

Land Stewardship Project Wrap-up of the 2008 Session of the Minnesota Legislature

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The 2008 Minnesota Legislative session adjourned on May 18. Land Stewardship Project (LSP) members made a difference during the session promoting policies that help family farmers and stewardship of our land. And as always, we were vigilant on the issue of local democracy and township rights and defeated attempts to weaken these powers. Below is an overview of our key work during the session.

Livestock Improvement Grants will Work for Family Farmers & Sustainable Agriculture

A family-sized livestock operation can accomplish a lot with \$4,000—renovate several acres of pasture or retrofit a milking parlor, for example. But a proposal before the 2008 Minnesota Legislature would have originally required farmers to spend \$40,000 before they could qualify for a program that would provide grants for improvement of livestock operations. The grant would be equal to 10 percent of the value of the improvements made, with a cap of \$500,000. Thus, a farmer spending \$40,000 on improvements would be eligible for a \$4,000 grant.

Such a high threshold, says LSP Policy Program organizer and livestock farmer Paul Sobocinski, would have put this program out of reach for many family farmers in Minnesota. Plus, since the program is first-come, first-served, the \$40,000 threshold would have drained the program's \$1 million budget, quickly limiting the program to 250 producers at a maximum.

“Having a high threshold puts small- and medium-sized farms, including those that are organic and sustainable, at a competitive disadvantage to large-scale livestock operations,” says Sobocinski.

That's why LSP worked at the Legislature to lower the Livestock Improvement Grant Program's qualifying expenditure amount from \$40,000 to \$4,000. In addition, LSP was successful in making pasture improvements such as fencing, water lines and animal lane construction eligible for the grant program. On the House side, Rep. Aaron Peterson and Rep. Bud Heidgerken were instrumental in working with LSP to make this change. On the Senate side, Sen. Gary Kubly, Sen. Sharon Erickson Ropes and Sen. Dan Skogen were leaders in making this program more family farmer friendly.

Work on the Livestock Improvement Grant Program is an example of how LSP farmer-members were able to provide information to legislators that showed the benefits sustainable production systems can provide at relatively low cost. For example, University of Minnesota dairy scientist Dennis Johnson drafted a letter detailing how far just a few thousand dollars would go on a livestock grazing operation, while pasture farmers Dave and Florence Minar presented information on how investment in sustainable farming systems can help the local community. Both Johnson and the Minars are members of LSP's State Policy Committee.

This work is in keeping with LSP's State Policy Platform position: "State incentives should give equal treatment to family farmers, including those who are using sustainable and organic systems. Tax credits, grant programs and payment incentives for farmers should give equitable treatment to family farmers and sustainable farming practices....The state must be careful to ensure that incentives are not tilted towards the largest producers, thus creating an uneven playing field."

ATTENTION LSP LIVESTOCK FARMER-MEMBERS: All Minnesota livestock farmers that make improvements in their operations valued at more than \$4,000 will be eligible for the Livestock Improvement Grant Program equal to 10 percent of the improvement. There is a \$500,000 cap on eligible expenditures. For example a livestock farmer making \$8,500 in improvements would be eligible for an \$850 grant. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture will be developing the criteria and application form this summer. The program will be first-come, first-served, so submitting applications in a timely manner is key. Contact LSP's Bobby King at 612-722-6377 to be kept up-to-date on the Livestock Improvement Grant Program.

Efforts to Move Bioenergy Beyond Row Crops Fails with no Funding for Reinvest in Minnesota-Clean Energy

Unfortunately, decision makers at the Minnesota Capitol weren't as responsive to public needs when it came to creating an infrastructure of sustainable biofuels production. Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM)-Clean Energy, is an initiative that would pay farmers to grow native perennials such as prairie grass for bioenergy. Moving biofuel production beyond row crops such as corn and soybeans is essential to addressing soil erosion, lowering carbon emissions and increasing net energy efficiency.

RIM-Clean Energy, which was supported by LSP, along with 46 other conservation, wildlife and environmental groups, was authorized by the 2007 Minnesota Legislature. The mechanics of RIM-Clean Energy, which included a tiered system that tied increased plant diversity to higher payment amounts, were developed by this coalition during the summer of 2007. However, RIM-Clean Energy needed funding in 2008 to get it off the ground. LSP and the other groups sought \$46 million in bonding funds, which would provide for approximately 13,000 acres of native perennials on farmland.

Sen. Ellen Anderson, Chair of the Minnesota Senate's Environment and Natural Resources Finance Committee, was an ardent supporter of the proposal. Early in the session, her committee recommended \$25 million in bonding. Unfortunately, Gov. Tim Pawlenty recommended only \$3.3 million, and the House of Representatives provided no funding. In the end, RIM-Clean Energy received no money.

However, biofuels from row crops got a boost when the Legislature passed and Gov. Pawlenty later signed into law a mandate that the amount of biofuels included in diesel fuel increase from 2 percent to 20 percent by 2015. Soybeans are the primary source of biodiesel.

LSP State Policy organizer Bobby King says the decision on the part of the Legislature and the Governor to increase the biodiesel mandate while zeroing out RIM-Clean Energy was

particularly troubling given that biofuel demand is already increasing the planting of row crops on highly erodible land.

“We didn’t take any real steps to move beyond row crops as sources of biofuel,” he says. “In fact, we passed a biodiesel mandate that will increase the focus on row crops even more. You’ve got to create incentives for the kind of agriculture you want. We could have had RIM-Clean Energy on the ground this year and perennial crops being planted for bioenergy, but without incentives —like the ones corn- and soybean-based biofuels are getting—this will not happen.”

Efforts to Undermine Local Control & Township Rights Fail

During the 2008 session, LSP worked with other groups such as the Minnesota Association of Townships and Minnesota Farmers Union to ward off attempts to weaken local control in the state. One proposal pushed by development interests would have weakened the power of local governments to enact interim ordinances when unanticipated development projects such as factory farms, housing subdivisions or big box stores like Wal-Mart are proposed in a community. Interim ordinances allow local governments to put a temporary hold on proposed development while a community takes stock and assesses what planning and zoning is needed to protect the area’s quality of life. The proposed bill would have changed the law so that merely submitting a completed application for a permit exempted the proposal from being stopped by the interim ordinance

King says such changes would have severely limited the rights of local citizens when they are caught off-guard by unanticipated and potentially harmful development.

“The problem is often the first time a township hears about one of these developments is when its proposers apply for a permit, so such a change in the law would put local residents at a huge disadvantage,” says King.

LSP state policy committee member Alan Perish of Browerville in Todd County traveled to the Capitol to testify in opposition to the bill. Perish has been a township officer for over 20 years. Rep. Ken Tschumper, Vice-Chair of the Local Government Committee, worked with Committee Chair Rep. Debra Hilstrom to ensure that the bill was tabled and Rep. Hilstrom instructed the bill’s backers to work with the townships and LSP to find a compromise that addresses concerns about weakening local control. Rep. Larry Hosch, the bill’s author, also expressed strong interest in addressing concerns.

Sen. Steve Dille revived his efforts to pass a bill from last session that would undermine township rights. As introduced, Senate File 1402 attempted to press local units of government into adopting the “State’s Livestock Production Policy.” The bill also dictated to counties and townships how they must go about preserving farmland and open spaces.

“The Livestock Production Policy was created by Senator Dille in 2004 to promote more livestock, not more family farms,” says Sobosincki. “And preserving farmland and open space is critical for rural Minnesota, but detailed requirements imposed by the state are not the appropriate way to address a complicated problem that varies from one area of the state to the next.”

Under pressure from LSP, the Minnesota Association of Townships, the Association of Minnesota Counties and Minnesota Farmers Union, the bill was amended to take out any reference to the “State Livestock Policy,” as well as any language that undermined township and county rights. The bill did create a task force to look at the issue of preserving farmland. LSP will be watching to see that the task force’s recommendations don’t negatively affect local control.

“We need to address the issue of preserving farmland, along with the issue of access to farmland, especially for beginning farmers, so this task force could provide some good ideas,” says Sobocinski. “LSP is willing to work with Senator Dille and other key legislators on this issue, but protecting farmland and open spaces does not mean weakening local control.”

For more information on LSP’s state policy work, e-mail Bobby King at bking@landstewardshipproject.org, or Paul Sobocinski at sobopaul@redred.com. More information is also available by calling LSP’s Policy and Organizing Program at 612-722-6377.

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