

Proudly Standing with Family Farmers

Welcome, friends! We are so glad you are here with us to celebrate FLAG's 25 years of serving family farmers and their communities. What an extraordinary journey it has been thus far. From those dark days of the 1980s, when credit was the dominant issue, to today, when farmers struggle to stay afloat in this fragile economy and in the very complex world of agriculture, we have stood with family farmers.

This work—like farm work in some ways—is rarely glamorous. A typical day in the life of a FLAG attorney can range from sitting at a desk and reading regulations or case law, to drafting an article or a chapter of a book, to working with a farmer to gather records to apply for a federal insurance or loan program, to examining zoning regulations, to talking to farmers in crisis who contact our office every day.

But the importance of legal work on behalf of family farmers can't be overstated. I think of the friend and hero from Missouri we lost this year, Dale Reesman. He got a phone call one Christmas Eve about the Allison family, whose electricity was being cut off by FmHA. Dale said to his wife, "Someone has to help these people." He made some calls, put on his coat, and went out to the farm. He studied the arcane regulations, filed the administrative appeals, and fought for the Allisons in court. Dale won, setting the precedent for the national class action to come. That commitment and the strength of his legal knowledge made a difference—not just to one farm family, but to many.

The commitment to bring top-notch, independent legal analysis and intellectual firepower to bear on behalf of family farmers has not wavered in FLAG's 25 years, and it has made a difference to so many. For instance, FLAG's team of attorneys, armed with FLAG's comprehensive *Farmers' Guide to Disaster Assistance*, toured the southern states to bring critical information to the farmers in those states that were so devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and who desperately needed help to recover.

FLAG's commitment to family farmers also has led us to new and different work we certainly could not have foreseen in 1986—like the Hmong American farmers in Minnesota who were threatened by a neighbor with a loaded shotgun. Terrified, and speaking no English, they called Ly Vang, the Executive Director of the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota. Her first call was to 911; her second call was to FLAG. FLAG attorneys went into action, advocating for felony charges, extra police patrols, conducting community outreach, conducting a culturally tailored mediation process, and obtaining a civil restraining order that will keep all 45 of the Hmong American farmers safe on that land for years to come.

Over the decades, FLAG stood with family farmers as they weathered dramatic changes in agriculture: intense consolidation of industries with certain markets decimated; increasing vertical integration of the hog industry; the industrialization of many segments of agriculture; the seeming inevitability of natural disasters; the birth of organic standards; and the resurgence of interest in good, healthy food and its ethical production. We stood with hog farmers and our partners challenging the pork checkoff, taking the fight to the Supreme Court. We fought for equity in the USDA credit programs that are supposed to assist family farmers. We stood alongside our partners who fought persistent race discrimination within USDA, and we testified before Congress about that discrimination. We continue to help minority farmers as they seek some measure of justice through USDA's settlement of all of the class action discrimination lawsuits that had been pending for years.

We don't always—or even usually—win those battles. But in this time of polarization and widening gaps in agriculture between those who are thriving and those who are not, they are battles worth fighting. For, despite all that troubles farm families these days, it's also true that there is a rising recognition in this country of both the importance of their contributions and the dangers of corporate control of agriculture.

We see a lot of new farmers on the land these days, and it is critically important that these passionate and committed individuals receive the support they need so that their operations can be profitable and their numbers can grow. We will continue to stand with America's newest family farmers—young, passionate farmers, and immigrant farmers who bring with them long agrarian traditions.

In the next 25 years, FLAG will continue, every day, to fight for social, economic, and racial justice for all of America's family farmers. They deserve nothing less, and we are so proud to stand with them.

Susan E. Stokes

Executive Director