



What Do Rural People Think?

A Report by

Minnesota Farmers Union

Rural Issues Discussions

Hosted March 27 – April 6, 2017

Presented by
Minnesota Farmers Union, Ste. 200
305 Roselawn Avenue East
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What do rural people think?

Since the 2016 national, state, and local elections, there seems to be an ever-present question on the minds of policymakers, elected officials, the media, and organizations of all kinds: What do rural people think?

- *\$43,429 per year is too much to pay for health insurance that you don't use.*
- *St. Paul politicians need to come out to rural Minnesota to listen to us about what works, and what doesn't work, before they tell us what to do with our farms. Rural people need to be consulted, not told.*
- *Broadband Internet is an essential utility, like electricity. It has to be affordable and available throughout all rural areas if we are going to survive and thrive.*
- *Rural Minnesota does not deserve to be left behind on transportation, roads, bridges, healthcare, wages, and everything else.*
- *We need to be able to pay rural health care workers more for their work in nursing homes, homes, and healthcare facilities. Right now, big box stores pay more than health care jobs can pay them. It's our people being taken care of in those nursing homes.*
- *Politicians need to really get out here and listen to us; not listen and tell; just listen and hear.*

These are just a sample of the voices of rural Minnesotans.

Minnesota Farmers Union set off to find out what rural people have to say in answer to the question of what they think. Over the course of the two-week time period between March 27 and April 6, Minnesota Farmers Union hosted 14 Rural Issue Discussions around the state

To make sure that Farmers Union could hear as many voices as possible, the listening sessions were very prominently open to the public, and contact was made with a large variety of people and organizations to make sure we heard diverse voices on farming and rural issues.

The sessions were held from Southeast Minnesota, to South Central and Southwest Minnesota, to Northwest, Central and Northeast Minnesota. Sessions were held in:

- Oronoco
- Winona
- Norwood Young America
- North Mankato
- Windom
- Willmar
- Alexandria
- Little Falls
- Duluth
- Roseau
- Goodridge
- Moorhead
- Park Rapids
- Isanti

Over 450 people participated in these sessions. The format of the sessions was simple. After brief remarks from Minnesota Farmers Union President, and special guests who had asked to attend, there was a moderated discussion, with people raising issues of concern, and questions they would like answered.

Special guests who asked to be included because they wanted to hear the issues and questions included (not at all sessions):

- **Minnesota Lieutenant Governor Tina Smith**
- **Minnesota Department of Agriculture Commissioner Dave Frederickson**
- **Minnesota Department of Commerce Commissioner Mike Rothman**
- **Minnesota Department of Human Services Commissioner Emily Johnson Piper**
- **Minnesota Department of Human Services Assistant Commissioner Santo Cruz**
- **Minnesota Department of Agriculture Assistant Commissioner Andrea Vaubel**
- **Minnesota Department of Agriculture Assistant Commissioner Susan Stokes**
- **National Farmers Union Senior Vice President of Public Policy and Communications Rob Larew**

What did people talk about?

Health care insurance costs & health care access and availability

Clearly, from the bottom of Minnesota to the top, the cost of health insurance dominated the list of what is on people's minds.

After days of listening to horror stories about health care, availability, and costs, **the most terrifying story was from a Southern Minnesota farmer who shared that his premium for health insurance for he and his spouse is \$29,329 with a deductible of \$13,100. Combined, that totals \$43,429 out of pocket costs before ever seeing a benefit from a health care plan.**

Others in attendance pointed out that \$42,429 was more than many people earn in jobs that often provide them with access to lower cost health insurance.

Further, these particular family farmers have paid their premiums for years, and have never met their deductible in any of those years. Essentially, they have paid out, but never been on the receiving end of the coverage. As they look at their finances, and hear from their banker that they need to cut costs, it sparked a question between him and his spouse of whether they can afford to pay for health insurance, offset by the question of whether they can afford not to carry health insurance.

This story, or versions of it, were repeatedly heard at the Rural Issues Discussions. Person after person told their own stories of the high cost of insurance, and the high cost of care now available only in regional centers. Everywhere in the state, people called for premium and deductible relief.

There is almost **universal support for some kind of public health care option to be implemented.** A buy in to Minnesota Care was supported, even though many think that it does not go far enough and that there should be further consideration of a Minnesota single payer program

On the matter of reinsurance financial support voted on by the Legislature, the consensus is that there should be **assurance from the insurance companies** that benefit from this that they pass on cost reduction benefits to Minnesotans who need it.

Additionally, people called for speedy implementation of programs such as health care co-ops, reinstatement of a high risk health care pool funded by insurance companies, such as the MCHA program, and looking at whether there are other ways to provide premium relief for people in the individual marketplace to put them on a level playing field with people who access health insurance through an employer.

For farmers, **affordable, available health care access and insurance coverage must be a required safety net.** Without a health care safety net, more than one farmer said they would be unable to continue farming. It is not sustainable for farmers to continue to be forced to pay high prices for premiums, with high dollar level deductibles, for what is essentially catastrophic coverage that they hope they will never use.

These high costs are made even more unpalatable and maddening when farmers see or hear of what they believe are non-working people accessing medical services for which they pay little or nothing. It is too easy for these concerns to slip into conversations blaming race, class, and immigration issues for the problems faced by individuals who feel unheard and left behind.

Agriculture Issues

Because these meetings were hosted by Minnesota Farmers Union, and held in rural communities, it should be no great surprise that agricultural issues were raised. Interestingly, while agricultural issues were discussed, it is clear that **the larger statement from people was a perceived disconnect between rural people and "St. Paul"** (The Governor, the Legislature, the media, and government in general). "St. Paul" is **viewed as being out of touch with people who live in rural Minnesota.** Person after person expressed that **rural people do not believe their voices are being heard by policymakers, especially urban policymakers who are viewed as out of touch, and not knowledgeable or caring about rural people.** There is also a concern that the news media portrays rural people in unfavorable lights and that rural people are looked down upon.

- **Buffers**
 - The proposed new Minnesota Buffer regulations came up at almost every stop. People expressed that they were happy to see Farmers Union continue to be at the table with the Governor to work on the issue to make it better for farmers. Several specific points were made repeatedly. First, there needs to be clarity on what is and what is not public water, and how private ditches are to be addressed. Second, identification and enforcement should be under local control, at the county level, with adequate state funding provided so that the system can work. Third, that there be recognition that different parts of the state are different, calling for different approaches to addressing the issues. Fourth, there must be more clarity around the need for the buffers, how much they will benefit water quality, and what the compensation will be for farmers who take land out of production and put it into buffers that benefit the whole population. Finally, the Governor should order a review of urban zoning and water impact, with a view toward stricter controls of lawn and garden chemical use, and the impact of storm water coming from urban areas.
- **Ditch Mowing**
 - Farmers and rural residents support ditch mowing along state highways, and support a one-year moratorium to allow resolution of the issues between farmers, MNDOT, and the DNR. Again, questions came up about equity around who could mow and bale, with support for it being the adjacent land owner or their designee, and if there is prohibition that it affect mowing along state highways as they pass through towns and cities. Farmers appreciate that the Governor has just signed legislation addressing this problem by creating a one – year moratorium.
- **Labor and employment**
 - The question of the lack of available local employees was raised multiple times, particularly in the Minnesota grown, local food areas of produce, berry, and vegetable farms. The H2A visa program that brings legal international employees into Minnesota from at least 84 countries is seasonal, pays a wage of \$12.75 per hour (before taxes), and provides these employees with paid round-trip flights, government inspected housing, transportation, food, clothing, and tools. The calculation is that it works out to an equivalent of \$18.50 - \$19.00 per hour.
 - The issue as explained by farmers is whether these employees would need to be paid overtime after a 48-hour workweek, as is currently required under Minnesota law. Farmers say that they cannot afford to pay overtime based on their current rate of compensation, and that the employees are not seeking it either. Rather, Minnesota farmers are losing these employees to neighboring states, and even to foreign countries, including China, where there are no similar regulations. Other farmers and residents in attendance at the Rural Issue Discussions, and Farmers Union, support a “carve out” that exempts these farmers from the greater than 48 hour regulations.

Farm Bill Renewal a Priority

- Ensure an adequate safety net for farmers, including crop insurance, that allows farmers to stay in farming operations.
- Include local food and beginning farmer programs
- Affordable, available health care as a family farmer safety net
- Land access for young farmers and veterans and help with succession for retiring farmers
- Increased credit and access to capital and operating loans
- Include a safety net for produce and organic farmers similar to crop insurance for corn, beans, wheat, etc.
- The importance of ethanol should be increased in visibility
- Farmer-owned grain reserves may help with prices
- Cuts in the USDA and closing of local offices should be cancelled
- Farmers, especially those in border counties, should be allowed to conduct trade with Canada
- Dairy – MPP and the Farm Bill – problems in dairy must be fixed
- Need for more Farm Advocates
- Need for supporting more organic specialty farmers
- Support for women and minority beginning farmers including subsidies and crop insurance
- Cheap food policy impacting prices must be addressed
- Food labeling – COOL – needs to be re-opened and addressed

Additional Agriculture Issues

- Local Foods
 - Local Foods policy, through work such as the Minnesota Food Charter, should be a policy priority to demonstrate that locally grown food is a viable, value added economic model for some Minnesota farmers. Policy makers should give strong support to programs such as Minnesota Grown, Minnesota farmers markets, and projects such as the Farmers Union's Minnesota Cooks at the Minnesota state fair, and the *Farm Fresh Road Trip* television partnership with TPT Twin Cities Public Television.
- Renewable Energy
 - At numerous locations, farmers and community members called for increased funding and support for renewable energy programs, including solar, wind, and biofuels. Of particular concern was interconnect fees and the relationship between electric cooperatives and the PUC.
- Succession planning for older farmers
 - With the age of farmers increasing each year, older farmers need help, and increased incentives to transition their farms to younger or new farmers rather than selling it on the open market to big local farms that just get bigger. There is no loss of farmland, just a loss of farmers. The legislation currently being considered providing a small incentive to selling or renting to beginning farmers is a good, positive first step that needs to be more fully explored and expanded.
- Workforce issues – need for workers/labor in rural areas
 - Simply put, there are not enough workers for either agricultural employment or business/commercial employment. Farmers and small businesses have difficulty finding people who want to work, have the right training, and who are willing to accept the compensation farmers and businesses can afford to pay. Programs to train workers and to provide tax incentives for farmers and businesses so compensation can be increased are necessary, as is the ability to provide benefits which include health care.
- Wolf and elk management
 - The depredation from wolves and elk continues to be a major problem in northern Minnesota. Farmers are frustrated by what they view as both federal and Minnesota DNR staff not seeming to be helpful or supportive in dealing with this problem. Farmers are looking for solid solutions, and advocacy by the DNR, and federal agencies, on coming up with programs that better deal with their loss of crops and livestock.
- Water quality
 - Water quality issues concern farmers who seek to work with state agencies to find cures. They ask state agency staff, and Commissioners, to come out to work with local farmers and communities, and not send out missives that order changes and programs that may not work on a given piece of land or watershed.
- Size of farms
 - The loss of farmers, and big farms getting bigger, concerns many farmers and rural residents who see the impact on main street businesses, schools, and community services. Programs to encourage the sale of smaller family farms to beginning farmers rather than big existing farms should be a state policy priority.
- Property Tax relief on school bond elections
 - School bond funding cannot be placed primarily on farmland. Current proposed legislation begins to address this issue, but there needs to be more state involvement to assure that rural schools do not have to become more consolidated, and that there is a state policy promoting equity between urban and rural schools for programs, internet access projects, class size, and other factors for a quality local education. Education is a priority in rural areas, and the state should support local endeavors.
- Poultry disease
 - Farmers want to ensure that the state continues to be heavily involved in both cure and prevention to assure that disease does not spread.
- Pollinators and safe seeds
 - Farmers support pollinators, and pollinator programs, and we urge the Department of Agriculture, the DNR, and others involved working with local farmers and communities to implement workable programs. The need to treat seeds should be reviewed by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

- Palmer Amaranth
 - Palmer Amaranth is a dangerous, spreading weed, unknowingly brought in to Minnesota. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture needs to make sure that Palmer Amaranth is eradicated, and that no other similarly bad seeds are brought in to Minnesota.
- Alternative crops
 - Minnesota should investigate and further support the development, cultivation, and marketing of alternative crops, such as hemp and hops.
- Deer Management
 - Much like elk and wolves in northern Minnesota, deer are a problem in southern Minnesota. Too many deer cause problems ranging from Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) to crop depredation, and car crashes. Farmers do not feel the Minnesota DNR is being proactive enough in addressing this deer problem.
- Emerald Ash borers and tree cutting
 - The Emerald Ash Borer is a major invasive pest making its way through the state. It is not just an urban issue, but a statewide issue as ash trees are a dominant species throughout the state. Federal funds to treat trees are depleted, and it is expensive to treat trees. Quarantines on the transport of ash trees as firewood, or for other purposes, are in place, but there may also be a need to cut and remove trees as a preventive measure. The impact on rural communities, groves, and trees on private and public lands needs to be measured and addressed.

Rural Hunger Issues

- Market Bucks
 - The Market Bucks program is a program that provides state funding to double people's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits when they purchase food at Minnesota Farmers Markets. This is a program that needs legislative support, and benefits both low-income people who use the Market Bucks program, and farmers at Farmers Markets who see increased sales and purchases. On the federal level, the SNAP program must continue to be part of the federal Farm Bill.
- Farm to School programs – school lunch program support
 - The number of schools purchasing food directly from farmers is growing, as are the direct sales to other institutions such as nursing homes and hospitals. While providing nutritious, good food to youth, it also benefits farmers by providing them with another market for their produce and other agricultural products. But, for this to work, there needs to be state support, and funding from the Legislature to help rebuild the cooking infrastructure that was dismantled in previous years, and to provide cost and budget incentives in order for school and other institutions to fully afford direct farmer purchases.
- Food Shelves, SNAP and hunger program support
 - Food shelves in both urban and rural areas are under great pressure, and often do not have enough food on hand to meet need. In rural areas, mobile food shelves can meet the need, particularly of rural small town seniors and young parents plus other residents for whom transportation is an issue. The food shelves also meet needs beyond just food, with items such as diapers and other basics. There also continues to be a need for farmers to get more information about the Farm to Food Shelf program through which farmers can donate or sell excess products to food shelves.
- Good Food Access program and the loss of rural grocery stores
 - Local communities are losing their hometown main street grocery stores because they cannot compete with chain grocers, which center in regional communities. Many small town residents and farmers now have to drive significant distances to purchase groceries, or get them from convenience stores in their towns, most of which have limited inventories and generally higher prices. The Good Food Access program is a state funded program (which needs legislative support) to help build access to local groceries through support for maintaining local grocers, or creating programs such as mobile grocers to serve rural communities and populations.
- Need for farmers market support
 - Farmers Markets are growing in Minnesota and more people are shopping at them than ever, benefiting farmers who sell at them. However, there is a need to support infrastructure, marketing, and management programs, and programs that benefit both low-income shoppers and farmers, such as the Market Bucks program.

- Potential loss of Meals on Wheels program
 - It appears that the Meals on Wheels program, a source of food security for seniors and low-income people in rural areas, may be a victim of federal budget cuts. Without this program we may see an increase in rural hunger.
- Support for local food programs
 - The Minnesota Department of Agriculture Minnesota Grown program, the Minnesota Farmers Union Minnesota Cooks program (and television partnership with TPT Twin Cities Public Television) are good examples of how outreach can connect people with information about farming, and more specifically, where their food comes from.

Infrastructure Issues

- Broadband in rural Minnesota –is an essential utility
 - High speed broadband internet is not a luxury for family farmers and rural communities. Without it, farmers and communities cannot retain residents, or be a part of the world’s economy. Additionally, without adequate internet, youth cannot compete with the rest of the country, to complete homework or education programs. Farmers need it for everything ranging from working with FSA to communicating with state government to running their farm’s operations. As more than one person indicated, broadband internet needs to be considered an essential utility, and significant state and federal funding is required in order to make it universally available.
- Road and bridges funding
 - Just as in urban areas, rural bridges and roads are in horrible shape. There is not sufficient funding available to build, or repair, roads and bridges, and we are faced with a fast approaching crisis. We need roads and bridges to get our food and crops to market. The Legislature must look at a massive investment in funding, and not get caught up mixing road and bridge repair with urban transit. Urban transit is important and should be supported, and rural bridge, road, and other transportation matters are equally important. They should not be pitted against one another or made to compete for the same dollars.
- Groundwater testing and protection of water
 - As said in earlier in this report, good water is important to all of us, and urban and rural policymakers need to work together to assure that water is protected for the future, while current agricultural needs are met. State agencies, legislators, and others are again strongly urged to come out to rural Minnesota, to meet with farmers and rural communities to seek common sense, workable solutions to testing groundwater and protecting water. Too often rural people feel the onus of solving these issues are put solely on them, and that urban overuse of lawn chemicals, the overuse of salt and road chemicals, and the impact of storm water and other urban water use is never taken into consideration. There is great sentiment that the Governor, Legislature, and state agencies must create a program that measures the environmental impact of urban water issues.
- Support for programs that encourage renewable energy, solar, wind, and biofuels
 - The future is now. Farmers are early adapters of technology, and there must be state and federal programs that encourage rural (and urban) use of renewable energy, such as solar, wind, and biofuels, and that these programs and policies be written and implemented to benefit farmers and rural businesses that are putting these programs into place, instead of benefiting private or cooperative electric programs, or in the case of biofuels, benefiting oil and gas companies.

Other Issues

The biggest lesson learned might be summarized in two words: **Respect** and **Communication**. It is important to note that too often rural people do not feel respected by their government policy leaders, or the people who work for government. The lack of communication, or one-way instead of two-way communication, is cited as one aspect of this lack of respect. In order to reduce this feeling of resentment, it is important to once again emphasize the need for policymakers and staff to make sure they come out to rural Minnesota and listen to the voices of rural Minnesota. **Not talk. Listen.** They need to **hear** what people have to say. Only after listening carefully can there be meaningful conversations that can move us forward to solving the serious problems facing all of us.



A Call To Action:

Based on listening to over 450 people over a two-week period, and reviewing Minnesota Farmers Union policy adopted by a grassroots process with input from members throughout the State, **Minnesota Farmers Union is following up on our Rural Issues Discussion report with the following calls to action:**

Healthcare

Immediate reconsideration by the Minnesota House and Senate of a public option allowing people to buy into Minnesota Care.

- Action must be taken to cut down on health insurance premium and deductible costs. To underline what we heard as we traveled the state, the example of \$43,429 per year premium and deductible costs is not sustainable. If we are serious about keeping families on farms, we need to be serious about this health insurance cost crisis. While the program of reinsurance passed, we will be vigilant in watching to see if it benefits farmers by bringing down costs. At the same time, we will be actively seeking legislation that reconsiders and passes a public option.

Listening

We call on the Governor, and the Legislature, to hold listening sessions and public hearings throughout the state on issues that impact family farmers and rural communities.

- The Governor, Lt. Governor, State Commissioners, and state staffs should schedule a series of listening sessions, and the Legislature should come to rural Minnesota and hold hearings on topics including health insurance costs, broadband, renewable energy, dairy problems, land access, beginning farmer programs and succession planning, health and human services issues including pay for rural health care workers, and hunger issues including closed grocery stores, assisting farmers markets, and other programs that benefit farmers and rural communities.

Agriculture Issues

Agriculture issue must be a high priority for the Governor and the Legislature.

- In regards to Buffers, we urge the Legislature and the Governor to continue to work with farmers in various areas across the state to ensure that farmers have input into the proposal, that there is recognition that different things work in different areas, and that programs be adopted that make sense both agriculturally and environmentally.
- We appreciate the Governor and Legislature's moratorium on ditch mowing permits, and strongly encourage legislators and the Governor to hold input sessions to assure that all issues are taken into consideration before permitting progresses.

Hunger Issues

We call on the Governor and the Legislature to actively address issues related to rural hunger.

- We call on the Governor and the Legislature to support programs to address hunger, especially the SNAP Market Bucks program, the Good Food Access Program, Food Shelf initiatives including mobile food shelves for rural areas, and consideration of implementing the programs outlined in the Minnesota Food Charter.

Infrastructure

We call on the Governor and the Legislature to actively address rural infrastructure issues.

- We ask the Legislature and the Governor to support additional funding, both from Minnesota and from the federal budget, to create universal rural access to broadband high speed internet.
- We ask the Governor and the Legislature to adequately fund a major public works program to provide funding for building, or rebuilding, rural roads and bridges.
- We ask the Governor and the Legislature to strongly support renewable energy programs, written to benefit rural family farmers and communities, rather than utilities, public or private.