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April 19, 2022

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 drought relief conference committee:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), I want to thank you for your continued work on drought relief. Though most of the state is now no longer presently facing drought conditions, many producers are still reeling from the worst drought in a generation.

I want to reiterate how important it is that you act quickly. Livestock and specialty crop producers continue to face needs related to last summer's historic drought. We continue to hear from members who are struggling to feed livestock until their pasture is ready, purchase inputs for spring planting, or finance water infrastructure investments that will make them more resilient going forward. Your work will allow the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) to begin developing a program, which will also take time. And this while producers are expecting this relief. With the Governor's first proposal in September and your action last month, we are getting calls from farmers who do not want to miss their opportunity to apply.

With that, I wanted to share some thoughts on the two proposals for agriculture. First and foremost, I want to highlight that both reflect the administration's proposal and would provide a meaningful hand up to farmers who need it. We are grateful that **both include non-competitive, easy to administer 'rapid response grants'** to help livestock and specialty crop farmers with drought related expenses. On these grants, we'd like to share our support for:

- **Expanding eligibility to more counties**, which will avoid confusion on the part of producers and make the program easier to administer. The drought impacts were inconsistent and a proposal that limits to certain counties will inevitably leave out producers who need and expect this relief.
- **Reserving allocations for Specialty Crop and Livestock producers** (House 2.29) instead of capping the amount that can go to either category. This will again help avoid confusion and allow MDA to best meet the need.
- **Allowing "up to \$10,000** per eligible livestock farmer or specialty crop producer" (House 2.12), which will give the department flexibility to meet producers' needs.
- **Allowing for more grants**, by allocating \$7 million to the program (Senate 1.9).

Second, we support **replenishing the Rural Finance Authority's (RFA) disaster loan account**, including by:

- **Dedicating \$5 million** (House 3.4) or more to the revolving loan account. Farmers in Minnesota are now facing two disasters with avian influenza (HPAI) on the rise. This will lead to more pressure on the account.
- **Expanding eligibility** (House 1.22) to more producers by adjusting the gross income requirement. This will allow more young and emerging farmers to access the program as they ramp up their operations.

Finally, I want to share why we support the proposed investment in the Agriculture Emergency Account (Senate 3.1) and Veterinary Diagnostic Lab (VDL) (Senate 2.21). Both will help the state respond to HPAI.

We appreciate your work on this and are confident that you will reach a consensus proposal that will deliver meaningful relief to producers who need it. Not only that, but keeping more livestock grazers on the land and helping specialty crop producers invest in water infrastructure will make our state more resilient to the effects of climate change long-term. There is much more to do, but this is an important place to start.

Thank you again. 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 "W".

Gary Wertish
President, Minnesota Farmers Union

CC: Commissioner Thom Petersen, Minnesota Department of Agriculture