directly with farmers and make locally produced food more than a rarity on cafeteria tables. For example, more than 65% of U.S. school food authorities participating in the USDA's latest farm-to-school census, which took place during the 2018-2019 school year, reported that they were involved in farm-to-school activities. That represents over 42 million students. The number of Minnesota school districts engaged in farm-to-school practices rose from 18 in 2006 to 262 in 2019, which impacts over 520,000 students.

In Minnesota, one thing that's helped smooth the path between the vegetable plot and the lunch table has been increased support for farm-to-school initiatives via the state department of agriculture. For example, state Farm-to-School and Early Care Grants support Minnesota school districts and early childhood education centers that want to buy and serve Minnesota agricultural products. In fiscal year 2024, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture expects to award up to $935,000 to reimburse school districts and early care centers for buying Minnesota grown and raised foods used in federal meal programs. School districts can also get state funding to purchase kitchen equipment that supports their handling and processing of locally-sourced food. And farmers wishing to better match their growing season with the school calendar can apply for USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds to erect hoop houses and other season-extending structures.

A big reason such support is available is because groups like the Land Stewardship Project and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy have been working hard during recent legislative sessions to promote farm-to-school bills, winning funding for grants as well as a farm-to-school coordinator at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Having a paid professional available to coordinate farm-to-school initiatives is important, and not just on the state level. For example, Aimee Haag is the farm-to-school coordinator for the cooperative district that encompasses the central Minnesota communities of Hutchinson, Litchfield, and Dassel-Cokato.

For the past three years, Haag has served as the link in the food chain connecting the schools and farmers in the region. Her work encompasses 12 kitchens and between 4,800 and 5,200 meals served in a given day. She regularly works with around 15 farmers, sourcing mostly produce, but also some meat and dairy products. The schools have also started bringing in local maple syrup, honey, and dry beans. Haag estimates that, on average, the food they buy directly from farms is within a 15-to-30 minute drive of the schools. At the peak of the farm-to-school season, which is in early fall, 80% of the schools' vegetables and 100% of the beef is locally sourced. Haag estimates over the entire course of the school year, between 25% to 35% of the food is from local farms.

The Hutchinson, Litchfield, and Dassel-Cokato initiative has been called the gold standard of farm-to-school programs in the state, in no small part because school officials have dedicated staff time to its coordination. And Haag is a good fit for the job. She had worked in the classroom before, but even more importantly, she and her partner, Andy Temple, for a time raised vegetables in the area. That means Haag knows the challenges farmers face, and has made lots of connections with the people raising food in the area.

Haag recently sat down to talk on episode 322 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast about what is involved with developing and maintaining a successful farm-to-school program: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-222-lunchroom-stewardship. Below are excerpts of that conversation.

Starting With Low-Hanging Fruit

"When launching a farm-to-school program, start out with things that students love, like carrots, cucumbers, broccoli, cherry tomatoes. These foods also need minimal prep and give our kitchen staff a little bit of experience to see how orders come in.

"And it does take a little bit of planning. I know that the vegetable farmers, espe-

Lunchroom, *see page 15…*

Farm-to-School Funding

For more information on grants available to support farm-to-school initiatives in Minnesota, see mda.state.mn.us/farm-school-early-care-grants or contact the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Kate Seybold at kate.seybold@state.mn.us.

…Lunchroom, *from page 14*

cially, are making their decisions on seeds and quantity in December. There are things that have good storage life, like potatoes and carrots and squash, that we can serve all winter, so that's not to say that everything is over now, after a frost. And things like our proteins, our beef, and now some chicken, that will carry us through the winter too. But generally, farm-to-school conversations need to take place way ahead of the school year."

Importance of Relationships

"My connection to the farms and the system of delivering produce has changed over the course of the three years that we've been doing this. When we started, I picked up every box of produce and delivered it to the schools. I can't do that anymore — we've grown past that, so farmers deliver their own produce now. But I do try to make it out to the farms. It's an important piece of knowing what their farms look like — both because I love farms and I want to grow that relationship with the people that we purchase from and, in reverse, they want to know where they're selling to.

"We have a strong interest in food safety, too. So when we're feeding as many students as we are, it's important to make sure all of your boxes are checked, things are coming in right. We haven't had any issues, but if that was the case it would be nice to say, 'Well, I've seen their pack shed. I've seen their delivery vehicle. Everything looks great, so what's going on here?' And then we can dig into it."

Food Service Staff Buy-in

"Food service staff have a really hard job. Schools can also be a really challenging place to be, and there is a tight schedule to get everything done in a day. I never expect everybody to be super-jazzed about serving cabbage again. But you can see the difference when the staff does engage with the students, or shares a story.

"For example, there was a day that the coleslaw was a *little* bit heavy on the red cabbage, so it kind of turned out pink. And a student kind of flipped. It was like 'Whoa, whoa, whoa. This coleslaw looks different.' And it's pink of all things. And our food service staff that day engaged with the student, and told her, 'You know, the farmers had a lot of red cabbage this week and that's what we had, so this is what it looks like. I think you should try it — it tastes the same.'

"And she came back with an empty tray and a big thumbs up. And it was because our employee was able to take the time and had the energy, and knew why they had so much red cabbage. It might come in looking different each week. Now that student knows it might be purple this week, or it might be green, we don't know."

In the Classroom

"If we're not telling that local food story in the classrooms, we're missing an opportunity. The cafeteria is kind of loud, it's kind of fun, it's the students' social hour — as it should be. So it's hard to tell that story in the lunchroom sometimes. We are just getting to that point where we are able to get into that classroom and tell the story of community connection, through food, and celebrate it."

Laura Frerichs Cullip (*third from left*) says a local farm-to-school initiative has helped create a consistent wholesale market for the produce she raises on Loon Organics near Hutchinson. (*LSP Photo*)

Consistent Support Needed

"I can only speak for the districts that I work for that state farm-to-school funding has been important. It's been like the legs that we stand on to reach out and try new things. We rely on that public grant funding to cover a percentage of our purchases. I think what's important is for the state to show a permanent level of commitment and kind of define their commitment to farm-to-school funding more than one or two years at a time. I think the farmers could really get on board with selling into institutions if they knew that this funding was going to be available for schools. It does the farmers no good if we have just a banner year of supporting them, and then two years later the funding is cut; it's really disruptive for small farms. And I have heard from a few of the growers like, 'Well we would buy a carrot harvester and washer *if* we knew this was part of our 10-year plan.' "

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"If we're not telling that local food story in the classrooms, we're missing an opportunity."

— Aimee Haag

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Advice to Schools & Farms

"A school district that has interest in buying local food should set a priority to have somebody like me working for their food service department to make those connections. There's a lot of things at play that a food service director or other kitchen staff doesn't have the time and flexibility for. Are there four or five small districts that could share a part-time person to just get this off the ground? I think so.

"If you're a farmer, I think back to when I was starting, when Andy and I were starting our farm, Rebel Soil, and it was intimidating to cold-call restaurants. School nutrition is such a different field. Everybody loves kids, and they want what's best. And if their participation rates increase because they have a farmer selling high quality food that's coming to the cafeteria, that's a win.

"So, if you're looking to get started and you want to get started as a grower, the child nutrition director is your contact person and the things to consider are: What do you think students are going to love? What foods are going to be easy to sell to students? And what ingredients are low labor on the kitchen side? Do you have something you're really good at, or you have the space and capacity on your farm to grow? If you do broccoli really well or you do cabbage really well, or you do salad radishes really well, go for it. Start with one thing. If we're all just playing on our strengths, I think any working relationship will thrive when you're genuine." ❐

LSP & Community Food Systems Work

For more information on the Land Stewardship Project's work on community-based foods, see landstewardshipproject.org/community-food or contact Amy Bacigalupo, amyb@landstewardshipproject.org, 320-269-2105; or Scott DeMuth, sdemuth@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-767-9487.

Soil Health

A Long, Hot Summer

10 Farms Prepare for the Day When it Remembers to Rain

By Brian DeVore

For many farmers, 2023 was one of those growing seasons where, as the old saying goes, "It seems like it forgot to rain." In much of the Midwest, this was at least the second straight year of abnormally dry weather. According to the USDA, at one point topsoil moisture was "short" to "very short" across 79% of Iowa, 75% of Minnesota, 68% of Illinois, and 64% of Wisconsin. For a time, 94% of Minnesota was considered in a formal drought situation, with more than a quarter of the state in what meteorologists consider "extreme" or "exceptional" drought. There's nothing like extreme weather to shake farmers' confidence in the way they are managing their operations. So no wonder the dry, hot weather was topic number one during the numerous on-farm field days sponsored by the Land Stewardship Project and other organizations in 2023.

As one southeastern Minnesota crop and livestock farmer put it: "Water was the best fertilizer this year."

On a hot (of course) day in early August, soil health expert David Kleinschmidt proved that statement true while kneeling in a cornfield on the Tom and Alma Cotter farm near Austin in southern Minnesota. While a crowd of field day participants watched, Kleinschmidt took a reading from a carbon dioxide probe that was sunk into the field's soil. CO2 activity in soil is a key way to gauge how active the microbes are — the more microbial activity, the more biologically healthy the soil is. The reading was 1,400 parts per million of CO2 — the ambient air above the soil measured around 465 ppm. Then Kleinschmidt poured a bottle of water on the soil. The reading jumped to 1,600 ppm. Yes, water is the best fertilizer.

"The microbes are talking to each other," said Kleinschmidt. "This soil is resilient."

The lesson: someday it will remember to rain, and it when it does, it's the farmer's job to create the kind of soil environment that can take advantage of that moisture — an environment characterized by good aggregate structure, lots of biological activity, and ample cover to shield the surface.

On the following pages are 10 examples from the 2023 field day season of what farmers are doing to create a welcoming home for that liquid fertility — whenever it arrives.

Flexible Farming

Passing on Purity

Cover crops are a mainstay in building soil health, but during the Cotter field day, many farmers expressed concerns that during the drought of 2023 rye and other covers actually competed with cash crops for moisture, resulting in diminished corn and soybean yields. Kleinschmidt, who is the owner of the Illinois-based Progressive Agronomy Consulting company, says 2023 was a good reminder not to be a "rigid purist" and to keep all tools at your disposal when it comes to implementing soil health practices. Conventional wisdom says that soil benefits the most when cover crops like cereal rye are allowed to grow a foot or more before they're terminated, but in a dry year that extra growth may simply be not worth the risk, said Kleinschmidt, adding, "We can have all the soil health in the world, but if we don't raise a crop, what's the value in that?"

David Kleinschmidt conducted a soil respiration test as farmer Tom Cotter looked on. "Tom has done a fantastic job laying out those pros and cons and trying to stack more pros for every con," said the agronomist. (*LSP Photo*)

Short term compromises for the sake of long-term benefits have to be made all the time. That may mean violating a few soil health rules: killing a cover crop early, using intense tillage, spraying more pesticides than one would like. The goal should be to keep the big picture in mind and attempt to follow up a temporary negative practice with steps that build soil health in the long term.

The Cotter cornfield where the CO2 reading was taken is a prime example of such a balance being struck. Tom Cotter, who implements numerous soil-friendly practices on his crop and livestock farm, felt he had to use intense tillage to kill off a stand of alfalfa before planting the corn; otherwise, the alfalfa would evolve into a weed pest. But he followed that tillage with the planting of a cover crop. Despite the drought, the corn was thriving, and Kleinschmidt spaded up a soil sample that, although dry, showed signs of good aggregate structure. The spike in C02 activity indicated that this field still had microbial potential as well; a temporary setback in building soil health had been overcome with a longer-term strategy of keeping roots in the ground.

"Tom has done a fantastic job laying out those pros and cons and trying to stack more pros for every con," said Kleinschmidt. ◆

Building Biology

Great Expectations

When taking steps to build soil health, it's easy to have high expectations for what's possible. In fact, many pioneers in the field are seeing significant improvements in soil health within three to five years.

So it's not surprising that when Jordan, Minn., farmer Mike Seifert started on his soil health journey around 2018, he had high hopes when it came to the impact practices like no-till, cover cropping, and the integration of alfalfa and small grains into his corn-soybean rotation would have. And he did see an increase in aggregate structure, which has helped reduce erosion and increase his fields' ability to manage moisture. He's also been able to reduce what he spends on chemical inputs because of the practices he's adopted.

But during an August field day he and his wife, Dana, hosted, he conceded that he has been disappointed not to see the actual biology of his soil a lot further along by now. It turns out there's a difference between constructing a solid house for that soil biome, and stocking the pantry with nutritious food.

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Creating a healthy soil biome with a good balance of vibrant fungal activity can create fields that are more resilient in the long term, and which have the ability to cook up their own fertility and become resistant to weed and insect pests.

During the field day, Mike demonstrated how he's spent the past two years trying to stock that pantry. The Seiferts have been experimenting with utilizing homegrown ingredients to build compost piles and then distilling them down to a liquid extract that is applied to their fields utilizing modified tillage equipment.

"We're going to put as many species of life out in the field as possible and let nature select what it needs," said Mike Seifert, shown here displaying some of the material he uses to make compost extract. (*LSP Photo*)

Mike made it clear that applying a compost extract to spark microbial life is different from making enough compost to cover an entire growing area, something gardeners are quite familiar with. The idea with compost extracts is to create a biological inoculum that sparks a kind of soil microbe chain reaction.

The farmer showed participants how to put together a compost stack made up of wood chips, corn husks, manure, and straw. After demonstrating how they had modified tillage equipment to apply the extract, Seifert led the way to a soybean field where he had side-by-side comparisons of what added biology can contribute to a crop. Part of the field had been treated with extract, while the other had not. The plants growing in the treated soil were noticeably more bushy and healthy looking, even on a day when the heat index was 116 Fahrenheit.

Seifert admitted the comparison didn't constitute conclusive scientific results, but it gives him a sense that he's learning ways to work with nature in a manner that feeds the soil, as well as his intellect.

"It's like a shotgun approach — we're going to put as many species of life out in the field as possible and let nature select what it needs," said the farmer. "We have to find things that stimulate us mentally, because if we just keep doing the same things every year and hoping the situation will adjust to us, how likely are we to find success?" ◆

Liz Haney argues that conventional tests don't give soil enough credit for its natural ability to build fertility. (*LSP Photo*)

Measuring Microbes

Taking a Soil Census

Building that biology does little good if farmers don't have ways to accurately assess where the soil is at in terms of health and fertility. How do you figure out how far it is to your destination if you don't know where you are located currently?

One way to gauge mileage in the soil health journey is to do an accurate soil test. Farmers and agronomists are no strangers to taking soil samples, sending them to a lab, and getting back recommendations for how much fertilizer to add. But Liz Haney says such tests don't provide a full picture of the soil's biological state, and thus can prompt farmers to overapply certain inputs, lowering a farm's return on investment and harming the environment via runoff of excess nutrients. That's why she and her husband, Rick Haney, have developed the Haney Test, a sampling method that attempts to measure the level of microbial respiration and other natural processes taking place in soil.

During a July field day at the Kevin Davis farm near Cannon Falls in southeastern Minnesota, the soil scientist explained that agronomists have often overlooked the role organic nitrogen can play in productive plant systems, and have thus emphasized adding inorganic, petroleum-based nitrogen, as well as other fertilizers, as much as possible.

But it's become clear nitrogen that exists naturally in the soil can play a significant role in productive crop fields and pastures. While people gathered in Davis's machine shed, Haney shared results of soil tests done on area farms and showed calculations of how much money could be saved on nitrogen fertilizer by tapping into the land's natural ability to build fertility.

Her overall point: if we are going to "farm in nature's image," we need a soil test that also adheres to natural processes.

"We don't want to dictate what's happening," said Haney. "We want nature and the soil to tell us what's going on." ◆

"That's what you have a soil account for — so you can pull from it when times are rough," said dairy farmer Nathan Vergin. (*LSP Photo*)

Banking Soil Health

Rainy Day Fund

At one point during a September pasture walk hosted by Nathan and Amy Vergin, a local farmer pulled up the latest Minnesota drought monitor map on his smart phone. The Vergin farm, located just east of Rochester in southeastern Minnesota, was in the heart of an area marked by a lurid

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Soil Health

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red splotch on the map — a sign the region was suffering from extreme drought. This was the second driest growing season ever recorded for this area; the last time it was this dry was in 1910.

The Vergins made it clear that this year's brutal weather has required them to make adjustments to the management of Silky Cow Farm, their organic dairy operation. Their herd of around 65 milkers and replacement heifers relies heavily on rotational grazing, and it was clear the lack of rain and blistering temperatures had not been kind to the grasses and forbs the Vergins have in their pastures — much of the forage was stunted and had stopped growing in spots.

Fortunately, since Nathan and Amy began the process of taking over the farm from retired farmers Arlene and Mel Hershey five years ago, they've focused on adaptation and flexibility. A cornerstone of their ability to roll with the punches has been to utilize techniques like adaptive rotational grazing to build soil health and thus boost their pastures' resiliency. For example, through management that built up a deep-rooted plant community over a four-year period, they were able to extend the grazing season in a formerly worn-out paddock from four days to over 21 days.

During the LSP pasture walk, participants were shown what adjustments were made on Silky Cow Farm during the summer of 2023, and there was an energetic discussion about what lessons were learned that could be applied to future growing seasons.

As it happens, the farmers are reconsidering their past avoidance of alfalfa as a pasture forage, given how well its deep-rooted plant structure seems to ride out drought conditions. Indeed, on this day, the vibrant green of a grazing paddock dominated by alfalfa contrasted sharply with the dun colored pastures growing heat-stressed grasses.

As Nathan made clear while leading participants through the grazing paddocks, it's next to impossible to predict what curve balls the weather will throw from year-to-year, which makes building a healthy soil biome that can weather extremes over the long haul more critical than ever.

"That's what you have a soil account for — so you can pull from it when times are rough," he said. "And this is definitely one of those rough years." ◆

Community Relations

A Greener Neighbor

Driving through farm country in late fall can be a monochromatic experience. As the corn and soybean harvest is being taken in, it's clearer than ever that this duoculture of row crops doesn't leave much life on the land once it's removed. That's why the hilly acres Jeremy and Jessica Holst produce milk on in southeastern Minnesota's Driftless Region stand out so dramatically. Even in late October, the bright green of rotationally grazed pastures pop on the landscape. The Holsts like utilizing rotational grazing to produce milk with their 120-head cow herd. They feel the cows are healthier and that grazing provides a low-cost source of feed. It also creates a fun, pleasant environment for them and their two young children.

And fortunately for the family, the four landowners they rent acres from like to see cows out grazing the land as well. That's important, given how competitive it can be to rent farm ground, particularly in corn and soybean regions. During a late fall LSP pasture walk, Jeremy led a tour of their grazing paddocks while a light rain fell and a chilly autumn wind blew. Participants walked by a patch of prairie as well as a stand of evergreens that had been planted as a windbreak and habitat for wildlife. When the group arrived at the deep green pasture, it was clear it fit in nicely with the woody and prairie habitat of these hills. The Holsts say they notice plenty of grassland songbirds like meadowlarks and bobolinks in their grazing paddocks, and on this day a flock of turkeys was making its way across a side-hill.

Jeremy Holst said the people he rents land from "like having the cattle out on pasture and seeing them, and it's given me an opportunity with good neighbors." (*LSP Photo*)

The 2023 grazing season was a tough one for the Holsts, given the drought, pest problems, and low milk prices. But Jeremy said one bright spot is that his family's utilization of rotational grazing and continuous living cover to produce milk is seen as a community asset.

"We're pretty lucky with the neighbors here who have wanted to try something besides corn and beans," said the farmer. "These acres are probably worth more on the open market, but they want to take care of the land." ◆

Farmer-to-Farmer

Walking & Talking

There's a lot of talk about the value of farmer-to-farmer learning, but what does it look like in action? One extremely effective way to learn firsthand about grass-based livestock production is to go on a pasture walk. LSP pasture walks are fairly informal affairs and usually start out with the host farmer standing in the shade of a tree at the farmstead and describing the basics of their operation, including a little history of why they got involved with adaptive rotational grazing in the first place. Maybe their permanent pastures were worn out or, in some cases, perhaps the farm was dominated by row crops like corn and soybeans, and grazing provided a way to transition into a livestock production system that helps build and protect soil profitably with perennial grasses and forbs.

But at the heart of any good pasture walk is, well, the walk. Specifically, participants take a hike into a pasture broken up into grazing paddocks. There, they get an up close and personal gander at what's growing in the pasture, how the fencing and watering systems are set up, and ways the host farmer handles issues like rotations and animal health.

On a warm evening in mid-July — one of those nights when a passing rain made it seem like a droughty summer wasn't an inevitability — Nikki Meyer hosted an LSP pasture walk during which a couple dozen farmers and landowners that represented a range in ages and experience hoofed it around the extremely hilly land she and

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Nikki Meyer provided some hands-on advice on setting up a grazing system during her pasture walk. "I just wish I could have been a jackrabbit jumping around to each conversation," she said. (*LSP Photo*)

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her husband, Cody, own near Dorchester in northeastern Iowa. Both Nikki and Cody work fulltime off the farm — she's a sales rep for a seed company and Cody is a mechanic. During the past few years, Nikki has found time to build up a 50-cow beef herd consisting of various breeds; she affectionately refers to them as her "mutts." The 30-year-old is enthusiastic about developing a rotational grazing system that makes the best use of these rugged acres while producing healthy, productive animals.

Meyer led pasture walk participants down a steep slope to one of her paddocks and talked about some of the hard lessons she's learned when it comes to setting up and utilizing fencing and watering systems. Hint: water builds up *a lot* of pressure when it's running through a line down a bluff country slope, so amateur plumbing skills come in handy. The beef producer then allowed participants to get their hands on various kinds of fencing wire and posts she had on display. They even got to play with a "batt latch," a type of gate mechanism that utilizes a timer to open automatically when it's time for livestock to move to a new paddock.

This hands-on experience prompted lots of questions and sharing of information on what equipment to use and how to use it. Participants eventually broke up into their own mini-groups to discuss topics they were particularly interested in. The pasture walk had evolved into a show-and-tell discussion and support group, the epitome of farmer-to-farmer learning.

"I just wish I could have been a jackrabbit jumping around to each conversation," Meyer said afterwards. "But I'm sure I'll get that information from other pasture walks I attend." ◆

"It's a really beautiful thing what they can do for a farm," said Jordan Meyer of how goats have helped him and his wife, Rachelle, create profitable grazing acres on formerly neglected land. (*LSP Photo*)

Land Access

4-Legged Restorers

Land, as the saying goes, is a limited resource, given that they aren't making any more of it. That may be so, but in a way, there are ways to create more *grazing* land on neglected or marginal acres. That's what Jordan and Rachelle Meyer are proving in the rugged landscape of southeastern Minnesota's Houston County. The young farmers raise beef cattle and poultry on pasture, and direct market meat, eggs, and raw milk through their Wholesome Family Farms enterprise. Getting access to land is difficult for beginning farmers these days, given the inflated prices prime cropping acres garner.

But the Meyers are finding that land can be rented for a relatively reasonable price when it's extremely hilly, has poor soil, is overgrown with brush, and otherwise not well suited for raising row crops. It turns out there are plenty of acres that fit that description in their neighborhood. But just turning livestock out onto marginal land and expecting a good return on your investment isn't enough — it needs to be restored in a way that it can produce forage on a consistent basis.

As the farmers explained during an LSP pasture walk in early August, they are doing that by utilizing goats to clean up brush, weeds, and invasive species. In addition, the animals, via their manure and urine, literally transport biology from the woods over to the open, pastured parcels of land the Meyers rent, thus building soil health.

The Meyers have been raising goats for three years, and now have a 400-head herd. They are so happy with the impact the animals can have on the land that they now lease the animals to other people looking to use them as a way to clean up overgrown acres and improve soil and vegetative health.

During the pasture walk, which was held on one of the hilly farms they rent, the Meyers led participants on a tour of their grazing paddocks and talked about fencing strategies, animal health, and vegetation management, among other things. One important lesson the farmers imparted is that goats can make it so just about no plant species is undesirable — including noxious weeds. That can be a particularly important advantage during times of severe drought. In 2023, they were able to take pressure off parched cattle pastures by grazing their beef herd on land the goats had transformed from overgrown brush into grassy pastures.

"The goats bring a lot more profitability to the land by utilizing acres that would have not been used before and turning those acres into another profit generator for another enterprise," said Jordan. "It's a really beautiful thing what they can do for a farm." ◆

Erosion Prevention

A Deeper Dive

It's an infamous footnote in soil conservation history. The town of Beaver was founded in southeastern Minnesota's Winona County in the mid-1850s, and after the surrounding hillsides were stripped of their trees and grass, plowed up, and planted to crops, the Whitewater River became uncontrollable due to all the runoff that resulted. One year alone, the town was swamped more than two dozen times by waters carrying soil loosened from the surrounding hills. Finally, less than a century after Beaver's first house was built, the flooding, silt, and mudslides won — the community was abandoned, and it became known as the "Buried Town of Beaver."

Given the area's soil erosion history,

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perhaps it's not surprising that taking care of the land was a priority for Sandy and Lonny Dietz when they started raising vegetables a few miles from the Beaver townsite in 1996. Before they bought the farm, its soil had suffered as a result of intense corn and soybean cropping practices and lack of good biological activity. In fact, the soil was so poor they had difficulty growing *anything* at first.

"There was no topsoil left — it was down to subsoil," Sandy recalled.

Over the years, the farmers have used mulching and cover crops to build back their soil's organic matter. However, one thing that always concerned the Dietzes was how much their organic vegetable production system relies heavily on tillage to control weeds. Such constant disturbance can be bad news not only when it comes to erosion, but also in terms of the soil's microbial health and its aggregate structure.

As a result, the Dietzes' Whitewater Gardens Farm has gotten funding from the USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education initiative to study three different kinds of no-till vegetable production methods: deep compost mulch, hay and straw mulch, and a living cover crop of clover. During a field day on an unseasonably warm day in October, the farmers showed participants what they are testing and shared some preliminary results.

The jury is still out on which method works best to prevent erosion. And covering the soil isn't the farmers' only goal — through this research, the Dietzes are also focused on developing a system that goes beyond the surface and builds soil biology, creating fields that are resilient long into the future. One thing they've learned over the past three decades is that keeping soil in place is not enough — it's also critical to make sure there is good biological activity taking place underfoot. So the farmers are integrating extensive soil testing into the study to measure what impact various no-till systems have on the biome.

"It's kind of cliché saying you're working with nature or mimicking nature, but you do have to see what nature is doing," said Sandy. "You have to get the other legs of the stool involved." ◆

Alan Bedtka's goal is to graze 300-days-a-year — he's come within 15 days of hitting that marker. (*LSP Photo*)

When implementing a no-till organic vegetable system, a farmer has to go beyond the surface and build the soil biome, according to Sandy Dietz (*left*)**. "You have to get the other legs of the stool involved," she said.** (*LSP Photo*)

Grazing Cover Crops
Season Stretcher

The first snow of the season had just fallen when Alan Bedtka hosted an LSP field day on his farm near Dover in southeastern Minnesota. That was fitting, given that the subject at hand was how to set up a system where cattle can graze deep into the winter. A stand of tall sorghum-sudangrass was rattling in the harsh wind as Bedtka described how he uses annual crops that are planted during the summer as a source of low-cost forage once the snow is deep. Those rangy stalks poke up through deep snow drifts, allowing the cattle to graze in the field well into the cold season.

Bedtka has been rotationally grazing cover crops for around four years, and said it's helping him reach his goals of creating a profitable and efficient cow-calf enterprise. His soil health is improving and water infiltration has increased. Bedtka has also been able to cut his reliance on purchased fertilizers on the corn, soybeans, and sweet corn acres his family raises. The covers take pressure off his permanent pastures, which was especially important during a drought year like 2023. Bedtka has made use of various government programs to help further establish his cover cropping and grazing system, including the Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program (*see page 22*).

The farmer is a self-described "numbers guy," so while standing near a stand of sorghum-sudangrass he cited figures from a clipboard he held showing the various seeding and fencing costs associated with his system, as well as the returns. The bottom line: Bedtka is making more money than when he was using a total mix ration (TMR) system to haul feed to the cattle.

And by growing a tall cover crop like sorghum-sudangrass, he is also able to extend not only how many acres he grazes, but how *long* those acres are actually providing forage to his 52-head cow-calf herd. The 35-year-old has been supporting himself working as a carpenter, and being able to extend the grazing season as long as possible helps make being on the farm fulltime a realistic possibility. Bedtka's goal is a 300-day grazing season, and he's come tantalizingly close to that — 285 days out in the paddocks was his best year thus far. Each day a cow is on the land means fewer days on an off-farm job site for the young farmer.

"I traded my TMR for a no-till drill," he said. "Every day you feed hay, you go backwards. Any day you can graze is better." ◆

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"It can be done," said Alan Kraus of the Tentis family's work to build a farming operation based on healthy soil. (*LSP Photo*)

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A Peek at the Future

Ag's Public Good

When Matt and Seth Tentis began taking over their family's farm in southeastern Minnesota's Wabasha County in 2016, they almost immediately began utilizing soil health practices such as no-till, minimum till, cover cropping, and diverse rotations. They both work fulltime off the farm, and Matt is in the National Guard, so efficient use of time and resources is a key goal for the brothers. A critical component of that transition has been reintegrating livestock onto the farm. The operation has been in the family since 1938, and over the decades has been home to hogs, dairy cows, even turkeys. But starting in 2003, animals were pretty much replaced with row crops.

Utilizing financial and technical support from the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Matt and Seth established a rotational grazing infrastructure on tabletop-flat acres that were formerly row-cropped. Erecting fence around open crop fields raised eyebrows in the neighborhood, especially since a previous generation had worked hard to tear fenceposts out.

"If you grow anything but corn and soybeans here, you're definitely an outlier," said Matt. "For us, it worked better to have a certain amount of cropping land mixed with pasture and have the cattle doing the work."

Today, the Tentises have a 50-cow herd that serves as the basis of their White Barn Acres direct-to-consumer beef enterprise. They also raise sweet corn for a local cannery, as well as soybeans. In addition, in recent years they've experimented with growing camelina, which is an oilseed, and Kernza, which is the world's first commercially viable perennial grain.

White Barn Acres is less than two miles from the Mississippi River, and lies in the heart of southeastern Minnesota's fragile and porous karst geological area. That means building a farm business that is based on good soil health not only benefits two brothers looking for ways to make their operation efficient — it also provides a public good in the form of a reduced reliance on chemical inputs that can contaminate groundwater.

Besides EQIP, the Tentises have used several other government and university programs to put in place soil-friendly practices. During an October field day sponsored by LSP and Clean River Partners, among others, the family described how support from groups like the Land Stewardship Project and research projects like the University of Minnesota's Forever Green initiative have helped them not only get their practices established, but provided them an opportunity to take a chance on experimentation involving something like a perennial grain.

Because of the practices the brothers use, White Barn Acres is a Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certified Farm, which means it qualifies for specially designated technical and financial assistance to implement practices that promote water quality, among other things. Toward the end of the field day, participants walked up the farm's driveway — on one side was a soybean field that had been no-tilled and on the other a cover cropped field planted to a cocktail mix and awaiting fall grazing. The group stopped at the end of the driveway to check out a thriving stand of Kernza. Across the road, a neighbor's field was already plowed black on this day in mid-October.

Alan Kraus, the conservation program manager for Clean River Partners, addressed the crowd as they stood in the Kernza. He pointed out that they had just walked through the kind of farming landscape that should represent the regenerative future of agriculture.

"It can be done — farmers like Matt and Seth are proving it," he said. "And that plowed field across the road — that's what we *don't* want for the future." ❐

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.

For more information on joining, see landstewardshipproject.org/soil-health or contact LSP's Alex Romano (aromano@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-767-9880) or LSP's Maura Curry (mcurry@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-767-9882).

Give it a Listen

On LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast, hear the folks quoted in this article discuss some of the issues they grapple with when building soil health profitably. The podcasts are on the *Ear Dirt* web page: landstewardshipproject.org/ear-dirt.

- ✓ **Episode 325: Return of the Fence** (Matt Tentis)
- ✓ **Episode 324: Good Grass Makes Good Neighbors** (Jeremy Holst)
- ✓ **Episode 323: Rainy Day Fund** (Nathan Vergin)
- ✓ **Episode 321: Buried Knowledge** (Sandy & Lonny Dietz)
- ✓ **Episode 320: Season Stretcher** (Alan Bedtka)
- ✓ **Episode 318: Great Expectations** (Mike Seifert)
- ✓ **Episode 316: Passing on Purity** (David Kleinschmidt)
- ✓ **Episode 314: Going for the Goat** (Jordan Meyer)
- ✓ **Episode 313: Walking & Talking** (Nikki Meyer)
- ✓ **Episode 312: Testing in Nature's Image** (Liz Haney)

Soil Health

Rooting Out Nitrates

Can One County's Approach to Soil & Water Health be a Model of Disruption?

By Brian DeVore

Mark Thein's family has been tapping into Minnesota's aquifers since 1893, and in the southeastern Minnesota region where his well drilling company operates, the cracks, basins, and underground streams that make up its karst geology have long been an excellent source of drinking water. But Thein has noticed a troubling trend the past two decades: wells are increasingly contaminated with nitrates, and the pollution is diving deeper into the earth. This puts him in an awkward position when it comes to balancing the economic and the ecological.

"It's not in my best interest to save the aquifer because there are other aquifers deeper that I can make more money drilling wells to," he says. "But it's not in society's best interest to look the other way. I don't think it's fair to the next generation."

Drilling deeper is a fruitless race against gravity as water, and any pollutants along for the ride, steadily percolate through the fractured rock. Eventually, well drillers like Thein will run out of depths to plumb. As a result, a little over a year ago, he and fellow Olmsted County Commissioner Gregg Wright approached the local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) office and asked a question: how can we prevent nitrates from entering that downward geological escalator in the first place? That conversation has resulted in an innovative program that takes a holistic approach to helping farmers implement a system that not only hangs on to nitrogen better, but is not as reliant on commercial applications of the fertilizer in the first place. A little over a year into its implementation, the Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program (olmsted-soil-health-program-gis-olmsted.hub.arcgis.com) has resulted in thousands of acres of cover crops being planted, as well as land diversified into water- and soil-friendly alternatives such as oats. Farmers have even used the program to convert row cropped land to deep-rooted perennial hay and pasture. The SWCD estimates that as a result of acres enrolled in the program, along with fields utilizing similar practices that aren't officially part of the initiative, over half-a-million pounds of nitrates have been kept out of the area's water.

"Protecting water quality is a perk, but the main reason I'm doing it is to try to be more profitable," says farmer Alan Bedtka of his use of practices supported by the Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program. (*LSP Photo*)

The program is still too new to be considered a game changer that reverses the water quality trends in the region, but it's shown potential for taking a fresh approach to hitting that sweet spot of balancing farmers' profitability with a public good. Could it be a model for similar initiatives in other counties — even statewide or nationally?

"We've paid and we've paid and we've subsidized for the way that farming has gone," says Shona Langseth, a soil conservation technician for the Olmsted County Soil and Water Conservation District. "We're going to have to help transition farmers into the next way of thinking, and we're going to have to be creative about it."

Plugging the Leaks

In a sense, the idea for the Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program has its seed in 2013 — that's when extreme rainstorms flooded area fields, leaving large swaths of corn and soybean fields unplanted. Desperate to keep washed out "prevent plant" fields covered during the growing season, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provided farmers cost-share funds to pay for planting cover crops such as cereal rye. For many of the farmers who took part in this cover crop program, this was the first time they'd had experience growing a non-cash crop on their land as a way to protect soil.

"Before that, nobody believed you could get a cover crop to work in a corn and soybean rotation this far north," recalls Martin Larsen, a conservation technician for the Olmsted SWCD. Larsen used cost-share funds to plant cover crops on his own farm that year, and, like many other farmers, found that it was not only possible to grow cover crops in Minnesota, but that they added numerous benefits to the soil: less erosion, better water management, and a lower reliance on chemical inputs as a result of added fertility and the breaking up of weed cycles. At about that time, news was coming out of North Dakota about how farmers like Gabe Brown were building soil health profitably using a system based on cover crops, no-till, managed rotational grazing, and diverse rotations. In 2015, the Land Stewardship Project's Bridge to Soil Health program was launched out of its southeastern Minnesota office in Lewiston. Through that initiative, the Soil Builders' Network was developed — it now brings together hundreds of farmers in the region to share information on regenerative farming techniques.

This was all occurring as public health experts and other local government officials in Olmsted County became increasingly alarmed by the amount of nitrates that were showing up in water tests. Karst geology is made up of porous limestone that allows surface contaminants to easily make their way into underground aquifers. Nitrates are a particularly troublesome pollutant, given their ability to escape the surface and seep deeper into the earth. High nitrate levels can

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cause a sometimes-fatal condition called "blue baby syndrome," as well as colorectal cancer, thyroid disease, and neural tube defects. The Environmental Protection Agency has set the drinking water standard for nitrate at 10 milligrams per liter, or 10 parts per million. In recent years, research has hinted at serious health problems associated with nitrate levels as low as three parts per million. Recent Minnesota Department of Agriculture testing has shown that over 12% of the private wells tested in southeastern Minnesota exceeded the EPA's drinking water standard. More than 9,000 residents in the state's eight-county karst region were or still are at risk of consuming water at or above the EPA standard, according to a letter the agency released in November 2023. Nitrate pollution has prompted LSP and 10 other groups to demand that government agencies recognize this as an "emergency" situation and take action under the Clean Water Act (*see sidebar on page 25*).

According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 89% of nitrate pollution in southeastern Minnesota comes from commercial fertilizer and manure. Corn requires lots of nitrogen and it's by far the most used fertilizer in the Midwest — Minnesota farmers apply it on 98% of corn acres at a rate of 146 pounds per acre, according to recent USDA data. Nitrogen is leached from soils primarily in the form of nitrate.

Larsen likes to show a graphic comparing the diversity of agriculture between the 1940s and today — plantings that included row crops, small grains, hay, and pasture have been replaced by a duoculture of corn and soybeans. (As a legume, soybeans fix their own nitrogen, but fields planted to the oilseed can still be the source of "legacy" commercial fertilizer that was applied to corn in previous years.)

Analyses from around the world have shown that annual crops take up only about half of the nitrogen applied to the field, "leaving most of the remainder available for loss to the larger environment, including leaching loss to groundwater," according to the journal *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment*.

In addition, large concentrated animal feeding operations, which have become more prevalent in southern Minnesota in recent years, rely on storing and disposing millions of gallons of liquid manure. That manure is full of nitrates and nutrients such as phosphorous, which can make their way into groundwater, as well as surface waters, resulting in fish kills, among other problems.

In 2019-2020, Olmsted County began identifying areas where it may no longer be feasible to construct new wells that are free of nitrate. The county eventually passed rules around how much nitrate could be present in newly drilled wells. It's considered the toughest well ordinance in the state, but it still acknowledges that water in certain areas of the county will continue to see

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"It's not in society's best interest to look the other way."

— Mark Thein

• • •

increasing nitrate levels as the contaminant moves deeper into aquifers due to historic land use practices, including applications of commercial fertilizers and manure. This is particularly troubling considering that when nitrates are present, it's inevitable that other contaminants, such as pesticides, are also polluting the water.

"We're allowing this to happen, but what can we do to prevent this in the first place?" Caitlin Meyer, the water resources coordinator for the Olmsted SWCD says, describing the question that people like Mark Thein were asking.

Cover crops such as cereal rye that are planted in the fall and terminated in the spring build soil health, reduce erosion, and disrupt weed cycles. They also help keep nitrates out of water. (*LSP Photo*)

The answer Larsen and other soil health pioneers from the area gave was: build healthier soil by disrupting the conventional corn-bean-feedlot machine that dominates the current landscape. If we create the kind of year-round root structure that soaks up nitrates, plus become less reliant on continuous plantings of fertilizer-intensive crops like corn, nitrates could be nipped at the surface before they made it underground.

Studies have shown that planting cover crops between the corn/soybean growing seasons provides the kind of soil environment that can cut nitrate leaching by 40% to over 50%. And Olmsted County has local research to back this up. Trials conducted at the SWCD's own Soil Health Research Farm has shown that water beneath soybean plots grown without cover crops had nitrate concentrations that were as much as double the drinking water standard. Cover crops that were allowed to grow at least 12 inches high consistently reduced those levels below the safe drinking water standard.

Thein says that having that kind of practical, firsthand information available convinced him and other commissioners that the nitrate problem could be dealt with at the source, given the right approach. SWCD staff — Larsen, along with Meyer and soil conservation technician Angela White, as well as Skip Langer, the SWCD's conservation manager — provided the commissioners information on what farming practices could reduce nitrate contamination and the practical ways they could be implemented and supported. It didn't hurt that farmers who had worked with the SWCD and LSP on building soil health contacted the commissioners to encourage them to support cover cropping and other practices.

"I think that kind of local information was crucial," says Thein. "I'm a well driller, not a farmer."

Covering the 5 Principles

The overall message provided by SWCD staff and local farmers was that practices that build soil health can make a difference, but that making that transition can be tricky for farmers who have long been incentivized by federal agriculture policy to raise corn and soybeans in a system that's input intensive and that leaves the soil exposed for the majority of the year.

Providing farmers financial assistance to put in a soil building practice is nothing new. The NRCS still provides cost-share funds for seeding cover crops, and EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) helps farmers establish rotational grazing systems, among other soil-friendly practices. Cover cropping assistance is also available through SWCDs, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, and groups like Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Minnesota Soil Health Coalition. According to the latest National Cover Crop Survey, such incentives

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play a key role in getting farmers started on this practice; 49% of the cover crop users who participated in the survey reported receiving some sort of incentive payments for cover crops in 2022, and almost 78% of cover crop non-users said that incentive payments would be helpful.

For a time, the Olmsted County SWCD administered a traditional cover crop assistance program. The SWCD's White says the program was valuable in getting cover cropping established in the region and showing it could work, but it had limitations as far as producing positive environmental benefits. Farmers would often plow the cover crop under early in the spring before it could provide optimal soil health benefits, and they were frustrated with restrictions that controlled seeding rates, for example.

"They did what the program required of them," says White.

The Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program takes a more comprehensive, yet flexible, approach to building healthy soil. For example, the program pays a farmer $55 an acre to grow a cover crop to a minimum height of 12 inches. Farmers can also receive payments for growing so-called alternative crops like oats and other small grains, and for converting row cropped acres to hay and pasture ground. The three main portions of the program — cover crops, alternative crops, and haying/grazing — have as sub-categories "enhancements" that can qualify a farmer for more money. For example, if a farmer allows a cover crop to get to 24 inches, they receive an additional $20 per acre. If they plant their cash crop into a living cover crop, a practice called "planting green," that garners an additional $10 an acre. All told, an individual farm can qualify for a maximum of a little over $15,000 in payments per year.

The payment limit is key — when Olmsted County SWCD staffers originally brainstormed with area farmers about setting up the soil health initiative, a per-farm payment cap of $20,000 to $25,000 was being considered. However, the farmers insisted on a lower cap; that way more money could be spread around on more farms.

Meyer, Larsen, and White say the core question that drove the design of this program was: what farming practices will reduce nitrate pollution in a way that works financially for the farmer? Research shows that allowing cover crops to grow at least 12 inches, for example, helps develop the kind of extensive root system that soaks up wayward nutrients. Converting row-cropped acres to perennial hay and pasture systems and rotating in alternative crops like oats also builds the kind of soil that slashes runoff while reducing the need for a heavy reliance on commercial fertilizer. And rotationally grazing pastures and cover cropped fields spreads animal manure and urine in a manner that it doesn't concentrate in one place and become a hazard to the environment — instead it becomes an input that builds biology.

The program also acknowledges that growing conditions can change in a flash on a farm. If a farmer signs up to grow cover crops to 12 inches and droughty conditions make that seem like not a good idea because they'll compete with cash crops for moisture— as was the case for many farmers this year — they can still get payments if they signed up to grow an alternative crop or to convert a field to haying and grazing.

"We have a total of nine different ways to sign up," says Larsen. "I'm going to do a little bit of grazing — oh, maybe not, I don't have any cattle so I'd like to try small grains. And then I'm going to have these corn and soybean acres that I slip cover crops into. So there's more than one option."

In other words, instead of relying on promoting one or two isolated farming practices, the program attempts to provide farmers an incentive to implement the five principles of soil health that were popularized by soil health pioneers in North Dakota: armor the soil, minimize disturbance, increase plant diversity, keep roots in the soil as long as possible, and integrate livestock.

Creeks, Cash, Connections

Not all participants in the program are going to check all five soil health principle boxes, of course, but the flexibility built into the Olmsted County initiative makes it at least a possibility.

One early morning in late September, Alan Bedtka checks out a stand of sorghum-sudangrass he had planted on his family's farm east of Rochester in June, in the midst of a major drought in the region. Sorghum-sudangrass thrives in dry, hot weather, and this 20-acre field was no exception. Part of the field had been grazed a week or so before, and the sudangrass, along with the cowpeas, millet, sunflower, and buckwheat that had been seeded with it, was green and thriving. Bedtka hadn't added fertilizer to this field in two years, and the ground was sprouting earthworm middens and toad stools, signs of healthy soil activity.

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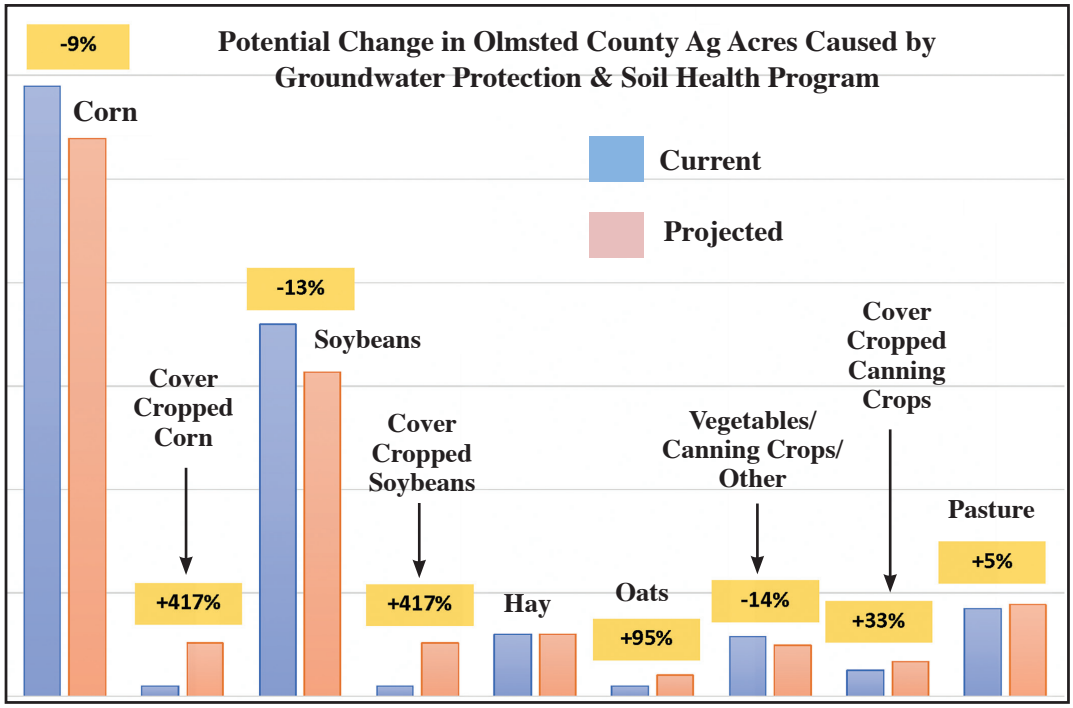

The Olmsted County SWCD has calculated how, if it lives up to its potential, the Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program could impact the make-up of ag acres in the county. (*Source: Olmsted County SWCD*)

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But what the farmer was most happy about was how integrating cover crops into his cash crop system is helping him make money with his cow-calf herd. His family raises field corn, soybeans, and sweet corn, and during the past four years, Bedtka has been growing a diverse mix of cover crops on the row cropped land, which has allowed him to expand how much access to grazing his herd has. In fact, thanks to portable fencing, he is pretty much at his goal of grazing every acre annually.

That's money in the bank — especially in a drought year, hay is expensive, and the farmer feels he's building his soil's natural ability to generate its own biological health, which saves on the fertilizer bill.

Bedtka concedes that 2023 was a tough year to build soil health profitably, given that his area was at one point the epicenter of the worst of the drought that struck Minnesota. But what helped get him through the season was his enrollment in the Olmsted SWCD initiative. In 2023, he participated in the portion of the program that paid him for growing his cover crop to 12 inches before he terminated it. "It was close on one field — it was *exactly* 12 inches on the day we sprayed it," he recalls.

Bedtka also signed up to raise cover crops for seed production, which qualified him for the alternative crop portion of the initiative. Finally, his use of rotational grazing and the growing of forages on formerly row cropped land qualified him for the haying and grazing payment.

The program comes at a time when cover cropping and grazing are creating a kind of synergy between economic viability and environmental health — the farmer is saving money on feed and fertilizer costs while seeing fewer washouts on the local creek.

"Protecting water quality is a perk, but the main reason I'm doing it is to try to be more profitable," says Bedtka. "You're soaking water in better, you're not seeing it pile up and go down the streams. So that means you're growing more grass and more cows per acre. All the benefits are kind of tied up into one."

One of the main goals of the Olmsted County program is to alleviate the risks that farmers face when they adopt a regenerative ag practice. Logan Clark is in the process of converting row cropped ground to rotationally grazed pastures for his cow-calf herd. His land drains into Lynch Creek, a trout stream that flows near the town of Chatfield in the southeastern part of Olmsted County.

"The reason I'm doing all this is because the land is highly erodible," says Clark, adding that the previous owners of his farm had row cropped continuously for several years, leaving the soil in poor shape. "They'd been running it no-till before this, but I don't think it should have been in row crops, regardless."

Clark, who is a graduate of LSP's Farm Beginnings course (*see page 27*) and who teaches high school fulltime, admits he's a "newbie" when it comes to government programs. He enrolled in EQIP to help set up a rotational grazing system, and in 2023 signed up for the Olmsted County nitrate reduction initiative to help cover some of the expense of turning cropland into pasture. However, getting the seeding in late during an unusually dry growing season, coupled with the fact that he grazed the new pasture when it was under stress and he used rye in the mix,which crowded out the grasses, resulted in a poor stand of perennial pasture.

"Lots of hindsight right now," says the farmer. But Clark is still committed to pushing forward with his perennialization plan, and he's learned a few lessons. During such a dry year, he says he would have been better off enrolling some land planted to sorghum-sudangrass. Regardless, the SWCD program payment helped take some of the economic sting out of experimenting.

"I put $6,500 total expenses into seeding — the program paid back $3,500," says the farmer. "So I'd at least be $3,500 more in the hole if I didn't have the program."

A few miles from Clark's operation, Mark Stokes is another farmer whose land abuts a trout stream — Trout Run Creek, in this case. The fact that it helps "keep the dirt out of there" is one reason he's been no-tilling for 26 years, says Stokes. But around five years ago, he noticed that even on his no-till acres he was seeing some erosion, so he started growing cover crops utilizing traditional cost-share programs. He isn't afraid to experiment even within the cover cropping system itself — he's grazed his beef cow herd on a nine-way mix of cover crops he seeded after oats, and a few years ago, after seeing it being done on YouTube, mounted a seeder box on his combine, making it possible to plant cover crops while he's harvesting corn.

Stokes enrolled in the Olmsted SWCD program in 2023 to help cover the risk of yet another practice he uses: planting green. He's glad he had the payment to fall back on. Through the contract, he agreed to plant his corn and soybeans into cereal rye green, and terminate the cover when it was at least 12 inches tall. But the droughty conditions made it a bad year to let a cover crop grow that tall. And then the nitrogen Stokes applied later was soaked up by the rye, setting back his crop further. On the other hand, the food grade oats he raised in 2023 thrived.

"Oats will probably pencil out better than the corn, considering how expensive fertilizer was this last year," says Stokes, who belongs to an oat marketing cooperative Larsen and other farmers formed recently.

So, says the farmer, when he signed up for the Olmsted program for 2024, he took advantage of the program's flexibility. "I signed up for more oats, so we don't have to worry about the cereal rye so much and if we have to, we can terminate it sooner."

Rooting, *see page 26…*

Give it a Listen

LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast episode 326 features Shona Langseth talking about how the Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program could serve as a holistic model for supporting practices that are good for the farmer, the land, and water quality: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-326-rooting-out-nitrates.

In episode 320, farmer Alan Bedtka discusses his use of the program: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-320-season-stretcher.

EPA to State: SE MN Nitrates Need Addressed

In April 2023, the Land Stewardship Project joined 10 other groups in filing a petition calling on the Environmental Protection Agency to use its emergency authority under the Safe Drinking Water Act to address the fact that nitrate contamination is causing "an imminent and substantial endangerment to public health" in the karst region of southeastern Minnesota — Dodge, Fillmore, Goodhue, Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Wabasha, and Winona counties. In response, in early November the EPA requested that the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and the Minnesota Department of Health develop a plan for dealing with the nitrate pollution issue and provide safe drinking water to residents with wells above the maximum contaminant level.

To read the petition and the EPA's letter, see https://bit.ly/LSPnitrate. Check out LSP's blog on this issue at landstewardshipproject.org.

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Truckloads of Disruption

The Olmsted County program was launched as a pilot in 2022, and it soon became clear there was a pent-up demand for such an initiative. For the 2023 growing season, 52 farmers signed up for the cover crop option — more than double what was expected. During the first sign-up, over 5,300 acres of cover cropped land was certified as being allowed to grow to the 12-inch height; 2,700 acres of land was certified at 24 inches. As of early fall 2023, over 70 farmers had signed up to raise cover crops under the program for the 2024 growing season, representing almost 13,000 acres. Farmers signed up to raise over 600 acres of alternative crops such as oats, rye, and sorghum-sudangrass in 2024. Over 200 acres of row cropped fields will be converted to hay ground and pastureland under the program as a result of the most recent sign-up. To be clear, there's over 240,000 acres of cropland in Olmsted County, so the vast majority of the area's farmers aren't participating in this program.

But the water quality benefits of building soil health are not exclusive to acres enrolled in the initiative. Farmers are also implementing practices like cover cropping and rotational grazing on acres that aren't officially signed up under the program, according to SWCD conservation technicians. The agency has estimated that based on how much land was enrolled in the initiative as of fall 2023, roughly 310,000 pounds of nitrogen is being kept out of the region's drinking water. When the SWCD includes its estimates of unenrolled acres farmed using soil building practices, that figure goes up to 560,000 pounds. That's equivalent to 23 semi-truckloads of urea fertilizer.

At the Olmsted County SWCD office in Rochester, Meyer, the water resources coordinator, flashes a color-coded map onto a wall-mounted screen. It shows spots around the county where farmers have signed-up for the program so far: blue for cover crops, green for alternative crops, and orange for haying and grazing. Blue is by far the most prominent color, and with the exception of a few blank spots, cover crops are present in most areas of the county.

"If we could get 30% in our subwatersheds put into cover crops, we'd be making real progress, at least moving the dial on nitrogen," she says. Between the number of acres signed up through the program and the anecdotal evidence of other, non-program fields being managed using soil-friendly practices, one estimate is that some watersheds are approaching the 20% mark of being consistently planted to cover crops. That's a good start, Meyer says.

Larsen then displays a chart showing what kind of acreage changes could occur if the program lives up to its potential: 9% less corn, 13% less soybeans, 417% more cover cropped corn, 95% more oats, 5% more pasture. In short, the corn-soybean system will have been disrupted.

"With those changes in acreage amounts, it could lower the nitrates across all of the county, and not just on ag acres," he says.

"We're allowing this to happen, but what can we do to prevent this in the first place?" is a key question that is asked about nitrate contamination in Olmsted County, says Caitlin Meyer, shown here (*left to right*) with fellow SWCD staffers Angela White, Martin Larsen, and Shona Langseth. (*LSP Photo*)

The program also requires that participants take part in at least one soil health educational program — workshop, field day, etc. — during the life of the contract. That's important — a literature review conduced by the University of Minnesota Water Resources Center found that participation in farmer networks increased the likelihood of adoption of soil-friendly practices.

Larry Cowing raises crops using no-till and cover cropping in southwestern Minnesota's Martin County. He also serves on the local SWCD board, which administers cover crop cost-share funds to farmers. He's heard about the Olmsted program, and likes that it takes a holistic, systems-based approach to promoting soil health while requiring participants to take part in farmer-to-farmer educational events.

"When you go with cover crops there's going to be a little more mental management you have to deal with," he says. "It's kind of a long-term management thing."

Downstream Thinking

Ironically, the Olmsted County Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Program would not exist in its current form if it wasn't for COVID-19. As a result of the pandemic, money was made available to communities throughout the country via the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The Olmsted County Commissioners agreed to set aside $5 million in ARPA funds for the nitrate reduction program. Mark Thein, the commissioner and well driller, realizes that without the ARPA funding, it would have been an extremely tough pitch to his colleagues on the county board when they were asked to vote on budgeting for this program. SWCD staffers estimate that if they spend roughly $1 million a year on the initiative, it will have a five-year lifespan.

"This $5 million is eventually going to be gone," says Thein. "What are we going to do then?"

He hopes a cost-benefit analysis can show that such a proactive program saves the taxpayer money in the end by reducing the need for new drinking water infrastructure to deal with pollutants. It would be ideal, he adds, if the program was successful enough that it prompted the state of Minnesota to create a large-scale version, taking pressure off local governments to fund something like this.

Perhaps the most powerful legacy a program like this can leave is that it creates an atmosphere of success associated with building soil health. Such a positive image can inspire the farming community at large to adopt regenerative practices, whether government payments are available or not. There also needs to be an acknowledgement that pollution does not respect property boundaries, and that change must occur on a landscape-wide level. After all, despite the steps that Alan Bedtka has taken to reduce runoff, a nitrate sample taken from his well recently clocked in at 12 parts per million.

"I don't know if water quality is going to change much just from my management, when you consider all the farmland that feeds into this creek," he says while walking near a small, winding stream that cuts through one of his pastures. At one point, he passes an exposed face of limestone, a reminder of the vulnerable karst geology in the area. "Would all the neighbors upstream have to start doing cover crops and stuff like that to get my well a little better too?" ❐

FB Course Accepting Applications for 2024-2025

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 November 2024 through March 2025.

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 will be available. For more details and to apply, see landstewardshipproject.org/farm-beginnings-class.

Reach out with any specific questions by contacting LSP's Annelie Livingston-Anderson at annelie@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-400-6350. For more information on LSP's Journeyperson course, which can serve as a good follow-up to Farm Beginnings, see landstewardshipproject.org/journeyperson-course or contact Livingston-Anderson.

Is Farming for You?

By the way, if you're trying to figure out if farming is the right career path for you, take part in LSP's Farm Dreams Visioning Exercise at landstewardshipproject.org/farm-dreams-workshop. ❐

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. 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 farmers and 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.

Beginning & Emerging Farmer Funding

During the 2023 session of the Minnesota Legislature, the Land Stewardship Project and its allies won record funding for public programs that support farmers, conservation, and community food systems, among other things. We are now pivoting to the implementation stage to ensure these dollars and programs serve our members, as well as other small and medium-sized farmers, along with processors, farmworkers, processing workers, food businesses, farmers' markets, and local governments, as best as possible.

Below is a listing of a few of the opportunities for beginning and emerging farmers that are available. For a complete listing and details on applying, see landstewardshipproject.org/minnesota-funding-available-2023.

✓ **Farmland Down Payment Assistance Program**

This grant program offers up to $15,000 to qualified farmers purchasing their first farm. The Rural Finance Authority will award these grants using a random lottery process, with preference given to emerging farmers. If you are not an emerging farmer, you may still apply.

✓ **Beginning Farmer Tax Credit**

This program provides annual state tax credits to landlords and sellers (asset owners) who rent or sell farmland, equipment, livestock, and other agricultural assets to beginning farmers. To qualify, the beginning farmer must be enrolled in or have completed an approved farm business management program within 10 years of their first year of farming. LSP's Farm Beginnings class is an approved farm business management program. Beginning farmers are also eligible for a nonrefundable Minnesota tax credit equal to their farm business management program tuition, up to$1,500.

✓ **Emerging Farmer Technical Assistance Grant**

Organizations can apply to this program to provide technical and culturally appropriate services to Minnesota emerging farmers.

A Ticket to Transition

A Fateful Farm Beginnings Meeting Results in a New Era of Dairying

Note: In 2010, the *Land Stewardship Letter* profiled two brothers from southeastern Minnesota— Jim and Al Ideker — who had recently graduated from the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course. Through Farm Beginnings (*see page 27*) and the help of LSP organizer Karen Stettler, they met western Wisconsin farmer Paul Olson, who invited them to his community to take a shot at launching their farming careers. There, they connected with Paul and his wife Judy, along with a network of people who were eager to see two hardworking beginning farmers succeed. The article described the situation as "a network that has brought together established and retiring farmers, lenders, and even another young farmer to help them channel all that energy toward their ultimate goal: the creation of an agricultural enterprise that's sustainable from an economical, environmental, and quality-of-life point of view." (To read the original *Land Stewardship Letter* profile of the Ideker brothers, see landstewardshipproject.org/wp-content/uploads/Ideker.pdf.)

When Stettler recently touched base with the Idekers and Olsons, she learned that a lot had changed since 2010, and that in fact that network of support had paid off. What had started as a way to give two beginning farmers — Jim was 22 and Al was 21 at the time — a leg-up has turned into a full-blown farm business transition. In 2014, the brothers bought 60 acres of the Olsons' land and erected a dairy barn with a twin-eight herringbone parlor. The Olsons — Paul is 72 and Judy is 68 — retired from dairying in 2015 and sold their herd, plus some machinery and buildings, to the Idekers. The low-interest machinery contract between the Idekers and Olsons was paid off during the summer of 2022, and the cattle sale was completed later that year.

In addition, Jim and his wife, Cassie, now own the Olsons' 15,000-hen organic egg production facility. The brothers rent 700 acres of crop and pasture ground from 15 landowners, and have purchased roughly 300 acres of their own. All of the land was originally certified organic by the Olsons or other farmers in the area.

This summer, *Land Stewardship Letter* editor Brian DeVore stopped by the Olson farm. While Judy, Paul, Jim, and Al sat around the kitchen table, they shared a few reflections on their transition journey.

On a muggy day in August, dairy farmer Jim Ideker walks over to his pickup truck, reaches in through the open window and snags a well-worn piece of paper from the sun visor. He shows it off like it was a winning lottery ticket. In a sense, since Paul Olson handed him and his brother, Al, this business card a decade-and-a-half ago, it *has* served as a prized path to the future. After all, it set in motion a chain of events that culminated in the Idekers standing here on their own western Wisconsin farm on this particular day, a farm where they milk their 230-cow organic herd and raise feed on some 1,000 acres.

But this isn't a story about dumb luck and a chance meeting. After all, wannabe farmers and established farmers looking for successors cross paths all the time, with many of those encounters leading nowhere. What sets the Ideker-Olson relationship apart are numerous factors, some controllable, some less so: timing, community support, economics, positive interpersonal connections, and, perhaps most important of all, flexibility on the part of both parties.

First Impressions

When Paul Olson first connected with the Ideker brothers through the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course, he was impressed with two things: first, that the brothers were taking a course that focuses on the goal setting, marketing, and financial skills needed to establish a successful farm business. At the core of the course are presentations made by established farmers, and that was what brought Olson to the class that was held in 2007-2008 in La Crosse, Wis.

He was also impressed with the brothers on a deeper level. Although the Idekers didn't grow up on a farm, they had worked on various dairy operations near the family home in southeastern Minnesota.

"To be honest, I think the first time I met them I knew they had it in their gut that they wanted to farm," Olson recalls. "You catch on to that real quick. We've had a lot of help around here over the years, and none of them were of the caliber that they could step in and take over, and I felt these guys had it from day one."

And the brothers brought to the table different areas of strength — Al is a good herdsman and knows how to handle livestock, while Jim is sharp with the financial aspects of farming.

"There are so many people who are good herdsman, but they don't have the business acumen," says Jim. "The next one has the good business acumen, but he doesn't know the head from a tail of a cow. Finding someone with that balance, that's hard."

Good Timing

When Paul invited the Idekers to western Wisconsin's Jackson County to help milk his 75-cow organic herd, he was, and still is, president of National Farmers, a responsibility that takes him away from the farm frequently. Paul was 59 at the time, and his wife, Judy, was a few years younger. None of their three children were showing an interest in farming, and the Olsons noticed that many of the other dairy farmers in the community were getting older and didn't necessarily have successors identified. Although the Olsons knew they would be dairying for several more years, they saw in the Idekers a chance to begin planning an exit strategy they knew would not happen overnight. If they waited until they were closer to retirement age to begin bringing someone on, they might not have someone like the Idekers available to step in.

Timing can make or break a successful farm transition. Without it, there are a lot of missed connections.

"You don't have to have perfect agreement on everything," says Jim. "But the older generation has to be willing to step aside, and the younger generation has to be willing to put forth the effort."

Al says good timing played to their favor in another way: interest rates were relatively low and milk prices were relatively high.

"If we were four years, five years later, in getting started, we would be in a world of hurt," he says.

But even when all the financial and infrastructural issues are taken care of, there are still the emotional factors to deal with, something all the planning in the world can't prepare a retiring farmer for. Paul and Judy milked cows together for 45 years and went organic in 2003. By the time they retired, they were milking 80 cows.

"I still miss the cows," says Judy. "It's bittersweet going in the barn. That last day of milking was hard."

Ticket, *see page 29…*

…Ticket, *from page 28*

It Takes a Community

The work ethic and skill sets the Idekers were equipped with gave Paul and Judy the confidence to rent them a house while they began milking other farmers' cows in the neighborhood. By 2010, the Idekers were milking on three different farms and were starting to build their own herd utilizing the seed provided by an interest-free livestock loan offered through Farm Beginnings. The Olsons eventually gave them access to land, equipment, and feed at a low cost. Perhaps most importantly, they connected the brothers to a community network.

Farm Beginnings has long promoted the idea that a key piece in beginning farmer success is to tap into a community network. The Idekers are the living embodiment of how that networking can pay off.

They benefited greatly from the Olsons' giving them generous terms on things like the contract for machinery payments, access to facilities, even feed costs. However, for big investments, such as building a new dairy barn and buying land, the brothers needed outside financing.

The Olsons introduced them to the local bank, which had experience working with dairy farmers, and organic dairy farmers specifically. In fact, the bank's ag lender had seen how methods like managed rotational grazing worked well in that part of Wisconsin through successful dealings with Matt Fendry, another Farm Beginnings graduate and organic dairy farmer who had settled in the community. In addition, the late Paul Dettloff, who at one time was the staff veterinarian for the organic dairy cooperative Organic Valley, sat on the bank's board of directors.

Jim (*left*) and Al Ideker, shown here with Judy and Paul Olson. "The older generation has to be willing to step aside, and the younger generation has to be willing to put forth the effort," says Jim. (*LSP Photo*)

Paul Olson says having a good relationship with a local lender who understands the positive role small and medium-sized farms can play in the community is priceless.

"You need a bank that will work with you, give you some flexibility, that understands what you're going through," he says.

Training to Fall Back On

The brothers, who are now in their mid-30s, feel they are "over the hump" when it comes to dairy farming. They now sell to Organic Valley, are building up assets, and are done with major investments like buildings. These days, they're focused on making smaller tweaks to, for example, the way they raise organic crops and rotationally graze their herd. That makes sense, given that feed costs can be the most volatile aspect of livestock production, particularly at a time when extreme weather and disrupted supply chains play havoc with operating a farm.

A big part of the Farm Beginnings course is training in Holistic Management, which is based on the idea that when planning and setting goals for an agricultural enterprise, a farmer's quality-of-life, the health of the community, and environmental sustainabilty are at the same level of importance as economic viability.

Ticket, *see page 30…*

LSP Winter Farm Transition Workshop Series Set

Are you a farmland owner or retiring farmer looking to transition ownership or rent out your farmland in ways that reflect your values? In February and March, the Land Stewardship Project is hosting an online holistic Farm Transition Planning Course designed to help participants act on their conservation and social values. Six 2 ½ hour sessions will bring professionals, farmers, and LSP staff together to dig into values, goals, and communication strategies, as well as generational, financial, legal, and long-term care considerations.

The dates and times for the course are:

- ➔ Feb. 1: **Goal Setting for Life & Land**
- ➔ Feb. 8: **Financial Considerations**
- ➔ Feb. 15: **Legal Considerations**
- ➔ Feb. 22: **Working with Next Generation Farmers**
- ➔ Feb. 29: **Long Term Care Considerations**
- ➔ March 7: **Resources and Planning Next Steps**

For details and to register, see landstewardshipproject.org/transition-course or contact LSP's Karen Stettler at stettler@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-767-9885.

…Ticket, *from page 29*

The brothers concede that in their first years as farmers, they didn't pay much attention to holistic planning — they were too busy "just surviving."

"We were milking 50 or 60 cows and well, you can't hire somebody at that size," Al recalls. "It takes two people to do it, so you're just always there. But we couldn't have made it another two years that way, no way."

Today, the brothers have an employee and are able to take turns with the milking, giving each other time away from chores and the farm. In fact, the Idekers say they can now take enough of a breather that planning for the future is possible. A decade-and-a-half after they took Farm Beginnings, holistic planning is coming in handy.

"Now that you have the option to live more, you can set your goals according to what you want out of life," says Jim. "You have the option to implement the things that were taught in Farm Beginnings."

Paul says he's glad to hear the Idekers are taking a look at what life offers beyond the farm. Farming, especially dairy farming, can be a seven-days-a-week commitment, but one needs to learn how to take the foot off the gas once in awhile.

"You need to get away some of the time," says the retired farmer.

Al, who is married to Maria and has four young children, agrees.

"Because if not, you'll be 70-years-old and what did you do your whole life? Well, worked to get all this stuff," he says.

Holistic planning has also helped the brothers focus on what they can control while ignoring what's out of their grasp. For example, in 2017 and 2018, organic dairy farmers were getting paid $34 a hundredweight for their milk.

"We haven't cracked $30 in the last four years and our costs have gone up 30% to 40%," says Jim. "So what are you going to do? We're not going to spend a lot of time and energy on things that are out of our control. But we can do all the little things to get more milk — adjusting rations, figuring out how to feed more efficiently. Accept things you can't change, work on things you can."

Al adds that holistic planning is not just about adopting changes that make the farm business more sustainable — personal wellbeing must be considered as well. Sometimes small changes can have outsized impacts, like when the brothers added a special tool on the skid steer loader to better manage the sand the cows lay on in the barn. Before that adjustment, the brothers used to hand rake 200 stalls twice-a-day by hand.

"The last five years we've changed so much stuff it's ridiculous. When you're young, you're kind of stupid," says Al. "You say, 'I'll just put my back into it.' "

"And I wonder why my back hurts?" Paul adds with a laugh.

Keeping the Connection

The brothers have found that having Paul and Judy as sounding boards has been invaluable as they work on the thousand little ways to keep from making costly, irreversible mistakes. The older couple has seen it all: high interest rates, devastating droughts, sick cows, rock bottom milk prices.

"Every situation is a little unique. There is no cookie-cutter deal when it comes to transitioning," says Paul Olson. (*LSP Photo*)

"I remember once it was the first of September and we were going to try some fall seeding but didn't know what to do," recalls Jim. "It was a five-minute conversation with Paul and Judy, but it saved us from dumping $2,000 worth of alfalfa seeding on the ground."

Getting advice from the older generation is critical, but beginning farmers also have to be aware that times change, and what worked in the '70s doesn't make sense today. When the Idekers first started out, they were certain they could make a fulltime living with a 75-cow organic herd. After all, the Olsons were making a go of it with 80 cows, and other farmers in the area were successfully managing herds that averaged less that 100 cows.

But the brothers say today a herd of 230 cows provides them with enough income to support both their families, while allowing them to hire an employee, thus giving them time off. They are also fortunate, thanks to the Olsons, to have access to enough certified organic land to feed that size of a herd. And when they built their barn, it wasn't that much more of an investment to make it for 200 cows, rather than 100.

Right now, they are happy with their size from an economic and quality-of-life point of view. But that doesn't mean they have to always be satisfied with exactly how milk is produced from that herd. That's why constantly tweaking and innovating around the little things is so key.

"You can never really get comfortable," says Al. "It's the nature of the beast."

The Future of the Future

As the Idekers head into what they call the "middle part" of their farming career, and the Olsons look back on a long, fulfilling, life in dairying, the question is raised: what would you tell a beginning farmer today about the prospects in dairying? After all, consolidation, closed creameries, extreme weather, competition for land and, of course, low milk prices, offer up some significant challenges.

"It would totally depend on their age. If they were young, I'd be like, 'You want to work into our operation?' " Jim says with a laugh. "If they were young and fired up, I would say, 'You have got to find *exactly* the right situation. Don't settle for a long shot. Look for a person who can give you a deal on the farm, or a really long land contract."

"And those people are out there. We found that," says Al.

For their part, Paul and Judy are fully aware times are tough in farming, but they have been in the past as well. For a beginning farmer, they recommend finding a place like Jackson County, where prime corn and soybean ground is less prevalent, and thus land is more affordable. For both the retiring farmer and the beginning farmer trying to negotiate a transition, finding someone you can have a good personal relationship with is just as important as figuring out things from the business side of the equation.

"Keep an open mind. Have some give and take. Every situation is a little unique," Paul says, adding that the earlier a farmer can start planning a transition, the better. "There is no cookie-cutter deal when it comes to transitioning. It all depends on the situation, the given time, the people, everything involved."

That last statement resonates with Jim. "I've been thinking about and anticipating where you are at now," he says, pointing at Paul and Judy. "Because retirement's coming and it's not that far away for us." ❐

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

◆ Jessica Chamblin has 3 acres (2 pastured) available to buy in ***Wisconsin's Pierce County, near Bay City***. There are two fenced poultry pastures, two fenced goat/alpaca pastures, 22 raised garden beds, beehives, a new vineyard, and a new fruit orchard. There is a berm house that is all on one level, plus an oversized two-car garage. The asking price is $295,000. Contact: Jessica Chamblin, jnj021918@gmail.com.

◆ Bill Hjort is looking for a farmer to buy roughly 100 acres (65 tillable) in ***east-central Minnesota's Isanti County***. There is a large pole shed with electricity and the house has three bedrooms. At least 9 tillable acres have been fallow for over 20 years, so it would be eligible for organic production. The asking price is $1 million. Contact: Bill Hjort, 320-267-2105.

◆ Allison Teeney is looking for a farmer to rent her 8-acre farm (5 tillable, 2 forest, 1 other) near ***Canton, in Minnesota's Fillmore County***. The land has not been sprayed. Teeney is willing to discuss ideas or options a renter may be considering. There is an old pole barn (that needs major work) but no house. Contact: Allison Teeney, therarestfarmer@gmail.com.

◆ Farm Beginnings graduates are looking to sell a 17-acre farm set up for vegetable production and with basic grazing infrastructure near ***Stockholm Wis., and Lake Pepin***. The property has a solar array and an open garage outbuilding with poured concrete floor used as a pack shed. There are hoop houses and other farm equipment they would like to sell with the property. There is a house with satellite internet. Contact: Sammie Ardito Rivera, sinfronterastc@gmail.com.

◆ Ed Lysne has 8 acres of land for sale, including a house and small detached garage, near ***Northfield, Minn***. Five acres are tillable and 3 acres are pasture. Contact: Ed Lysne, 612-790-7873, edriclysne@gmail.com.

◆ Timothy Burdick is seeking a buyer for his 46-acre farm (forest, pasture, and tillable) in ***Big Stone County, near Ortonville, Minn***. The land has mostly been used for pasture for cattle and horses; however, 1-2 acres tillable would be available for gardening. Burdick would consider selling the entire 46 acres or selling 10 acres and the buildings. The land has not been sprayed. Contact: Timothy Burdick, 320-808-0175, kburdic@gmail.com.

Seeking Farmland

◆ Matthew Schadt is seeking farmland to rent in ***Wisconsin***. No housing is necessary but grain bins or sheds in good condition would be beneficial. Contact: Matthew Schadt, 920-285-8593, schadtmatthew@gmail.com.

◆ A young couple is looking for a farmer interested in transitioning their farm to the next generation. They are interested in most types of farming and would ideally like to find something in ***southeastern Minnesota*** or ***western Wisconsin***. They come from farming backgrounds and currently rent 60 acres and rotationally graze beef cows. Contact: Ernie Weissing, 507-993-5873, norseman870@gmail.com.

◆ Carly McAndrews is seeking 10-40 acres of certified organic farmland in ***Iowa***. If there is not a house already, there would need to be a place to build one. Contact: Carly McAndrews, 203-668-1278, trowelander-rorfarm@gmail.com.

◆ Kevin Sauer is seeking 60 acres of land in ***Iowa***. He would like 8 tillable acres, 12 pastured acres, and 40 forested acres. An equipment barn would be a plus, but a house is not needed. Contact: Kevin Sauer, 501-952-3735, loveyourneighborfarm@gmail.com.

◆ Jessica Davis is seeking pastureland and a house to rent in ***Iowa***. Contact: Jessica Davis, 661-917-8902, jessicabasham188@gmail.com.

◆ Taylor Olsen is seeking pastured, tillable, and forested land to buy in ***Minnesota***. No housing is required. Contact: Taylor Olsen, 801-696-8390, taylor.olsen19@gmail.com.

Seeking Farmer

◆ Emily Macdonald wants to transfer her farmland, infrastructure, and equipment to next-generation farmers who share her stewardship values. This would be through a lease-to-own or other long-term arrangement. She has an 80-acre farm in ***Berrien County, Mich***. The farm consists of 27 tillable, 14 pasture, 18 woodland, 10 wetland, and 11 additional acres. There is a barn and a farm store with freezers. There is fencing and a livestock watering system. Housing is not available. Contact: Emily Macdonald, 269-697-0063, greenfieldgrazing@gmail.com.

Resources for Retiring & Beginning Farmers

A farm is a deeply personal thing. It is a home, a business, a living ecosystem, a way of life. It can also be an investment in the future of agriculture. When family members develop a farm transition plan, they can shape the values and stewardship that will be carried out on that land, and potentially give new farmers an opportunity to get started.

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 Land Stewardship Project transition resources, see landstewardshipproject.org/land-transition-tools, or contact LSP's Karen Stettler at stettler@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-767-9480. ❐

Conservation Leases Toolkit

The Land Stewardship Project's "Conservation Leases Toolkit" includes fact sheets, sample leases, and other resources for farmers as well as non-operating landowners who are interested in developing rental arrangements that build soil and ensure stewardship of the land in the long-term.

Check it out at landstewardshipproject.org/conservation-leases or contact LSP's Robin Moore at rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org, 320-269-2105.

Reviews

Land
How the Quest for Ownership Shaped the Modern World

By Simon Winchester
446 pages
HarperCollins Publishers
harpercollins.com

Bet the Farm
The Dollars and Sense of Growing Food in America

By Beth Hoffman
259 pages
Island Press
islandpress.org/books/bet-farm

Reviewed by Brian DeVore

I'm not sure I'd recommend this, but I recently read two books back-to-back that represent extreme ends of the spectrum when it comes to the issue of land, that most critical of agricultural resources. First, I ploughed through Simon Winchester's impressively thorough *Land: How the Hunger for Ownership Shaped the Modern World*. The title says it all: this is a comprehensive look at how land — our desire to own it, control it, and manipulate it — has set human history on a certain course, not all of it good. Decisions made and models developed decades or even centuries ago are having dire economic, ecological, and social repercussions today. That's the macro side of the land picture.

After making my way through all 446 pages of Winchester's tome, I went for a more granular examination of land and its impact on people and the communities they live in. Beth Hoffman's *Bet the Farm: The Dollars and Sense of Growing Food in America*, tells the story of how one family's efforts to be rooted in Iowa soil helps explain the challenges American farmers in general face in developing operations that are economically and ecologically sustainable, as well as good places to live.

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"We can move ahead only by creating a new future, not by replicating a nonexistent path."

— Beth Hoffman

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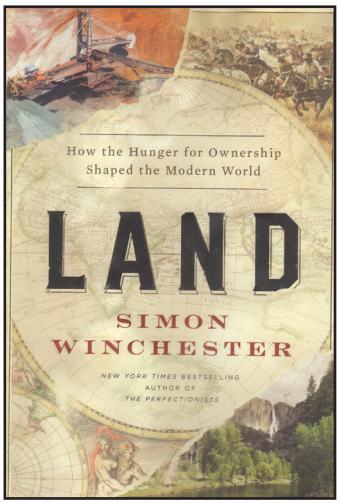
Taken together, these books provide insights into how we're long overdue to reshape our relationship with the land — not only how we treat it and what we expect from it, but how we see ownership itself.

Winchester begins at, well, the beginning. The idea of land that's something that should be owned is inseparable from the concept of "settled agriculture" — raising our food in one place rather than wandering the landscape as hunter-gatherers. By around 4,000 years ago, for many humans the landscape became no longer simply a place to traverse — it was a stable location to live and work on for years, even generations.

"And with this…so came the start of the demarcation of land. The establishment of its boundaries. And the realization of the importance of knowing its boundaries. And the realization of the importance of knowing how one man's land is made identifiably separate from another," writes Winchester.



Just as the invention of railroad schedules suddenly made the concept of time important, farms and placing boundaries around them helped make ownership the powerful force it is today. As Winchester documents, land ownership drives economics, politics, family relations, race relations, even how communities are developed.

After a prologue that ties the birth of agriculture to the birth of land ownership, Winchester, a globetrotting journalist who clearly enjoys introducing readers to far corners of the planet, spends the rest of the book creating a travelogue of sorts, one that jumps around from Scotland and New Zealand to India and Zimbabwe. Each country profile is meant to convey our complicated relationship with terra firma and how it impacts society today. Reading the author's deep history of Israel and Palestine and the role land plays in their fraught relationship is particularly relevant at a time when war wages in that part of the world. Spoiler alert: boundaries created by bureaucrats long ago are at the heart of that very complicated conflict.

Winchester is British by birth, but he has purchased land in New England because of his own self-proclaimed desire to be rooted in one place. He's been a resident of the U.S. long enough to have good insights into not only how this country's economy was built on stealing land from Indigenous tribes, but how such a model of nation building is nothing new. The story of how New Zealand's Maori farmers were robbed of their land rights and denied development grants given freely to their white counterparts will resonate with anyone familiar with how BIPOC farmers have been discriminated against repeatedly in this country.

Winchester reports on examples of nations, communities, and individuals attempting to fix our dysfunctional relationship with land. On the country-level, places like New Zealand are attempting to make things right with people who were forced off their homelands in previous times. On the community level, Winchester describes the use of land trusts to put ownership in the hands of the many. On an individual level, the author touches on how wealthy landowners in England are "rewilding" their estates by allowing natural habitat to take hold and thrive. These are interesting stories, but leave one with a sense of disparate activities going on across the globe, with no overall ethic steeped in ecological or economic justice binding them together. That's too bad, because the stakes are being raised. Toward the end of his book, Winchester describes how the assumption that "land is the only thing on this earth that lasts" is no longer true; climate change and pollution are altering that assumption at an alarming rate. Will land's vulnerability to being lost, and the impact that will have on everything from food production to people's quality-of-life, alter our relationship with it?

There's little doubt Beth Hoffman's relationship to the land has been altered over the past few years. When, in 2019, she moved from San Francisco to a 530-acre farm in south-central Iowa, she was seeking a connection to the soil she had never had growing up in New Jersey. *Bet the Farm* is an entertaining and thought-provoking look at one family's struggle to make that connection economically and ecologically viable, as well as something that is sustainable from a quality-of-life

Land, *see page 33…*

…Land, *from page 32*

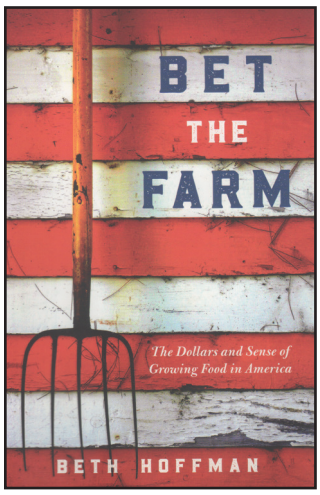
point of view.

Like many people, Hoffman came to be on the land through a family connection — her husband, John, grew up on that farm and it's been in the Hogeland family for five generations. From the outset, Hoffman admits that as a journalist who had written about agriculture extensively, she thought she knew a lot about farming. She didn't, and so she brings an outsider's point of view to the day-to-day machinations of running an agricultural business.

Beth and John are dedicated to converting this mostly conventional farm into a regenerative operation that produces grass-based livestock and consists of diversified cropping systems. In short, they want to heal the land while being good members of the community. But this is no romanticized story of city slickers coming to rural America and falling in love with the sights, smells, and earthy people while a Netflix film crew follows them around. Hoffman intersperses passages on how she and John grapple with nuts-and-bolts tasks such as converting row cropped land to rotationally grazed pasture with in-depth, journalistic analyses of how farm policy and economic forces make it so difficult to do things like convert row cropped land to rotationally grazed pasture.

As I dived deeper into the book, I found myself appreciating Hoffman's ability to balance just how excited she and John were to be starting their own farm with the realities of the situation.

"Our farm would become an ecological nirvana with many different enterprises all working together but owned separately, creating jobs for many people along the way," Hoffman writes at one point. She follows up with, "The vision was ridiculously idealistic…right now there were more urgent things to attend to than our fantasies of an ecologically and ethnically diverse farm, the end of racism in agriculture, and questions about the semantics of the term 'family farm.' "



In many ways, Hoffman is less of a romantic about farming than her husband. This clear-eyed vision is particularly useful as the couple struggles with transitioning the farm from John's father, Leroy. As with many transitions within families, this one was hampered by the fear of change and good old-fashioned parent-child dynamics. They finally had a breakthrough when Beth, John, his sister Andrea, and Leroy met with Dave Baker at the Beginning Farmer Center in Ames, Iowa. Hoffman had learned of the Center as a journalist, and it turned out that meeting was the perfect way to get over the barrier the two generations were up against. Just as the Land Stewardship Project has discovered through our farm transitions work (*see page 29*), having a third (neutral) party enter the planning process can be invaluable.

I would recommend that anyone interested in farming —whether they are "returning" to family land or are a complete newbie to agriculture — read this book. It's far from a step-by-step guide on how to be a successful, regenerative producer of food. Many of the questions — big and small — that Hoffman asks remain unanswered by the end of the final chapter. However, it's worth the read *because* of the questions she asks, such as, if regenerative farming is so good for society and the planet, why do regenerative farmers face so many more economic and policy-based challenges when compared to their conventional counterparts?

The book is also worthwhile for a message that's threaded throughout, one that Hoffman sums up towards the end when she makes it clear many of us live under a delusion that there was a "time before" when all farmers grew healthy food, were self-reliant, and lived "simple, happy lives."

"We can move ahead only by creating a new future, not by replicating a nonexistent path," she writes.

Read Simon Winchester's book if you want a deep look at our historical relationship to land and agriculture. Check out Beth Hoffman's writing if you want a glimpse at what questions need answered if we are to escape that past. ❒

Brian DeVore is the editor of the Land Stewardship Letter.

Jesus for Farmers and Fishers

Justice for All Those Marginalized by Our Food System

By Gary Paul Nabhan
204 pages
Broadleaf Books
garynabhan.com/books

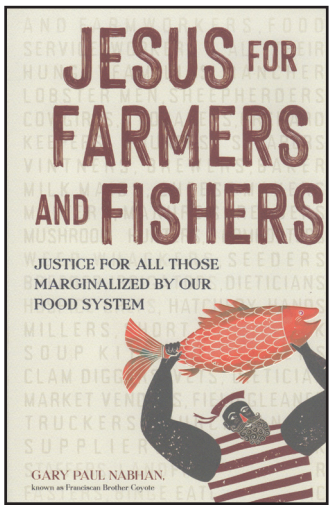
Reviewed by Dale Hadler

Drawing on his experience as an ethnobotanist, local food advocate, Franciscan Ecumenical Brother, and Arab-American, Gary Paul Nabhan argues that Jesus was a strong advocate for the agrarian people of first century Roman Palestine, and by extension, would be right at home advocating for the people who work in our modern food system.

The author accomplishes this by retelling the parables and stories of Jesus's life, emphasizing the social justice message of these accounts, especially as they relate to the "farmers and fishers" of his day. Like food and farm workers of today, their ancient counterparts faced dangerous working conditions, economic marginalization, and discrimination.

Nabhan proposes that those farmers and fishers were subjected to "colonial forces" that are much like the forces impacting today's "essential workers." The dominant forces of ancient times may have been religious and imperial in nature, and today's forces may be corporate, but in both cases the people in control benefit from the dangers those working the land and waters are exposed to.

After all, when Jesus tossed the "money changers" out of the temple, he wasn't enraged at the merchants making money that day, but at the larger powers who profited most from the toil of others.



The author says studying Jesus's parables isn't just a way to "soothe" and "placate" people about the problems they face.

"Rather than merely raging against the machine, Jesus offered game-changing principles that he sensed could avert further conflict and help people retain their dignity," writes Nabhan, adding, "He focused more upon strengthening a sense of justice, dignity, hope, and resilience through stories that continue to have staying power centuries after they were first told." ❒

LSP member Dale Hadler lives in Winona, Minn.

The 2023 Twin Cities Cookout & Potluck: No Major Milestones, Just a Really Nice Time

By Elizabeth Makarewicz

Some of our most beloved events take on a life of their own — we look back fondly on formative moments that led to lifelong friendships, career changes, or even great ideas transformed into lasting policy. However, under the scrutiny of the cold, hard facts, our perception of these events may turn out to be bigger than life.

Such is often the case with the annual Twin Cities Cookout and Potluck. To the hardworking Land Stewardship Project staff and volunteers who put this event on, every year feels like the *Best Year Ever*. Surely we raised more money than ever in 2009 thanks to an especially lively silent auction? Or broke an attendance record in 2022 with our 40th Anniversary celebrations?!

As the lead organizer for the Cookout, each year, I've dutifully updated the number qualifier ahead of the Cookout's title, starting in 2018 with the "17th Annual Twin Cities Cookout & Potluck." Having skipped the event in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic, simple math would make 2023 our 20th Cookout, right?

The truth is, I may be guilty of false advertising. I started writing this article as a 20-year retrospective. Since I knew the first Cookout predated my time at LSP, I enlisted the help of LSP managing editor and unofficial historian, Brian DeVore, to confirm the year of the first Cookout. Turns out, the earliest evidence Brian could find of the Cookout is 2004. Which makes the 2023 Cookout a not unimpressive, but somewhat less noteworthy, 17th event.

Why the long-winded Myth Busters: Cookout Edition? Hopefully, to remind us all (myself included) that LSP's work is so much more than a number can communicate. Whether it be our 40th year organizing, or our 41st, every year is a good year to celebrate our commitment to keeping the land and people together.

Nonetheless, 2023 was an historic year of organizing, and the Cookout on Thursday, July 27, at LSP's Minneapolis office, was a refreshing reminder of all we've accomplished. Once again, Twin Cities members and allies came together around a shared love of community, good food, and an inspiring message.

From picnic blankets and tables dotted across LSP's office building yard, attendees heard from a slate of inspiring speakers who shared varying perspectives on LSP's work. To kick things off, board chair Beth Slocum welcomed LSP's new executive director, Scott Elkins. Just a month or so into the job, Scott was eager, but perhaps a tad nervous, about representing LSP at one of the organization's signature events. Nerves appeared to be brushed aside as Scott thoughtfully gave attendees a glimpse of his background and path to LSP. "Food with dignity" is the phrase he used to describe his ethos on food systems work, and he recognized the many ways that LSP has represented that perspective in its pursuit of policies and programs that support the well-being of people and the planet.

The mic was then passed on to steadfast LSP ally and accomplished organizer, Minnesota State Senator Erin Murphy. Senator Murphy exuded her mantra, "The politics of joy," as she described the ways her background in organizing has contributed to her success as a legislator. First a nurse, and always an organizer, Senator Murphy understands deeply how human health and the health of our planet are intertwined, which happened to be the perfect theme to connect with the next speaker.

Queen Frye, an urban farmer and educator, smoothly transitioned the program to a personal story of growth and change through LSP's Farm Beginnings course (*see page 27*). Deeply concerned about the health disparities experienced in her community because of environmental racism, in 2019 Queen and her partner, Michael Kuykindall, founded the urban farm and nonprofit organization, R. Roots Garden, in North Minneapolis. The pair grow loads of delicious vegetables on vacant lots, all while connecting with neighbors and providing apprenticeship opportunities for local youth. Along the way, Queen and Michael have learned a great deal by finding community with other farmers, both urban and rural, near and far, and have especially appreciated the structure and mentorship provided by Farm Beginnings. Queen wrapped up the program with a hopeful nod to the future of LSP's work, and a call to LSP leaders and all present to deepen their commitment to unraveling the structural inequities that prevent neighborhoods like North Minneapolis from enjoying full health and prosperity.

A pressing reminder of the challenging work ahead hung over this year's Cookout: climate change. July 27 was a representative sample of the summer as a whole — record-breaking heat that led to a heat advisory for the day, and it hadn't rained in weeks. Attendance was lower than usual, and a few precautionary measures were in place to help attendees beat the heat, including a sprinkler hose that was much enjoyed by the youngest attendees.

Despite the unfavorable conditions, 161 LSP members and supporters showed up, won some pies, danced along to some groovy tunes by the Brass Messengers, adapted to the heat, and had a nice time. The LSP community,

This was the 17th time people gathered for LSP's Twin Cities Cookout and Potluck. (*LSP Photo*)

Cookout, *see page 35…*

…Cookout, *from page 34*

as evidenced by the 2023 Cookout, is hopeful and clear-eyed about the work ahead, and as anyone who was there might tell you, it was probably the best Twin Cities Cookout and Potluck ever. ❒

LSP membership support specialist Elizabeth Makarewicz can be reached at emakarewicz@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-400-6354.

Participants in LSP's 2023 Cookout and Potluck dined on local food, connected with each other, bid on pies, and had a chance to purchase local items via a silent auction. (*LSP Photo*)

Membership Questions?

If you have questions about your Land Stewardship Project membership, contact LSP's 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?

Has your address changed or do you anticipate moving in the next few months? Take a moment to update your address with LSP so that you can continue receiving the *Land Stewardship Letter*, event invitations, and other updates. To update your address, see landstewardshipproject.org/address. Make sure you use the same e-mail address you have on file with LSP so your data updates correctly.

Volunteer for LSP

It's a stone cold fact: the Land Stewardship Project literally could not fulfill its mission without volunteers. Volunteers help us do everything from stuff envelopes and make telephone calls to enter data and set up logistics for meetings. Remote opportunities are available.

To volunteer, fill out the form at landstewardshipproject.org/volunteer-for-lsp or contact Clara Sanders at csanders@landstewardshipproject.org, 612-400-6340.

Planned Giving to LSP

Since 1982, the Land Stewardship Project has been a leading advocate for family farms and sustainable agriculture. LSP is striving to create rural landscapes with more just and sustainable communities, healthy soil, and clean air and water. LSP's work for stewardship of the land begins with people. As a membership organization, LSP relies on the engagement, leadership, and support of its members to advance long-term care of the land, thriving family farms, and healthy rural communities.

Including the Land Stewardship Project in your estate creates a lasting gift that will help keep the land and people together for years to come. Legacy gifts of land, bequests, stock shares, a donor-advised fund, IRA distributions, or other planned gifts have a direct impact on the work and provide a lasting tribute to your values. If you have questions about making a planned gift to LSP, contact Josh Journey-Heinz by calling 612-400-6347 or via e-mail at jjourney-heinz@landstewardshipproject.org. ❒

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 and Wendell Fletcher

In Honor of Karen Stettler
- Ryan Batalden

In Memory of Mary Wagner
- Bill Moore

In Memory of Sherry Christiansen
- Brian DeVore

In Honor of Farm Ancestors
- A Crane

In Honor of Hardworking LSP Staff
- Dayna Burtness Nyugen

In Memory of Paul Loecher
- Elene Loecher

In Honor of Farmworkers & Robin, Elizabeth & all the Powerful LSP Women
- Erika Thorne

In Honor of Amanda Koehler
- Mary Voight

In Memory of John P. Hynes
- Patrick Ciernia

In Honor of Laura & Adam Cullip
- The Prairie Drifters

To donate to LSP in the name of someone, contact Clara Sanders at 612-400-6340 or csanders@landstewardshipproject.org. Donations can be made online at landstewardshipproject.org/join.

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Stewardship Calendar

➔ *WINTER* — **LSP Workshop Season Begins** (*see landstewardshipproject.org/upcoming-events*)

➔ *FEB. 1* — **LSP Holistic Farm Transition Planning Course — Goal Setting for Life & Land** (*see page 29*)

➔ *FEB. 8* — **LSP Holistic Farm Transition Planning Course — Financial Considerations** (*see page 29*)

➔ *FEB. 12* — **2024 Session of the Minnesota Legislature Convenes** (*see page 10*)

➔ *FEB. 15* — **LSP Holistic Farm Transition Planning Course — Legal Considerations** (*see page 29*)

➔ *FEB. 22* — **LSP Holistic Farm Transition Planning Course — Working with Next Generation Farmers** (*see page 29*)

➔ *FEB. 22-24* — **Marbleseed Organic Farming Conference**, La Crosse, Wis. Contact: marbleseed.org/events/organic-farming-conference

➔ *FEB. 29* — **LSP Holistic Farm Transition Planning Course — Long Term Care Considerations** (*see page 29*)

➔ *MARCH 7* — **LSP Holistic Farm Transition Planning Course — Resources & Planning Next Steps** (*see page 29*)

➔ *MARCH 7* — **LSP Family Farm Breakfast & Lobby Day**, Saint Paul, Minn. (*see page 10*)

➔ *MAY 20* — **2024 Session of the Minnesota Legislature Adjourns** (*see page 10*)

➔ *SPRING* — **LSP Field Day Season Begins** (*see landstewardshipproject.org/upcoming-events*)

Latest LSP Events:
landstewardshipproject.org/upcoming-events

Order Your LSP '40 Years' Book

During the Land Stewardship Project's four-decade history, we've always emphasized the power of sharing our stories. To mark that legacy, we've pulled together member recollections of LSP's impact on people, the land, and our communities. These stories are featured in a commemorative 40th Anniversary publication that's available through our online store.

To order a copy of *Making Change From The Ground Up: 40 Stories for 40 Years of Land Stewardship Project*, see landstewardshipproject.org/shop. You can also order a copy over the telephone at 612-722-6377.

• • •

"I've seen how LSP, instead of telling people, helped people and continues to help people hear their own voices and listen to each other. I think that's one of the essential things that's overlooked, and it takes time. It takes time to listen to each other."

— Bonita Underbakke, from *Making Change From The Ground Up*

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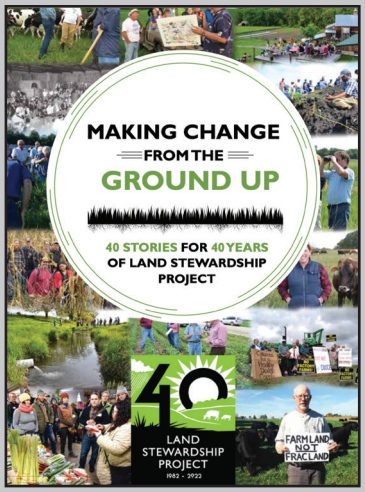

Go Public With Your LSP Support

There are numerous fun ways you can show your support publicly for the Land Stewardship Project. LSP has available for purchase t-shirts, caps, window decals, bandanas, tote bags, 8 x 10 metal barn signs, and the classic "Let's Stop Treating Our Soil Like Dirt" bumper stickers. Order any of these items today at landstewardshipproject.org/shop or by calling LSP at 612-722-6377.

Cap

Bumper Sticker

Metal Barn Sign