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Representative Rick Hansen
Representative Amy Wazlawik
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Representative Todd Lippert
Representative Josh Heintzeman

May 12, 2022

Dear Omnibus Environment & Natural Resources Conference Committee:

As the Conference Committee convenes to consider differences in the House and Senate versions of the Environment & Natural Resources Bill (H.F. 4492 or S.F. 4062), we wanted you to know Land Stewardship Project's priorities.

SUPPORT House Position: \$5 million to Accelerate the Adoption of Soil Health Practices
(Side by Side Page R19 Article 1, House Lines 17.4 to 17.8)

By ensuring soil-healthy practices are profitable from day one, 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. Minnesota has an opportunity invest in rural resiliency, capture federal dollars, and makes us a national and international soil health leader.

SUPPORT House Position: \$180,000 to Develop a Soil Health Action Plan
(Side by Side Page R24 Article 1, House Lines 23.28 to 24.13)

Our soils are one of Minnesota's greatest resources and is also the most at risk. We are seeing greater degradation, erosion and nutrients being stripped away from our soils with increased nitrogen pollution to our watersheds. Creating a state-wide soil health action plan will bring together relevant state agencies, stakeholders, and related organizations to work together with farmers to develop a plan to increase adoption of soil health practices that will ensure we protect and enhance our soils for generations to come.

SUPPORT House Position: Establish Voluntary State-Wide Soil Health Goals

(Side by Side Page R70 Article 2 House Lines 46.6 to 46.13)

Setting voluntary benchmarks for our state with state-wide soil health goals sets a measuring guideline for how we are making progress as a state to implement practices that will build and protect our soils, clean our water and create more resiliency and diversity on the land. Initiating voluntary goals will encourage better tracking and data collection for where our state is currently at and provide benchmarks for how are we using our working lands to meet our climate goals.

SUPPORT House Position: \$10 million for Incentives for the Conservation Reserve Program

(Side by Side Page R19 Article 1, House Lines 17.15 to 18.3)

With thousands of acres (if not tens of thousands of acres) coming out of conservation contracts in Minnesota, it is more important than ever to ensure that there are motivating payments and incentives to enroll land in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP allows landowners to allow their land to rest and provide countless ecosystem services without losing a paycheck. Without addressing this issue now, there will be major impacts on our soil, water, and climate from conservation land being converted back into cropland.

SUPPORT House Position: \$5 million for the Lawns to Legumes Program

(Side by Side Page R20 Article 1, House Lines 18.4 to 18.8)

Building the health of our soil and stewarding our pollinator populations is up to all of us – not just farmers. The Lawns to Legumes program educates the public on critical pollinator and wildlife habitat issues while ensuring more landowners have the resources they need to implement such habitat. It is clear that the demand is much greater than the existing available resources and our state should take advantage of our historic budget to invest in this important program.

SUPPORT House Position: Steward our Pollinator Populations

(Side by Side Page R56, 83, 102 Article 2)

Our farm and food system depend on our pollinator populations. Pollinating organisms are needed to produce seeds for forage crops like alfalfa, meaning our livestock farmers are particularly vulnerable to dwindling pollinator populations. Farmers will be unable to feed our communities or provide economic benefits to our state without stewarding the health of our pollinators. Neonicotinoids, commonly found in pesticides, pose a threat to Minnesota's pollinators. Plastic coated fertilizer and pesticides pose a threat to the health of humans and wildlife. The House proposals includes language that would protect our pollinators and water.

SUPPORT House Position & OPPOSE Senate Position: Strengthen Transparency & Public Participation in Environmental Review & Permitting

While the House has included provisions that would strengthen environmental justice, transparency, and public participation in our state agencies and environmental review and permitting processes, the Senate has included provisions that would favor corporate interests while stifling public participation in such processes.

For example, the House has proposed a definition of environmental justice, a directive to identify environmental justice areas, and a requirement to consider cumulative impacts of industrial projects in

the environmental review and permitting processes – which we strongly support. Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income communities, many of which are rural, face a disproportionate amount of pollution and climate change impacts.

On the other hand, the Senate has proposed to limit petitions for environmental review to residents of the county or adjacent county where a project is proposed – which we strongly oppose. All Minnesotans and our air, water, land, and climate are interconnected. Pollution nor economic impacts do not stay within geopolitical boundaries and have the potential to impact Minnesotans across the state. Communities downwind and downstream of proposed projects, especially in the unique karst region in Southeast Minnesota, could be barred from petitioning for the environmental review of projects that have the potential to detrimentally harm them. Additionally, each Minnesotan has a vested interest in the health of each county in Minnesota. This provision would prevent Minnesotans from making their voices heard and weaken public participation in our environmental review and permitting processes, benefitting industrial proposers at the expense of the rest of us.

OPPOSE Senate Position: Protect Public Waters

The Department of Natural Resources has and should remain to have the authority to determine and amend which waters are “public” and “private” based on statutory definitions. There are already processes in place to appeal these decisions. Weakening this authority risks public waters that our farmers, rural communities, and wildlife depend on.

OPPOSE Senate Position: Prioritize Residents & Small and Mid-Sized Farms in Water Appropriation

Favoring large industrial users over small and mid-sized independent farmers and residents by changing water appropriation permitting, while our state faces more and more frequent extreme droughts is inequitable and unfair. Our state should put the public interest above corporate interests, especially in the use of public resources.

OPPOSE Senate Position: Continue Basic Environmental Protections

Again, it is our state’s responsibility to put the public interest above corporate interests and ensure that our communities and ecosystems are healthy. We strongly oppose weakening basic environmental protections that Minnesotans and our environment depend. For example, the Senate is proposing prohibiting agencies from enforcing unadopted rules, making changes to the state’s Clean Water Act implementation plan, and giving industrial polluters 16 years to comply with Clean Water Act standards.

We look forward to working with you to finalize an Environment & Natural Resources budget and policies that makes our farm and food system and rural communities more resilient, healthy, and just for farmers, rural Minnesotans, and our economy.

Thank you,

Laura Schreiber

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cc:

The Honorable Tim Walz, Governor of Minnesota

The Honorable Peggy Flanagan, Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota

Senator Jeremy Miller, Majority Leader of the Minnesota Senate

Representative Melissa Hortman, Speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives

Executive Director John Jaschke, Board of Water & Soil Resources

Commissioner Katrina Kessler, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

Commissioner Thom Petersen, Minnesota Department of Agriculture