



2024 ANNUAL REPORT

MISSION

The Land Connection trains farmers in resilient, restorative farming techniques; informs the public about the sources of our food and why that matters; and works to protect and enhance farmland so that we, and generations to come, will have clean air and water, fertile soil, and healthy, delicious food.

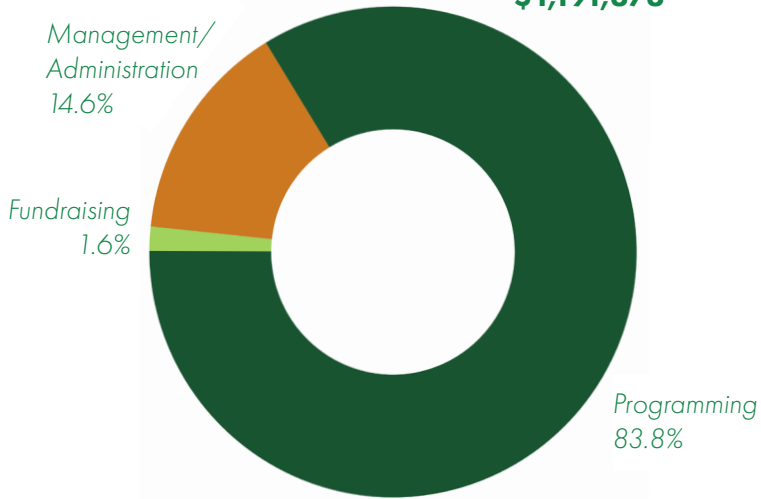
VISION

The Land Connection envisions community-based food systems in which every farmer has the opportunity to grow food in a sustainable manner, and every person can access local and organic foods.



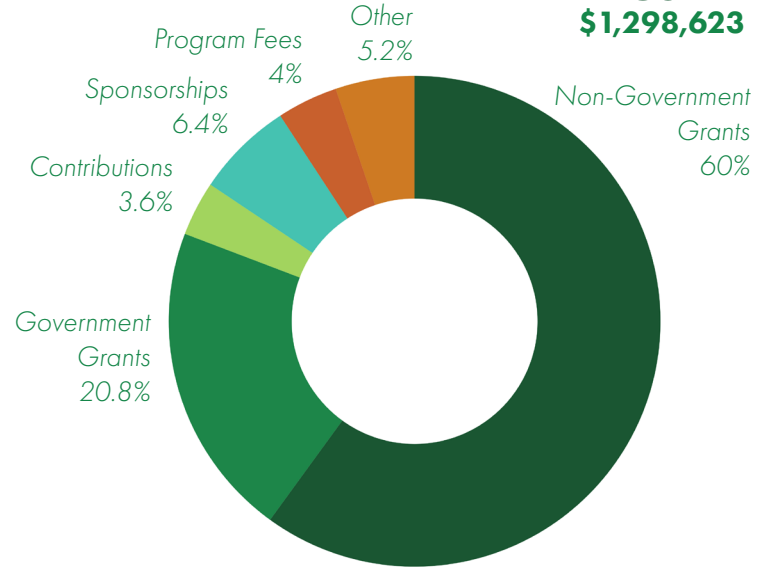
2024 FINANCIALS

EXPENSES \$1,191,878



Funds spent directly supporting local food and farm businesses and nonprofits: **\$176,028.42**

INCOME \$1,298,623



We are proud to invest in our local food and farming economy because we know that nearly 70% of the funds we spend on local businesses stay in our community.

WHAT WE DO

The Land Connection works at the intersection of farms, food, and communities. Our goal is a more just and resilient local food and farm system for Illinois, from soil to supper plate. To achieve this, we provide local farmers, landowners, food businesses, and consumers with the education and resources they need to play an active, vital role in Illinois' local food and farm system.

Our work focuses on:

- **Farmer Training** – Helping farmers build resilient, viable businesses through hands-on education and support.
- **Farmland Access** – Ensuring the next generation of farmers can find and secure farmland to grow their business.
- **Food Access** – Expanding food budgets and food choices in our communities, while supporting local producers.
- **Consumer Education** – Inspiring people to purchase more locally grown, raised, and produced foods.





FARM VIABILITY REPORT

In early 2024, we brought Ken Meter from Crossroads Resource Center (author of Building Community Food Webs), to conduct interviews with Illinois farmers. The goal of the project was to determine how organizations like The Land Connection could improve farm viability.

Ken's road trip took him to northern, central, and southern Illinois, where he spoke with farmers from 16 operations that currently or formerly produced food for Illinois consumers.

Farmers identified several key elements for their success:

- Access to land and capital
- Direct sales to household customers
- Determination
- Supportive infrastructure and services

Other important strategies were off-farm income, prior wealth, prior farm ownership, investments or loans from customers, living simply, building one's own infrastructure, and grant funding.

After Ken completed his report, we shared it with farmers and industry professionals around Illinois, encouraging everyone to consider these findings as they continue developing services for farmers.

At The Land Connection, we're already applying Ken's findings. We launched a new granting program for farmers focused on production and contracted services, giving farmers the resources needed to support meaningful quality of life improvements and strengthen the long-term viability of their business.



***"Farming at its core
should be about trust
and generosity."
-Interview Participant***

FOOD ACCESS

Access to food is a basic human right.

At The Land Connection, we believe access to food is a basic human right.

To make local food more affordable and accessible, we offer programs like Link Up Illinois, NeighborFood Bucks, and WIC and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program Match. These tools don't just stretch food dollars, though; they help ensure people can shop with dignity, choice, and autonomy.

Through grant funding from partners, we are able to double and triple the value of federal nutrition benefits at farmers markets. We also offer

a no-questions-asked option for individuals who may not qualify for federal assistance but still face hunger.

As federal support for food assistance programs like SNAP (formerly food stamps) is under threat, our work becomes even more essential. Local solutions, rooted in community partnerships and trust, are a powerful way to protect access and promote resilience in uncertain times. Will you help ensure our neighbors have access to nutritious food?



CHAMPAIGN - URBANA
WINTER FARMERS MARKET
PRESENTED BY THE CHAMPAIGN FARMERS MARKET

Champaign
Farmers Market

2024

BY THE NUMBERS:

- 11 sites offering nutrition assistance programs
- \$68,139 distributed in Link match
- \$18,970 distributed in WIC/ Senior Farmers Market match
- \$870 distributed in NeighborFood Bucks
- 600 Kids Kits distributed
- 196,000 shoppers at program farmers markets

Help ensure all people have access to
fresh, nutritious local foods.



WHAT'S A KIDS KIT?

Kids Kits are fun, ready-to-go recipe kits we hand out at the last farmers market of each month. They are designed to get kids excited about fresh, local food. Because we all know that every big change often starts with small hands.

The program began during the pandemic, when on-site activities at the market were paused due to health restrictions. We wanted to keep families engaged and give them something hands-on to enjoy at home. So, we created a kit with a simple, kid-friendly recipe and all the ingredients needed to make it.

In 2024, we distributed 600 Kids Kits through Champaign-Urbana farmers markets. Some popular recipes included Very Berry Muffins, Sweet Potato Parmesan Tots, Sunny Summer Salad, and Ratatouille. All-time Kids Kits favorites among families? The Massaged Kale Salad and PB Energy Bites!

Many families tell us they've returned to the market to buy more ingredients so they can remake the recipes at home. To us, that means mission accomplished.

Want to try a recipe yourself?

Visit thelandconnection.org/kids-kits/ to explore more!





A woman with glasses and a colorful floral shirt is smiling and holding a glass bowl filled with a colorful fruit salad. She is standing next to a young girl who is also smiling and holding the bowl. The kitchen has wooden cabinets and a purple wall. In the background, there is a sink with a sign that says "HANDWASHING SINK ONLY" and a bottle of hand sanitizer. On the counter in the foreground, there is a large metal pot with a wooden spoon, a whisk, a yellow container, and a bottle of honey.

A young girl in a grey t-shirt with "NIGHTS NETBALL" written on it is smiling and holding a glass bowl filled with a colorful fruit salad. She is standing next to a woman who is also smiling and holding the bowl. The kitchen has wooden cabinets and a purple wall. In the background, there is a sink with a sign that says "HANDWASHING SINK ONLY" and a bottle of hand sanitizer. On the counter in the foreground, there is a large metal pot with a wooden spoon, a whisk, a yellow container, and a bottle of honey.

HANDWASHING SINK ONLY

NIGHTS NETBALL

TOPP

In 2023, the USDA's National Organic Program launched the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) to strengthen the pipeline of domestic organic production. The Land Connection proudly joined the Midwest regional effort (led by the Midwest Organic Services Association) as Illinois' lead organization.

TOPP aims to increase the capacity of U.S. farmers to meet growing demand for certified organic food. The program focuses on key areas such as mentorship, technical assistance, community building, workforce development, and market access. While it was originally designed as a five-year initiative, its true value lies in the long-term infrastructure it creates to support organic farmers for years to come.

Through our 2024 award, we provided support to partner organizations including Farmers Rising, Food Works, OATS (Organic Agronomy Training Services), and Rodale Institute. Together, we're laying a stronger foundation for organic farming in Illinois. Our work has included hosting events, launching a mentorship program, offering consulting services, and training the next generation of organic agronomists. We all look forward to seeing this work continue in 2025.



2024

BY THE NUMBERS:

- 18,545 acres of consulting completed by Rodale
- 448 individuals engaged with Illinois TOPP
- 14 events held by Illinois TOPP partners
- 4 mentor/mentee pairs in Organic Grain Mentorship Program
- 1 buyer/supplier event held at the Organic Grain Conference



Do your part in building more demand for locally grown, raised, and produced foods.



ILLINOIS FARMLINK





In 2023, Betty Brennan reached out to Illinois FarmLink with a vision: to steward her 250-acre farm in Vermilion County in a way that aligned with her conservation values. After decades running a successful business and slowly growing her farm, Betty was ready to shift away from conventional row cropping toward regenerative practices, but needed the right farming partner.

Through Illinois FarmLink, Betty was introduced to Eric and Frank Rademacher, a conservation-minded father-son duo. After farm visits, shared values, and thoughtful conversations (facilitated by our team), the three agreed to a crop share lease late in 2024. Eric and Frank will now farm 125 acres using regenerative methods, including no-till, diverse cover cropping, and minimal chemical inputs.

This new partnership is a win for everyone: the land, the community, and the farmers. "I'm really enthused about the direction of my farm and grateful for Illinois FarmLink's help," says Betty. "The introduction to the Rademachers was a gamechanger."

*Invest in Illinois' agricultural legacy
by supporting critical services for
farmers and landowners.*



2024 BY THE NUMBERS:

- 100 advising calls
- 190+ profiles on illinoisfarmlink.org
- 3 farmland matches
- 463 individuals attending educational events
- 12 Illinois FarmLink monthly newsletters

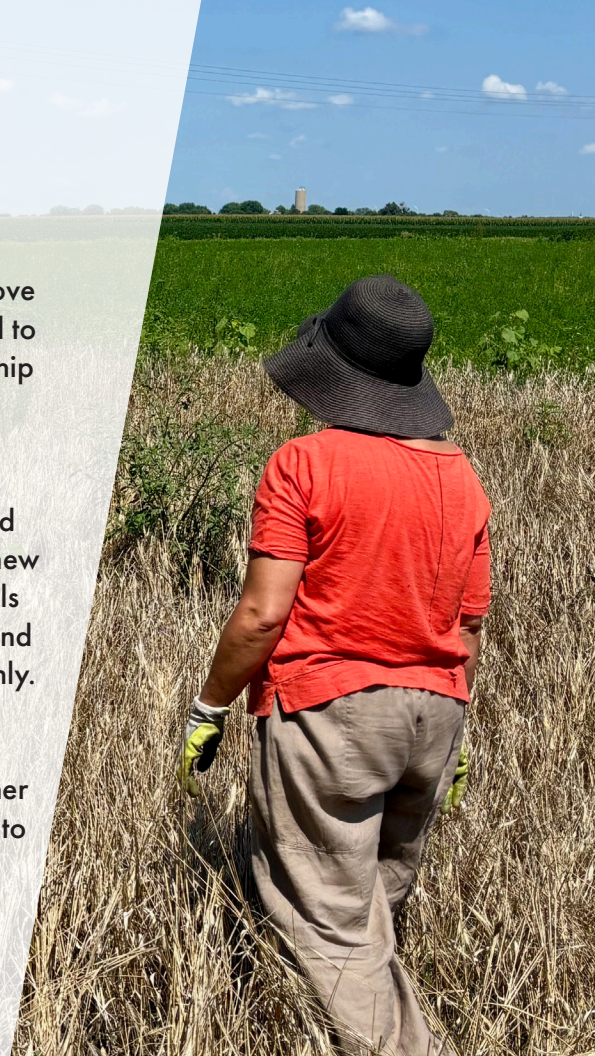
FARMER TRAINING

This past year, we visited one of our Organic Grain Mentorship mentees in northern Illinois to see her progress on her farm and hear how mentorship has shaped her journey. Vickie Renick said, "I've always been involved in food. I love baking. I love cooking... [I want] to create a food grade grain that can be used to bake and cook with and has high nutritional values." That's where the mentorship program stepped in.

Vickie credits much of her progress to her mentor, Paul Hoffman. "He has been a tremendous support and guide through this process," she said. Vickie reached out to Paul after hearing him speak at the Organic Grain Conference, so we knew pairing them together for this program would be a success. Beyond regular calls and farm visits, Paul connected her with nearby farmers to help with harvests and equipment needed to ensure her first einkorn planting and harvest went smoothly.

During our visit, we also toured Vickie's on-farm trials of barley, rye, and an ancient wheat variety. With strong germination rates and low weed pressure, her trials are off to a promising start. We can't wait to see how her work continues to grow in the seasons ahead.

Hear Vickie's full story in our short film about the Organic Grain Mentorship Program: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuo7EfC0-Eg>





2024

BY THE NUMBERS:

- \$15,000 distributed for Professional Development funds
- 100+ conversations on IDEA Farm Network listserv
- 675 participants in events
- 9 YouTube videos
- 4 mentor/mentee pairs in Organic Grain Mentorship Program

Increase farm viability for Illinois' next generation of farmers.



PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATIONS

Our work is only possible through the shared efforts of our partners. Thank you for helping us grow a more just and resilient food system from soil to supper plate.



Artisan Grain Collaborative
Champaign Center Partnership
Chicago Food Policy Action Council
City of Champaign
City of Urbana
Common Ground Food Co-op
Crossroads Resource Center
Experimental Station
Farm Beginnings Collaborative
Farmers Rising
Farmland Access Hub
Food Works
Glacial Drift Enterprise
Healthy Champaign County
IDEA Farm Network
Illinois Environmental Council
Illinois Farm Bureau
Illinois Farmers Market Association

Illinois SARE
Illinois Stewardship Alliance
iRegen
Land for Good
Local Food Forum
Midwest Grazing Exchange
Midwest Vegetable Growers Network
OFARM
Organic Agronomy Training Series
Purdue University
Rodale Institute
Routes to Farm Alliance
Savanna Institute
Smile Politely
The Conservation Fund
The Land Conservancy of McHenry County
The Nature Conservancy
University of Illinois

This list is not exhaustive and is presented in alphabetical order.



DONATE TODAY



Your support helps us show up for farmers, landowners, food businesses, and eaters when it matters most. Our goal is to respond quickly, offer hands-on support, and keep working toward a more just and resilient food and farm system. And we can't do it without you!

Gifts of any size make a difference, and they're tax-deductible. We accept cash donations, gifts from donor-advised funds, stock transfers, and more.

Learn more or make a donation at:
thelandconnection.org/donate/



— THE LAND —
CONNECTION

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