



305 Roselawn Ave E ■ Suite 200 ■ St. Paul, MN 55117  
Phone: (651) 639-1223 ■ [www.mfu.org](http://www.mfu.org)

May 1, 2020

Minnesota House Agriculture and Food Finance and Policy Division  
C/O Nancy Conley  
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard.  
St Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Poppe and members of the committee:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), I write to thank you for your swift, meaningful, and bipartisan work to provide needed relief to Minnesota's family farmers, and to offer strong support for the supplemental ag finance bill (HF4490). The challenges facing Minnesota's farmers cannot be understated and the strategic resources made available by HF4490—while limited—will help the farmers, their communities, and Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) continue to respond to this evolving crisis.

Please accept this letter as written testimony for the hearing scheduled for Tuesday, May 5.

MFU is a grassroots organization that has represented Minnesota's family farmers, ranchers, and rural communities since 1918. On behalf of our membership across the state, first thank you for your attention to unique ways this crisis is hurting farmers and for the work you've accomplished so far. I understand that agriculture is not the only sector facing challenges right now and appreciate you expanding the Rural Finance Authority (RFA) Disaster Loan Program to provide farmers with another option for emergency financing, extending farm mediation deadlines by 90 days to give farmers facing bankruptcy the opportunity to meet face to face with their lender, and expanding grants to Second Harvest Heartland to boost markets for agricultural products grown in Minnesota.

Just like your work to date, HF4490 doesn't include all the answers—and we won't know all that's needed for some time. That said, it does stand up resources we know farmers need now, representing a meaningful step in the right direction. We're eager to support the bill in that it includes additional resources for:

- **Farm and rural mental health:** Minnesota's farm families are facing immense and quickly evolving challenges, currently chief among them for many producers the closure of large meat processing plants and the need to euthanize healthy animals. As Chair Poppe stated in the last hearing, 'farmers are facing some impossible choices right now.'

Given these challenges, it's critical that mental health resources are there when farmers, farmworkers, their families, and other community-members need them. Furthermore, supporting people facing stress and mental health challenges takes a whole community. The additional funding for outreach will help ensure that service providers, family members, and others have the support and information they need to help farmers.

- **Farm Advocates:** While mental health resources help farmers and their families maintain their personal well-being, MDA's Farm Advocates help farmers sustain their farm business despite the economic challenges felt through the entire economy. As members of the Ag Committee, you understand that farmers were facing a host of challenges even before COVID-19, indicated by record low farm-income across the state.

This crisis has only intensified those economic challenges, making the work of farm advocates all the more important.

- **Farm Safety:** Along with many other organizations and advocates—including powerfully the Gran family—we've testified in support of new investments in farm and grain bin safety. The new challenges facing farmers only intensify that need. When other parts of a farm operation are stressed, it can be easy to lose sight of precautionary measures and take risks in order to get through the growing season. New investments in grain bin safety equipment, for example, might get pushed to another year.

This investment will help farmers make those needed investments in safety and improve awareness of farm safety.

- **Helping farmers find new markets and adjust their operations:** The first wave of economic hardship resulting from the pandemic was felt by farmers selling to schools, restaurants, and other institutions when they abruptly lost their wholesale markets. One of our members in Western Minnesota who sold food to restaurants in the Twin Cities, for example, saw 90 percent of her business evaporate overnight. The marketing and development team at MDA was quick to respond, working to connect farmers with alternative wholesale opportunities. That said, there is still much work to be done to ensure that farms have the marketing opportunities needed to deliver their farm businesses to the other side of this pandemic.

Investing in this kind of assistance is important now as well as strategic going forward. Farmers' needs are still evolving and the marketing team has the relationships and skills required to be flexible and quickly provide technical assistance. Not only that, but the value of this support will be multiplied across the new sales and business relationships they are able to foster.

In addition, we **support funding needed for equipment at the University of Minnesota's (UMN) Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (VDL)**, because it will help prepare our state's agricultural community for an animal disease pandemic comparable to COVID-19.

Finally, we're eager to lend our support for:

- **Further extending the deadline for farmer lender mediations** through Representative Lippert's bill (HF4599), also slated for your May 5 hearing. As I stated in my letter on March 30, extending the deadline would not only give farmers and lenders more time to reach a mutually beneficial plan for managing debt—which is warranted given the unprecedented challenges farmers are facing—but also allow them to resume this work when they are able to meet face-to-face.

Thank you for your continued partnership with the Governor, Commissioner Petersen, and stakeholders and protect the health, safety, and well-being of farm families and all Minnesotans. If you have any questions, please contact our Government Relations Director, Stu Lourey, at [stu@mfu.org](mailto:stu@mfu.org) or (320) 232-2047 (C). Thank you for considering the needs of farmers and rural communities as you make the difficult decisions needed to deliver us through this pandemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Wertish". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "G".

Gary Wertish  
President, Minnesota Farmers Union

CC: Commissioner Thom Petersen, MN Department of Agriculture