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March 18<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 (24-07701). 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 is a smart investment into Minnesota's producers and landscapes.

The program laid out within this bill takes inspiration from the popular Olmsted County Soil Health Program, housed within their Soil and Water Conservation District, which has successfully and measurably reduced the amount of synthetic fertilizer applied, saving farmers money on input costs and provided technical assistance to introduce new practices such as managed rotational grazing and introducing a third crop rotation of oats. There is a whole menu of practices for farmers to choose farm to implement what works best in their context and operation as also laid out in this bill.

The state-wide soil healthy farming goals included in this bill are modeled after a farmer-built proposal first introduced in the 2021 session, this language would establish state-wide soil healthy farming goals that clean our water, improve our landscapes resilience and with the attached program provide the financial incentives and technical assistance to help farmers reach this goal. Currently, states like Indiana and Maryland have over 50% of their farmland in soil-healthy practices, while Minnesota is only at about 5% according to the MN Office of Soil

Health (MOSH). This goal would signal to our farmers that we are serious in supporting their work to scale up soil-health practices, increase emphasis of our public institutions on soil health, and signal to the federal government and country that we are ready to be national leaders on soil health.

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 highest need in terms of improving water quality. By ensuring soil-healthy practices are profitable from day one, with direct payments to farmers and ensuring a stacking of practices this will have the greater return for our ecosystems and appreciate the results-based approach of ensuring acres are verified to be in compliance.

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,



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