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June 14, 2021

Chair Torrey Westrom
Senate Agriculture and Rural Development Finance and Policy Committee
95 University Avenue W.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Chair Mike Sundin
House Agriculture Finance and Policy Committee
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Westrom, Chair Sundin and members of the agriculture conference committees:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), I write to comment on the agriculture budget agreement, thank you for including several top priorities for our members, and to highlight some provisions we ask that you prioritize going forward. Thank you for your hard work on a deal that – taken as a whole – represents a meaningful step forward for family farmers in Minnesota.

MFU is a grassroots organization that has represented Minnesota's family farmers, ranchers, and rural communities since 1918. The pandemic's disruption of our largely consolidated food system made it more apparent that farmers, consumers, workers, and rural communities will all benefit from a food system that is more distributed, resilient, and fair. Many of the investments you secured as part of this deal will help farmers and rural communities bounce back from COVID-19 stronger than before.

There is still much work to do, but I want to thank the agriculture committee members, conferees, and others for their work to include priorities for MFU. More specifically, we thank you the following investments:

- **Expanding access to small and mid-scale meat and poultry processing**, including through:
 - **\$750,000 to meat and poultry processing** start new plants, modernize their facilities, and expand their capacity to better meet the needs of farmers. This will provide needed relief to farmers who are wondering how they will bring their animals to market;
 - **\$110,000 to hire an additional inspection staff** for the state's meat and poultry inspection program, which will expand access to inspection and add valuable technical capacity at MDA, helping get new plants off the ground. This investment also leverages a 1:1 federal match, bringing more money into the state;
 - **Funding to support a technical training program** that incorporates slaughter through a mobile processing. This will serve local producers, address workforce needs experienced by processors, and train new entrepreneurs to take over existing plants; and

- **\$150,000 to add a meat scientist to the staff at Agricultural Utilization Research Institute (AURI)** who will work closely with small meat processors and family farmers to sustainably develop that important industry.
- **\$6,000,000 to build out biofuels infrastructure.** This program will leverage other funds to expand the use of higher-octane, cleaner-burning biofuels, strengthen an important market for many family farmers, and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. Funding the infrastructure needed to move toward higher blends of biofuels—including E15 and beyond—will help clean up our air and reduce the carbon intensity of our current transportation fleet.
- **\$150,000 to establish an Emerging Farmer Office and hire a full-time coordinator.** These investments will improve MDA’s outreach to and service of BIPOC and immigrant farmers. We are lucky in Minnesota to have many resources to support farmers. This new will help ensure that everyone can access them and build a successful farm business.
- **\$150,000 for land access and transition** for piloting farmland access teams and updating the Minnesota FarmLink web applications. Both these investments are a good start toward helping the next generation of farmers get on the land and build a life in agriculture.
- **\$50,000 to strengthen Minnesota’s industrial hemp program** by making needed updates to the state’s licensing software.
- **\$50,000 for farm and rural mental health**, which will strengthen MDA’s important and impactful work to alleviate stress in among farmers, their families, and agricultural workers.
- **\$450,000 for the Noxious Weed Program**, which will make sure MDA can continue working with local governments to combat noxious weeds that threaten farmers livelihoods.
- **\$800,000 to support Farm to School and Early Care** initiatives that help improve local markets for Minnesota-grown foods, while connecting kids with healthy, nutritious food.
- **Supporting famers who experience wolf and elk depredation** by funding accounts that help reimburse famers for losses due to wolves or elk. Particularly for small livestock producers, the loss of animals to wolf depredation takes a significant financial and often emotional toll.

We are glad to see these proactive investments in farmer sand rural communities. Going forward, we urge that you:

- **Fully fund the Market Bucks Program**, identified in statute as the Healthy Eating Here at Home program. This program helps alleviate hunger while supporting small farmers who sell direct to consumer – a win-win for farmers and their communities. This program matches federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars at participating farmers markets and has the potential to leverage even more federal dollars to support farmers.

I understand that crafting a budget requires making difficult decisions. Going forward, MFU priorities that we look forward to working with you on include those to support new cooperatives, promote the adoption of climate-smart practices, and extend the timeline for farmers using the state's Farmer-Lender Mediation program.

Thank you Chair Westrom, Chair Sundin, members, and staff for your work and accessibility this session. We appreciate your partnership and your hard work to develop a strong package for agriculture. If you have any questions, please contact our Government Relations Director, Stu Lourey, at stu@mfu.org or (320) 232-2047 (C). Thank you for considering the needs and perspectives of Minnesota's farm families.

Sincerely,

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

Gary Wertish
President, Minnesota Farmers Union