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February 15, 2021

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

Dear Chair Sundin and members of the committee:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), thank you for acting quickly to advance a drought relief package. For many family farmers, the situation remains extremely challenging, with difficult decisions still ahead. Action early in session to provide targeted, accessible relief to livestock and specialty crop producers is sorely needed.

This past summer, nearly 80 percent of Minnesota faced severe drought conditions that stunted the growth of conventional and specialty crops, dried up water sources for livestock and deteriorated pasture used for haying and grazing. At present, 70 percent of the state is still abnormally dry. When I traveled to MFU County Conventions in the fall, I heard firsthand the toll the drought has taken on not only farm operations and livestock, but also farmers and their families. MFU members who raise livestock or milk cows were forced to sell off breeding stock at a loss, simply because they could not find feed. And many small fruit and vegetable growers are struggling to plan after losing much of last year's crop to the heat.

All of this is made more challenging by the fact that so much of the western United States faced similarly awful drought conditions, and that is coming on the heels of COVID-19. Given these challenges, I want to reiterate our strong support for the drought package Governor Walz first proposed in September.

His plan to **approve new 'rapid response grants,'** reflects a request we extended earlier last summer and will help livestock and specialty crop producers adapt and remain resilient. These grants should be swift to administer, easily accessible, and with no or limited cost share. **Specific needs that should be eligible for grants include:**

- **Purchasing, hauling, and testing feed and forage** – many producers are low on feed, feeding new rations, or traveling great distances to find feed.
- **Transporting livestock, installing fencing, dredging livestock ponds, and installing waterers** – finding additional grazing land is challenging and it is often a long distance away and without the necessary infrastructure for introducing livestock.
- **Installing livestock waterers** – both for producers who are moving to new grazing and for those whose water source has dried up.
- **Drilling new wells, hauling water, and installing irrigation** – for fruit and vegetable growers, lack of on-site water equipment can be a significant challenge. Not only that, but for some their wells have run dry.

We also strongly support the Governor's plan to **increase funding for the Rural Finance Authority's (RFA) Disaster Recovery Loan Program**. This program provides zero-interest loans to farmers who are struggling to recover from losses, including those not covered by insurance. Demand for the program has increased and it is important to make sure the department has funding to take new applications.

We hope these requests and ideas are constructive and inform your action on the drought. We appreciate your partnership in this and your hard work to date. 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, prominent "G" and "W".

Gary Wertish
President, Minnesota Farmers Union

CC: Commissioner Thom Petersen, Minnesota Department of Agriculture