



305 Roselawn Ave E | Suite 200 | St. Paul, MN 55117
Phone: (651) 639-1223 | www.mfu.org

February 29, 2024

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

RE: MFU testimony on HF4134 (Hansen) and HF4044 (Jacob)

Dear Chair Vang and members of the committee:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), I want to thank you for your attention to water quality in Southeast Minnesota and across the state. We are glad to share our thoughts on HF4135 (Hansen) and HF4044 (Jacob), both of which aim to address different parts of this important and complex issue.

MFU is a grassroots organization that has represented Minnesota's family farmers, ranchers, and rural communities since 1918. Safe drinking water is a fundamental value for all Minnesotans, including our members who live, farm, and raise families in Southeast Minnesota. We are committed to continuing to work together on long-term solutions that protect groundwater and promote rural economic vitality.

As you know from previous discussions in this committee, nitrates in groundwater in the karst region is a complex, generational issue for which there is not one simple solution. Instead, this will take multiple approaches and locally adapted partnerships that help farmers and communities address urgent public health concerns—including that which is due to persistent, legacy contaminants—and continue to improve farm practices and reduce agriculture's impact on the environment. We're glad to share our thoughts on the two bills before you, while also recognizing the body of important work this committee, our state agencies, and others are engaged in.

First on the agenda, I want to share concern about HF4135, which would assess a new .99 per ton fee on fertilizer sold across Minnesota to pay for private well mitigation. Fertilizer is a key input for farmers, and one that is already subject to high price uncertainty. An additional fee would put another burden on farm families as we enter what is expected to be a downturn in the farm economy. Finally, I'm not certain a fee increase is the timeliest way to respond to public health concerns, because it will take time to establish, accrue payments, and transfer funding to other agencies. We appreciate opportunities to engage with the author on this proposal and others before this committee.

Second, we're glad to share our support for HF4044, which establishes a tax credit for acres certified through Minnesota's nation-leading Agriculture Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP), which is proven to reduce nitrate loss. Many of our members are Ag Water Quality certified, and we've long supported the program which offers whole-farm technical assistance for farmers to assess and improve their operations. The program now has over one million acres enrolled, and farmers are finding new ways to adapt their management to address concerns about climate, soil health, biodiversity, and water quality through MAWQCP and the MAWQCP endorsements. MAWQCP certified farms on average see a 49 percent reduction in nitrate loss through the adoption of conservation practices like reduced tillage, cover crops, and nutrient management. Piloting a tax credit in counties in Southeast Minnesota could accelerate interest in this impactful program and advance adoption of soil health practices across the region.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective on these two bills. I also want to take the opportunity to thank you for your work last session on soil health financial assistance grants, Forever Green research and commercialization, the Ag BMP loan program, and a host of other programs that are all helping farmers implement soil health practices that all promote water quality. If you have any questions, please contact our Government Relations Director, Stu Lourey, at stu@mfu.org or (320) 232-2047. Thank you for your work to protect the livelihoods of Minnesota's farm families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Wertish". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gary Wertish
President, Minnesota Farmers Union