



**LAND  
STEWARDSHIP  
PROJECT**

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April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Dear Chair Vang and Members of the House Agriculture Finance and Policy Committee,

Today, I am writing on behalf of Land Stewardship Project's (LSP) 4,500 member households made up of farmers, rural, urban, and suburban members in support of Rep Pursell's soil health bill HF4989 and with a few suggestions. The Land Stewardship Project's mission is to foster an ethic of stewardship for farmland, promote sustainable agriculture, and develop healthy communities. Some of the Land Stewardship Project's greatest priorities are keeping small and mid-sized farmers on the land, growing the number of farmers stewarding the land, and advancing adoption of sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices.

LSP supports the creation of a clean water, climate-smart and soil healthy farming account to go toward creating a soil health program that incentivizes farmers to introduce new practices like cover cropping, perennial cropping and no-till or strip-till among more soil health practices to their operation. Utilizing the fertilizer tonnage fee for soil health programming that can have a direct, beneficial impact on our landscapes, improve water quality and reduce the need for inputs is a smart and appropriate use of this fee to support our farmers.

This bill takes inspiration from the popular Olmsted County Soil Health Pilot Program, housed within their Soil and Water Conservation District, which has successfully and measurably reduced the amount of synthetic fertilizer applied and a decrease in nitrate levels in ground water. It has saved farmers money on input costs and provided technical assistance to introduce new practices such as managed rotational grazing and the introduction of a third crop rotation of oats. There is a menu of practices farmers can choose from to implement what works best in their context and operation as also laid out in this bill. Providing flexibility is important and at the same time, the stacking of practices like cover cropping and no-till provides the greatest water and climate benefit and LSP would like to see the stacking of practices continue to ensure this program has the intended outcomes for both water quality and soil health. Though, in clause two there are practices like perennial cropping and managed rotational grazing that typically are not compatible with no-till and cover cropping given the management system is based on perennials. These practices still have great soil health benefits and should be considered for payment.

Focusing this pilot program on the counties in the vulnerable southeast karst region is a strategic step to grow this type of programming in areas of highest need in terms of improving water quality. Ensuring soil-healthy practices are profitable from day one, with direct payments to farmers in February and the rest of the payment after certifying practices and taking a results-based approach will have the greatest return for our ecosystems. Part of what made the Olmsted program so successful, for example, is additional payments to farmers once confirmed that their

cover crops were at least 12 inches or 24 inches high. We recommend including measurable criteria such as cover crop height directly to bill.

Regarding exploring a carbon credit program at the state level, we encourage legislators to expand what economic models can be explored to sustain this type of program with stable funding, such as ecosystem services framework or other alternative models beyond carbon markets.

With this type of program and investment, Minnesota's countryside can be abundant with perennial pastures, perennial cropping systems, cover cropping systems, no-till, and additional soil health practices. When we steward healthy soil, we are cultivating vibrant and resilient rural, urban, and suburban communities and economies. We cultivate thriving and resilient land that soaks up rain and sequesters carbon, while fostering healthy ecosystems with clean water and a sustainable climate for microorganisms, wildlife, and people. Yet, Minnesota's farmers are facing compounding challenges of extreme weather, financial crisis, and degrading topsoil. All Minnesotans depend on having a sustainable and just farm and food system – which requires public investment in farming that provides a public good.

Thank you to Rep. Pursell for your work on soil health and ensuring Minnesota is leading in investing in our farmers and collective resilience and look forward to working with you and the committee to advance these initiatives.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Laura Schreiber". The signature is written in a cursive style and is contained within a thin black rectangular border.

Laura Schreiber

Policy Organizer

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