

# PROTECTING THE SEED COMMONS



Sustainable  
Economies  
Law Center

Seeds are at the foundation of human and animal existence on this planet. Since the dawn of agriculture, over 10,000 years ago, human have domesticated, bred, and selected plant varieties that provide us with nourishment. Indeed, saving and sharing seeds is one of the few unbroken traditions we share with our ancestors.



In the last century, however, the tradition of sharing seeds has been largely replaced as the dominant form of exchange by the buying and selling of seeds in the marketplace. As a result, in 2016, three companies control more than 50% of the commercial seed market. The consolidation of the seed industry has also led to a sharp loss in seed diversity around the globe. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that we have lost 75% of the world's plant genetic biodiversity in the last century and that currently, nearly 75% of our food comes from just twelve plant varieties and five animal species. Studies show that seed genetic diversity is a key element of ensuring that our agricultural systems are resilient in the face of a number of social, political, and environmental threats.

In recent years, communities across the country have found a new home for continuing the age old tradition of seed saving and sharing - **seed libraries and exchanges**. Over 450 seed libraries, and countless more seed exchanges, exist in the United States, with many more in countries around the world. Seed libraries and exchanges offer people free access to seeds and promote genetic diversity and local adaptation to increase the resilience of the local food system.

So when we heard that seed libraries and exchanges were threatened with shutdowns by state regulators back in June, 2014, we decided to do something about it. We researched these seed laws being applied by state departments of agriculture and found that, in some cases, these laws are being misapplied, and in other cases, that seed laws need to be changed to protect seed libraries' rights to share locally grown and saved seed. We launched the **Save Seed Sharing** campaign to promote people's rights to save and share seeds and to protect our seed commons.

## CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

### Research

- Created the [Seed Law Tool Shed](#), a crowdsourced, publicly accessible database of excerpted state seed laws and analysis to support state level advocacy
- Drafted sample legislation and local resolutions to change state seed laws to create clear legal space for noncommercial seed sharing

### Education

- Created an online petition, signed by over 20,000 people, directed to all 50 state agriculture departments raising awareness of the need to



change state seed laws

- Presented at over two dozen conferences to over 500 people about the importance of holding seeds as a commons and the challenges that state seed laws pose to the growth of seed sharing

## Advocacy

- Helped pass 4 state laws protecting seed sharing activities (California, Minnesota, Nebraska, Illinois)
- Drafted and negotiated model amendment to protect seed sharing activities that was adopted by American Association of Seed Control Officials

## Advice

- Offered ongoing advice to a group of seed librarians and advocates in creating a democratically managed network to support seed libraries around the country
- Provided strategic advice to advocates around the country interested in changing state seed laws