



March 19, 2023

Re: Dear Chair Vang and members of the House Agriculture Committee,

West Central Initiative is writing in strong support of the Governor's proposed Emerging Farmers Office and Working Group initiatives, including:

- Expanding the Emerging Farmers Office to include four full time staff to support grant management, oversight, coordination, communication and technical assistance, Tribal consultation, administrative and technical support, with \$700,000 in FY24-25 and \$625,000 per year ongoing support. The current level of staffing with one position is not adequate to meet the need, and this level of support will move us towards the goal of serving emerging farmers around the state. An expanded Emerging Farmers Office (EFO) at MDA would be able to provide essential support, such as:
 - Connecting emerging farmers with resources to buy and rent land through Down Payment Assistance and working with internal MDA programs and external stakeholders in addressing the accessibility of programs and resources
 - Technical assistance in navigating grant information, ensuring we include equity in grant implementation and design
 - Navigation of loan process and options, MDA resources and regulatory requirements around licensing, food safety and complicated zoning
 - Coordination and advocating for equity in programs and projects with USDA offices and cross agency entities like DEED, MDE, MDH, DHS, Revenue etc. and internally with all MDA Divisions, including working together with the DEI Coordinator and Tribal Liaison, as well as county offices.
 - Connecting farmers to market access information and sustainability: the how, who, where etc. (LEAFF, LFPA)
 - Supporting financial literacy and farm business management education
 - Connecting with resources for equipment and transportation needs
 - Navigating how to access federal grants and how the MDA can assist
 - Connecting with language assistance needs in navigating information and resources
 - Connecting with urban agriculture resources, farmland in metro areas, federal resources on urban ag/EFO leverage coordination
 - Education and information on Controlled Environment Agriculture (hydroponics, aquaponics, greenhouse, hoophouses etc.)
 - Sharing best practices for CSA's and incubator models, including diverse land preservation option
 - Navigating Organic certification, GAP Certification, HACCP processes
 - Sharing best practices of how to start a slaughter/ butcher for Halal operation and what the regulatory requirements are (resources that meet needs, for example, of the Afghan community with limited English proficiency)

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- Providing connections and networks with UMN Extension , Non Profits and other entities depending on the need/ask
 - Connecting with mental health resources and issues affecting farmers (for example, energy assistance and other needs)
 - The EFO coordinates the Emerging Farmers Working Group and maintains communication with the group through a quarterly Newsletter, updates sent through mailing list, webpage and a phonline.
 - Additional 1:1 engagement with farmers groups and stakeholders as needed
- Eliminating the sunset of the Emerging Farmer Working Group to ensure this important group can continue providing a vital connection between emerging farmers and MDA into the future.

Emerging farmers are a crucial part of Minnesota's farming community, and deserve adequate support to help them succeed. Please include this essential support to expand staffing of the MDA Emerging Farmer Office and continue the important work of the Emerging Farmers Working Group in your final Agriculture Omnibus Bill.

Sincerely,

Kate Mudge
Business Development Officer
West Central Initiative

Kate Mudge