

Testimony before the H. F. 2562 on March 16, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of H.F.. 2562 by Rep. Sencer-Mura.

I am Paul Sobocinski, a livestock farmer from Wabasso MN. I have both cattle and hogs and currently raise hogs for Niman Ranch, a specialty market, plus I direct market hogs and cattle through local lockers.

COVID put a lot of pressure on small lockers due to the shutdown of large processing plants. Many independent livestock farmers lost their processing slots due to larger livestock operations losing their slots at the larger meat processors like JBS etc.

Because local lockers are so vital to our remaining independent livestock farmers who have developed specialized markets that can provide a significantly higher return than commodity markets, I and several partners started a special project entitled “Solving the Meat Processing Workforce Bottleneck” to address the bottleneck in meat processing. MN Farmers Union is the fiscal sponsor of our project. Our work was supported by the Regional Sustainable Development Partnership of the U of M, MDA, and a number of key partners that include Sustainable Farming Association of MN(SFA), Minnesota Association of Meat Processors (MAMP), Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture(MISA) Latino Economic Development Center(LEDCE) and Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program of the United States Department of Agriculture (SARE)

In your packet, I have provided you with a summary of a full in-depth report that came from over 50 interviews with local 50 local meat processors. Access to our report can be found at <https://misa.umn.edu/meat-processing-bottlenecks>

This bill provides for grants for meat processing training and retention incentives and specifically under Subd. 2 grants through MDA to partner organizations to assist small to medium sized meat and poultry processors with hiring and training new employees. This provides for navigation services to entities listed under the definition section of the bill.

This bill is important because:

- Benefit independent livestock producers by maintaining access to meat processing services.
- Benefit local communities where these businesses are located.
- Benefit consumers seeking local sources of meat from producers meeting their environmental, religious, and social values.

Our report entitled “Solving the Meat Processing Workforce Bottleneck” specifically speaks on page 4 of our summary that state financial resources should be made to navigator organizations such as LEDC that can assist immigrant apprentices with **culturally sensitive business management training** in addition to the legislature providing navigator support at MDA.

This bill provides for tuition assistance, relocation assistance, retention incentives, childcare stipends, and other related expenses. Our full report provides support for several key elements of this bill:

- A preference for at least a partially trained person in meat processing.
- Employee retention incentives was highly ranked.
- Apprenticeships as part of the path for learning meat processing skills as 60% very interested.
- Business management would be good for an apprentice to learn from a Technical College.
- While not provided for in this bill, Healthcare was weighted as a key item of importance for employee retention for workers in small meat processing businesses.

Finally I would like to lift up the importance of cultural navigation that this bill provides for under Subd. 2 as to grants:

- MDA needs partner organizations to effectively reach communities which have historically been under-represented in local meat processing, especially in management and ownership.
- MFU Bottleneck Project focus has been to open doors and "navigate" barriers for these communities.

- We've entered into partnership with Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC) to recruit, train and support members of the Latino community to become owners of local meat processing businesses in ownership transition.
- We are working with an Afghan community member, employed by DEED, who is serving as a navigator for his community who seek to raise livestock, own and operate a Halal butcher shop and retail and wholesale the meat to serve their community interest in fresh, local Halal meats.
- Such organizations LEDC, Afghan community organizations and others are vital "culturally competent" partners of the MDA who seek to own and operate local butcher businesses. Grants to such organizations to train and support their workforce, as well as to support their vital assistance in navigating the unique hurdles that these communities face while living and working in Minnesota will be vital to their success and to our meeting our shared goals of a strong and vital local food system.
- Examples of NGO and local governmental agency partners who might apply for and receive such grants could include **Latino Economic Development Center, Hmong American Farmers Association, Somali American Farmers Association, MFU Bottleneck Team**, as well as **Regional Economic Development Centers, Small Business Development Centers**, and more.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony today in support of H.F. 2562

Paul Sobocinski

Livestock Farmer and Minnesota Farmers Union Member

MFU Solving the Local Meat Processing Workforce Bottleneck Project Manager