Wellness Column

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Hello! Though many of you know me as the manager of MFU’s local foods program Minnesota Cooks, today I’m writing to you as a nutrition counselor, another career I maintain. I studied holistic nutrition at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition in New York City and have maintained a private practice as a nutrition counselor since 2006. My work with clients covers a wide spectrum of topics related to health, including food, exercise, stress management, sleep and relationship health.

The topic of wellness is in the news a lot lately, and most of it isn’t positive. People are struggling to maintain their physical and mental health. If this is you, you’re not alone. Because many of us could use additional support creating a healthy life, we’ve decided to include a wellness column in Minnesota Agriculture.

Given that spring seems distant for us Minnesotans, the topic of vitamin D seems like a good topic to start with – vitamin D is a heavy hitter for both physical and mental wellbeing. Though discussed more now than ever, vitamin D is perhaps the single most underrated nutrient.

Here’s a fun fact: vitamin D isn’t a vitamin – it’s a hormone made by the body in reaction to the sun.

Here in Minnesota, where our exposure to the sun decreases wildly from summer to winter, the level of this hormone tends to fluctuate widely with the seasons. The good news is that vitamin D is free (at least half of the year) because your body makes it when sunlight touches your skin. The bad news is that many of us living in northern latitudes are sorely deficient since we get virtually no meaningful sun exposure for the other half of the year.

The benefits of vitamin D are now well reported and undisputed: improved bone health, immune health (research indicates that optimal vitamin D levels can help protect against influenza) and mental health, including resilience against depression and Seasonal Affective Disorder. But this is only the beginning: vitamin D deficiencies may also play a role in the development of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and obesity in some individuals. Personally, when my levels are low, I feel more lethargic and have trouble concentrating. When they’re restored, I am productive and energized.

We all rely on a solid bank of vitamin D, preferably in the 55-80 nanograms per milliliter range, which is considered the optimal range. Vitamin D levels can be found with a blood test, but you may need to specifically request a vitamin D test from your physician. Find out your vitamin D levels, then talk to your doctor about just how much to supplement with to get into an optimal range. It’s not uncommon to need 5,000-10,000 IU’s daily in the winter.

Though the list is somewhat limited, good food sources of vitamin D include cod liver oil, sardines, mackerel, salmon, caviar, milk and tuna (not a lot of local foods on the list, unfortunately). As we dream of spring and sunshine, perhaps addressing vitamin D deficiencies can help us make the most of these last cloudy, dark weeks. I refer to it as “making our own sunshine.”

Was this helpful? Do you have a health topic you’d like to read about? If so, email me at claudine@mfu.org and let me know what’s on your mind.
Rural Voices Discussions cancelled
We had been planning another series of Rural Voices Discussions for the month of April. Due to the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, we will not be holding them.

The Governor and Commissioner of Health have recommended not holding large gatherings, and we must not put anyone at risk. Thank you for understanding.

Former MFU VP Hanson dies
I am sad to inform you that Norma Hanson, a former dairy farmer, Minnesota Farmers Union lobbyist and state Vice President, died on Feb. 26 at the age of 90. She lived in Goodridge, Minn., and was active in a wide variety of rural organizations, including Minnesota Agri-Women, the local 4-H, American Dairy Association and many more. She also served our country in the United States Navy. Norma is an example of family farm leadership on all sides of our triangle: legislation, cooperation and education.

Her celebration of life was held March 3 in Goodridge, and we send condolences to her family and friends.

MFU kicks off legislative session at Lobby Day Drive-In
We got off to a strong start this legislative session with Lobby Day Drive-In. Despite cold and wintry weather, a significant contingent of you came to St. Paul to let your legislators know what real family farmers are experiencing. It’s a short session this year, ending on May 18. So it made sense to have Lobby Day on the third day of session. I’m grateful for your willingness to share your farm stories with elected officials, and I also thank the legislators for listening to us. As it is a bonding year, we’re working for a bonding bill that invests in the state’s infrastructure needs, especially in rural Minnesota.

We also met as a group with Gov. Tim Walz, Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, Attorney General Keith Ellison, Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen, Transportation Commissioner Margaret Anderson Kelliher, Revenue Commissioner Cynthia Bauerly, House Speaker Melissa Hortman, House Majority Leader Ryan Winkler, House Agriculture Committee Chair Jeanne Poppe and Secretary of State Steve Simon. Thanks to each of them for taking time to hear from us.

Also, both the House and the Senate have passed bills for funding for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Rural Finance Authority, which was our biggest priority for right away. We’re also working on lowering the cost of health care and prescription drugs, strong funding for rural projects in the bonding bill and Section 179 conformity between state and federal tax codes. Last month, I testified in the House Tax Committee in support of a bill conforming our tax code with Section 179. Stu has more specifics on page 7 and provides updates in each week’s e-newsletter.

Additionally, we’re pleased that the Minnesota Senate has begun the confirmation hearing process with Commissioner Petersen. He was approved by the Senate Agriculture Policy Committee unanimously and recommended to the full Senate for a vote. I submitted a letter to the Senate on behalf of MFU in support of confirming Commissioner Petersen, saying that he exemplifies the values of servant leadership and carries the stories of Minnesota’s farm families in his heart. MFU members know that as well as anyone.

NFU Convention
We recently returned from Savannah, Ga., where the National Farmers Union 118th Anniversary Convention took place. About 40 Minnesotans attended, counting MFU members and staff. It’s important for family farmers across the country to connect with each other, so we can cooperate on policy priorities that support us, especially during this time of prolonged low prices on the farm due to myriad factors.

With the retirement of Roger Johnson as NFU President, delegates elected Rob Larew to succeed him. Rob grew up on a dairy farm in West Virginia and spent years working on Capitol Hill with the House Committee on Agriculture, including with Chairman Collin Peterson of Minnesota. He’s most recently served as NFU Senior Vice President for Public Policy and Communications, and he knows Minnesota well, having visited the state numerous times and spoken at our Rural Voices Discussions and state conventions. I am excited to work with Rob going forward in guiding the organization.

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Representing the MFU Executive Committee were myself; Vice President Bryan Klabunde of Waubun; State Secretary Anne Schwagerl of Browns Valley; Carol Anderson of Foley; Linda Larson of Rosemount; Joshua VanDerPol of Kerkhoven; and Ted Winter of Fulda.

Representing MFU on the National Youth Advisory Council were Maria Fatz of Waubun, Nicholas Foss of St. Bonifacius and Josiah Zapf of Denver, Colo., formerly of St. Bonifacius. Hannah Bernhardt and Jason Misik of Finlayson attended as Minnesota's Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership Couple. Carissa Elmstrand of North Branch attended for the Beginning Farmer Institute, along with her husband Erik and son Oliver.

Others representing Minnesota at the NFU Convention were my wife Jeanne Wertish of Renville; Steve Anderson of Foley; Chris Fullerton of St. Paul; Deanne Johnson of Fort Ripley; Jill Hawkinson of Cambridge; Marlys Jensen of Kensington; Bessie and Lori Klose of Atwater; Gene Paul of Delavan; Alan Perish of Browerville; Doug and Elly Peterson of Madison; Lisa Severson of Eau Claire, Wis. and originally of Kandiyohi County; Dennis Sjodin of Cambridge; Mary Sullivan of Franklin; Brian Rohrenbach of Rosemount; and Cindy VanDerPol of Kerkhoven.

MFU staff in attendance were Legislative and Operations Coordinator Molly Jansen; Public Relations & Communications Director Brita Moore; Membership Coordinator Diana Rico; and Education Director Glen Schmidt.

Dennis Sjodin receives Meritorious Service Award

A highlight of the NFU Convention for many is the awards given to those who have shown exceptional leadership and service to our mission. We were honored that one of our longtime leaders, Dennis Sjodin of Cambridge, Minn., was chosen to receive the Meritorious Service Award for Service to Farmers Union and to American Agriculture. Dennis was integral to the success of Minnesota Farmers Union and poured more than 40 years of his life in supporting the organization and its members. From 1966-2009, Dennis served in a number of roles for MFU: Field Staff, Director of Program Development, head of Green View, Director of the MFU-NFO Livestock Marketing Program, Assistant to the President, acting President and ended his career as state Vice President.

Dennis provided a positive presence in our office. Everywhere he went, he preached the Gospel of Farmers Union. He truly deserves this award.

Kathy Zeman testifies in DC

MFU was represented by a fantastic advocate in Washington, D.C. recently. Kathy Zeman, Rice County Farmers Union member and Executive Director of the Minnesota Farmers’ Market Association, testified at a hearing of a House Agriculture subcommittee in support of Local Agricultural Marketing Program (LAMP) grants, which have benefited farmers she works with. Farmers’ markets have expanded rapidly nationwide and provide opportunities for farmers and eaters to get to know each other. LAMP grants support local food programs like farmers’ markets and research on the impact of them. Thanks to Kathy for her leadership, and thank you to U.S. Rep. Angie Craig (D-MN02) for inviting Kathy to speak.
It’s been a busy start to the year for me and everyone at Minnesota Farmers Union. There have been several conferences, expos and county meetings, not to mention Lobby Day Drive-In. These have kept all of us busy.

It was a pleasure to work with our leaders in northwest Minnesota on building momentum for the legislative session. Mahnomen County President Sarah Hill facilitated a tri-county meeting in Ada, where members from Norman, Clay and Mahnomen counties came together for a potluck dinner and discussed the state convention, the importance of county conventions and legislative priorities. This also provided an opportunity for Government Relations Director Stu Lourey to connect with members in the northern part of the state and review MFU legislative priorities prior to our Lobby Day. Attendees had a chance to hear from State Sen. Kent Eken and Rep. Paul Marquart about the upcoming session.

If anyone is interested in a similar type meeting in their area, please contact me. I would be happy to help facilitate.

Getting the MFU message out during the winter months is an important part of what I do. In Grand Forks recently, I attended the 2020 International Crop Expo. The show was well attended by farmers from all over the region, including a large attendance of Canadian farmers. Our Canadian colleagues were interested in hearing our position on USMCA. While most were happy that a new agreement has been reached, it was agreed that there are many other obstacles left to face soon for family farms everywhere. One of my favorite aspects of being Vice President is building relationships, which tends to happen often at farm shows.

In Grand Forks, a couple stopped by the MFU booth excited to share their story. The husband and wife shared that there are many other obstacles left to face soon for family farms everywhere. One of my favorite aspects of being Vice President is building relationships, which tends to happen often at farm shows.

As spring approaches, it is more important than ever for all of us to stay united in our voice for rural Minnesota. As we gathered at the Capitol for Lobby Day, it was inspirational to hear your stories and your passion about the issues that affect our farmers and rural communities. I heard many of you voice concerns about health care, a fix for Section 179 tax code and, of course, the challenge of providing access to high quality broadband to all the residents of Minnesota. Feel free to reach out at any time.

President’s Letter (continued from page 4)

‘Phase one’ China export goals shrink

In January, the Trump administration announced the “phase one” trade deal with China, which showed a sign of warming relations. The agreement indicated that China would purchase $40 billion in U.S. ag products per year, an increase from the previous $26 billion/year they’d imported before the trade war. While we are glad there is progress, there remains a lot of uncertainty as to if China will achieve these numbers, as they are significantly higher than any previous purchases.

A USDA economist projected in February that China’s ag purchases would turn out to be at $14b for the fiscal year. Robert Johansson said, “I owe 40 years of marriage to Farmers Union.” He continued his story of their first date when he rolled up to his future wife’s family farm and the first thing his future father-in-law noticed were his Farmers Union tires. It was then deemed he was good enough to date his daughter! Our message of “Standing for Agriculture, Working for Farmers” is successfully spread throughout the region at farm shows such as this.

At the USDA Ag Outlook Forum that he’s asking if “it’s feasible that they meet these commitments” based on their actual demand. I’ve previously questioned the feasibility of these commitments as well, knowing that China has developed agreements with other nations for agricultural trade that may not leave room for $40 billion worth of products from the U.S.

Also, the coronavirus outbreak, or COVID-19, has prompted backups of products for export, as countries take precautions to contain the virus. China has restricted who can work, and shipping containers aren’t getting picked up – they’re sitting at ports. And that means there’s less space on ships for ag products. It’s unclear still how much COVID-19 is ultimately going to affect our export markets, but for the moment it’s not helping – it’s adding uncertainty to the U.S.’s recovery of our lost export markets.

Lastly, President Trump declared via tweet in February that another round of “trade aid” was possible, although USDA officials responded that there had been no discussion about it. Possible, although USDA officials responded that there had been no discussion about it. The first two rounds of Market Facilitation Program (MFP) payments were needed and appreciated because of the trade war, but with the national debt exploding, they will be hard to justify politically in the future.
A monthly update from National Farmers Union

Trump budget shortchanges agriculture

In February, President Donald Trump released his proposed budget for fiscal year 2021. As in years past, the proposal suggested steep cuts to farm, food and rural development programs while providing additional funding for defense initiatives. Though Congress is unlikely to take all the President’s recommendations into account, the budget is a good indication of the administration’s priorities for the coming year.

Under Trump’s proposal, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) would receive 8% less in discretionary funding in 2021 than 2020 and $57.7 billion less in mandatory funding by 2030. It would cut spending on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by $182 billion over the next ten years. This would theoretically be achieved by both switching the flexible EBT card to a prepackaged “Harvest Box” and by tightening existing work requirements further.

The proposal would also cut crop insurance and commodity program spending by 31%. Most of this would be achieved by limiting the maximum adjusted gross annual income eligibility threshold for crop insurance subsidies and commodity programs to $500,000 from $900,000. Though National Farmers Union (NFU) supports income limitations on farm programs to ensure that they help the farmers in greatest need, the organization was frustrated that these limitations did not apply to the recent Market Facilitation Program (MFP). In fact, the USDA doubled income limitations for MFP participants, enabling the largest and wealthiest farms to claim a significant portion of the available assistance.

Other USDA agencies and programs would lose significant amounts of funding as well. The proposal would cut $9.15 billion from farm conservation programs over the next decade, while eliminating the popular Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). At the same time, the budget would reduce spending on agricultural research, including a 35% reduction for the Economic Research Service (ERS) and a 12 percent reduction for the Agricultural Research Service (ARS). Rural Business and Cooperative Programs, which support economic opportunity in rural America, would lose 97% of its funding.

Though the budget proposal would direct additional resources towards infrastructure, overall, it disregards the challenging economic circumstances in farming communities. “Farm debt and farm bankruptcies have skyrocketed, crop prices remain low, climate change is disrupting food production and rural economies continue to lag behind their urban counterparts,” said NFU President Roger Johnson. “There are a number of programs and agencies that can help farmers and rural residents with these difficulties – including the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Agricultural Research Service and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – but the Trump administration is looking to cut funding from all of them.”

Trump signs USMCA

During a ceremony held at the White House, President Donald Trump signed the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) into law. The agreement has already been approved by Mexico, but it will not be fully implemented until it is ratified by the Canadian government. Though we initially withheld endorsement when USMCA was introduced over a year ago, the NFU board voted to support it after the U.S. House of Representatives made several improvements, including stronger labor standards, more robust enforcement mechanisms and some modest improvements to environmental protections, as well as partial elimination of investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) arbitration procedure. Additionally, it omits a provision that would have inflated health care costs by granting pharmaceutical companies marketing exclusivity for certain medications for at least 10 years.

President Johnson praised the bill’s passage urged the administration to continue working towards fairer trade deals. “Though USMCA is a big step forward, it should be a floor for future trade deals, not a ceiling,” said Johnson. “When negotiating with other trading partners, we encourage the Trump administration and Congress to build on this momentum to establish fair trade agreements that protect rural jobs, ensure fair prices for farmers and restore sovereignty to the United States.”

Tenth Circuit Court strikes down small refinery exemptions

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit struck down three biofuel waivers that were improperly issued by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to small oil refineries. The ruling is the result of a May 2018 challenge brought against the agency by NFU, the Renewable Fuels Association (RFA), the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA) and the American Coalition for Ethanol (ACE). The groups alleged that EPA had not properly complied with the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) when allocating the waivers. EPA has offered small refinery exemptions (SREs) to relieve small refineries of “economic hardship” caused by compliance with Renewable Volume Obligations (RVOs) under the RFS since 2013. However, the number of approved exemptions has nearly quadrupled during Trump’s presidency, and many of the recent recipients are owned by multi-billion-dollar oil corporations, including Exxon Mobil and Chevron Corp.

As a result, the demand for corn ethanol and biodiesel in the transportation sector has decreased by 4 billion gallons, representing a 1.4-billion-bushel decline in demand for corn and an $25-million-bushel decline for soybeans. Family farmers have consequently lost millions of dollars of hard-earned income, upwards of 30 biofuels plants have halted production and hundreds of rural residents have lost their jobs.

The three waivers in question were overturned because the recipients had not consistently received an exemption in the years preceding its petition. Per the RFS, all SREs issued after 2010 must be an extension of a previous exemption; EPA’s own data show that a maximum of only seven small refineries could have received continuous extensions of their previously existing exemptions, yet the agency has granted as many as 35 exemptions in a single year.

The Court also found that EPA abused its discretion in failing to explain how the agency could conclude that a small refinery might suffer a disproportionate economic hardship when the Agency has simultaneously consistently maintained that costs for RFS compliance credits, or RINs, are passed through and recovered by those same refineries. President Johnson applauded the court’s decision: “We believe this ruling will help restore the ability of the RFS to drive demand and expand markets for renewable fuels, as Congress intended, providing a badly needed shot in the arm for rural America.” The Washington Corner can always be found at nfu.org/corner.
Our legislative team hit the ground running at the start of the legislative session on Tuesday, Feb. 11. In the first three weeks of session, MFU members and staff have testified 15 times in legislative hearings considering priority issues, met with key legislators and administration officials, submitted four formal comment letters and executed a successful Lobby Day Drive-In. Through all of this, we’ve worked hard to connect legislators and other decision-makers with stories from MFU members so that they understand how their work affects family farmers and rural communities.

Despite the cold weather, we had over 40 members join us at the capitol to share their stories and make asks of the elected leaders and members of the administration. In addition to individual member meetings – which our Legislative and Operations Coordinator Molly Jansen successfully scheduled for every MFU participant – the following elected officials and members of the administration met with the full group to hear our priorities:

- Governor Tim Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan
- Attorney General Keith Ellison
- Speaker Melissa Hortman, Speaker of the House
- Rep. Ryan Winkler, House Majority Leader
- Rep. Jeanne Poppe, Chair of the House Agriculture Committee
- Secretary of State Steve Simon
- Thom Petersen, Commissioner of Agriculture
- Cynthia Bauerly, Commissioner of Revenue
- Margaret Anderson Kelliher, Commissioner of Transportation

Overall, this day was a positive way to start the session and express our shared priorities – including making health care more affordable, making our tax system fairer and increasing access to meat processing – and demonstrate our collective power to deliver on them.

One of the top priorities members discussed during lobby day was authorizing $50 million in user financed bonds for the Rural Finance Authority (RFA) – and doing so early in session. The low-interest loans made available by the RFA through local lenders help young farmers, farm families rebuilding after natural disasters, and others reinvesting in their operations. The program is nearly out of money, so passing it early would make sure that any funding lapse doesn’t affect farmers’ ability to use the program in addition to allowing the Minnesota Department of Agriculture to take advantage of historically low interest rates.

Companion bills authored by Chair Poppe and Senate Ag Finance Committee Chair, Sen. Torrey Westrom (R-Elbow Lake) have been passed by both chambers with wide bipartisan support. It’s clear that legislators understand that funding the program early could be the difference between some farm families having access to these loans ahead of the 2020 growing season.

Finally, February ended on a positive note with the Senate Agriculture Policy Committee unanimously recommending MDA Commissioner Petersen for confirmation by the full Senate. This bipartisan show of faith in his leadership – and the MDA as a whole – highlighted their hard work and advocacy on behalf of Minnesota’s farm families. MFU President Gary Wertish submitted a letter in support of Commissioner Petersen’s confirmation.

“Thom is humble, thoughtful and carries the stories of Minnesota’s farm families in his heart every day,” President Wertish said. “I can’t think of anyone better prepared to lead us through these challenges and help us take advantage of new opportunities in agriculture.”

When addressing the committee ahead of his vote, Commissioner Petersen highlighted some priorities for the Department going forward, all of which overlap with priorities for MFU. These include continuing the Department’s work to support emerging farmers, making sure that small and mid-sized farmers have access to meat processing and further investment in farmer mental health.

If you have any questions about MFU’s legislative work, don’t hesitate to reach out to me at stu@mfu.org or (320) 232-3047. A full list of our legislative priorities can be found at mfu.org/legislative-priorities.
FSA can help with on-farm propane storage

You might be thinking this topic isn’t the timeliest, especially when the days are getting longer, and temperatures seem to be moderating. Hopefully, Spring is going to be here soon. But from a planning standpoint, keep in mind that FSA can now finance on-farm propane storage handling through the Farm Storage facility Loan (FSFL) Program.

For several years, farmers have faced propane storage shortages. FSFL low-interest financing can be used to build or upgrade storage facilities and to purchase portable (new or used) structures, equipment, storage and handling trucks. Liquified petroleum tanks are covered for eligible commodities for the use of fuel for grain dryer equipment.

As with any kind of FSFL loan request, the first item on the agenda is to make sure all Environmental Quality standards and rules are met BEFORE an FSFL loan request is approved. Hence, the need for planning! Loans up to $50,000 can be secured by a promissory note/security agreement. Loans exceeding $100,000 require additional security.

Producers do not need to demonstrate the lack of commercial credit availability to apply. The loans are designed to assist a diverse range of farming operations, including conventional operations, small and mid-sized businesses, new farmers, operations supplying local food and farmers markets, non-traditional farm products and underserved producers.

To learn more about FSFLs and how these loans can help with your on-site propane tank storage needs, contact your local FSA county office.

Update your records

Making sure a producer’s farm records are both current and accurate is a major goal of FSA staff. FSA is continually working to ensure accuracy and timeliness of our producer record database.

If you have any unreported changes of address, zip code, phone number, email address or an incorrect name or business name on file, they need to be reported to FSA. Changes in your farm operation, like the addition of a farm by lease or purchase, need to be reported to FSA as well. Producers participating in FSA and NRCS programs are required to report changes in their farming operation in a timely manner as programs offered through both agencies use the same farm record for payment processing.

At this time, county offices have received new aerial flight imagery that was flown in 2019. We are reviewing the imagery to make sure all field boundaries, etc. are correct. Once this task is complete, the reviewed imagery will become the background producers will see for all maps used in county office operations including reporting crops in 2020.

If you have any updates or corrections, please call your local FSA office to update your records.

2020 ARC/PLC signup ends June 30, 2020

When the 2019 Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) signup was taking place, FSA offices also tried to get as many multi-year contracts run as a matter of convenience for producers. However, there may have been situations where cropland may have been changing hands and a 2020 contract could not be generated. This note serves as a friendly reminder that if you have any acreage that might fall into this situation, remember to get the 2020 ARC/PLC contract signed before the June 30, 2020 deadline passes.

In some cases, county FSA offices delayed the Yield Update until acreage reporting time as there were and continue to be many other tasks needing to be accomplished.

The deadline date for the Yield Update component of the ARC/PLC Program is Sept. 30, 2020.

If you are interested in reviewing your PLC payment yields, contact your local FSA office for more information along with the option of updating these yields.

Market Facilitation Program (MFP) payment status

County FSA offices processed the third and final tranche of 2019 Market Facilitation Program (MFP) payments aimed at assisting farmers suffering from damage due to trade retaliation by foreign nations.

At this time, producers should have their payments in their bank accounts. Please check your banking statement or through online access and contact your county office if there are questions about these payments.
LED lighting: A bright opportunity

A 2019 report provided to Minnesota Farmers Union found that while energy makes up only approximately 5% of all farm expenditures, energy is one of the only costs that a farmer has some control over. Energy-efficient LED lighting offers great potential for energy savings across farm operations.

The cost of LED lighting has come down dramatically in recent years, too, making payback even faster. On top of that, electric utility rebates and Property-Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) financing have made paying for it even easier.

LED lighting in operation

One family dairy farm worked with their electric utility to explore energy efficiency opportunities. They landed on LED lighting upgrades, among other dairy technology improvements. Just switching their dairy parlor lights from fluorescent tubes to LED tubes resulted in hundreds of dollars a year in energy savings and hundreds of dollars in one-time utility rebates.

A 2013 study of LED lighting in turkey barns showed that switching to LED lighting led to calmer birds and no measurable poultry production decrease – that was on top of an average energy savings of $2,000 per barn from upgrading to LEDs, a payback of three years or less.

Other improvements and energy assessments

Beyond LED lighting, other on-farm energy-saving opportunities depend on the operation. High-impact technologies include variable frequency drives, automated controllers, high efficiency grain dryers, refrigeration heat recovery and high efficiency space and water heating.

To find out what opportunities you have to save, you can get an on-farm energy assessment tailored to your operation. The assessment will help you determine the amount of energy used by the entire operation, and identify the short- and long-term measures you can implement to conserve energy and achieve greater production efficiencies. Often your electric utility will offer some form of energy assessment – contact them to learn more.

There has also never been a better time to consider adding a renewable energy system to your operation, particularly solar. Most farms have plenty of room for solar arrays that can significantly offset their electricity use and provide a long-term hedge against rising energy prices. A federal tax credit, accelerated depreciation, other incentives, and PACE financing all combine to make a strong case for solar.

Get more tools and support

Visit the Clean Energy Resource Teams website at cleanenergyresourceteams.org/farmers for step-by-step resources, lighting guides and contact information for Rural Energy Manager Fritz Ebinger.

Fritz Ebinger is the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) Rural Energy Development Program Manager for University of Minnesota Extension Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships. In this role, he works on energy efficiency and renewable energy initiatives with agricultural producers and rural businesses to reduce farm and business production costs and advance utility conservation planning.

By Fritz Ebinger, CERTs Rural Energy Manager with UMN Extension Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships

LED lighting, like these LED tubes, is becoming the norm across home, farm and business applications.

There’s an efficient LED bulb for just about every fixture and application imaginable – from standard bulbs and linear tubes to yard lights and grow lights. LEDs have become extremely popular because they produce excellent light using far less energy, reduce maintenance and can even offer production benefits for livestock and crops.

Hydroponic lettuce grown with LED light indoor farm technology
The class met MFU members and staff, as well as having the opportunity to hear from Minnesota Department of Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen, NFU Senior Vice President of Public Policy and Communications Rob Larew and NFU Government Relations Representative Aaron Shier.

The NLA second session was held earlier this month. The participants gathered in Duluth ahead of the MFU Lobby Day Drive-In and heard from many experts on how to effectively advocate to their Senators and Representatives. Speakers for the second session included MFU Director of Government Relations Stu Lourey; Assistant Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Ag Whitney Place; Representative Liz Olson; Vice President of Institutional Advancement, Enrollment and External Relations and Executive Director of Lake Superior College Foundation Daniel Fanning and John Beaton, who shared his experience being part of the NLA class one. In the afternoon Jeff Stollenwerk of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority gave the group an informational tour of the Duluth port and class two participant Randy Hanson gathered with the group at Lake Superior College to talk about the school’s new Eco-entrepreneurship Program.

The next session held this spring or summer, as decided by the class, will dive into Farmers Union’s past, present and future. The capstone session of the NLA will be a trip to Washington, DC in September. I am very excited to how this class grows as they become more active in MFU.

The participants of class two are Rachel Sannerud of Milaca, Melany Thomas of Felton, Jaime Malone of Wadena, Mary Paul of Clear Lake, Josephine Trople of Northfield, Fallon Ryan of Brainerd, Anneliese Walker of Princeton, Jode Freyholtz-London of Eagle Bend and Randel Hanson of Duluth.

If you are interested in applying for class three of the academy, please visit mfu.org/new-leader-academy for more information.

Class Two of the New Leader Academy is well into the swing of things!

Many of you got to meet the new class during their first session in November which was held in tandem with the MFU State Convention. At that first session the academy learned about the importance of MFU’s policy and how it shapes the direction of the organization. Participants got to experience first-hand how policy is drafted, submitted, debated and passed.

Post-secondary scholarship opportunities

Each year, Minnesota Farmers Union and National Farmers Union offer numerous scholarship opportunities to its members and members’ children, this year is no different. Altogether, there is over $14,000 worth of scholarship money available. Once again, MFU will be offering up to five $1,000 scholarships to MFU Members or their children. With the high cost of post-secondary education, it’s important to provide support for students that seek that education and will bring that knowledge back to family farms and rural communities in Minnesota.

• Rice County Farmers Union has a long history of sponsoring scholarships not only within Rice County, but also to students across the state. Scholarships from Rice County Farmers Union are available to MFU family members that plan to attend or are currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution of any kind.

• Howard Warmbold was a lifetime member of Hubbard County Farmers Union and was an extremely active person in his community. The Howard Warmbold Memorial Hubbard, Beltrami and Wadena County Scholarship is available to MFU members or their children who reside in Hubbard, Beltrami or Wadena County and plan to attend or are currently enrolled in a post-secondary institution.

• Kandiyohi County Farmers Union also offers a scholarship to any MFU member or their child who resides in Kandiyohi County.

NFU also offers many scholarships, such as the Stanley Moore National Scholarships, the Hubert K. & JoAnn Seymour, and the Stanley Moore FUI Foundation Regional Scholarships. Visit nfu.org/scholarships for more information on these scholarships.

Please encourage any student about to start their post-secondary education or currently attending to visit mfu.org/scholarships to apply or for more information.
Once again, it’s that time of year, time to start thinking about summer! MFU summer camp season is just around the corner.

Registration for Minnesota Farmers Union summer camp opened March 1 at mfu.org/camp. Register before May 1 for early bird pricing.

Camp is where kids can hang out, be kids and have fun. MFU prides itself on keeping camp affordable and open to everyone. During a week at camp children can sing at campfires, dress up in crazy costumes for theme nights, swim, play games, go on nature hikes and much more! Reasonable rates are made possible through grants and financial support from the MFU and CHS foundations.

For more Information and to register go to: www.mfu.org/camp.

Looking for a summer job? Come work at Minnesota Farmers Union Camp!

If you love the outdoors and working with kids, Minnesota Farmers Union Leadership Camp may be the perfect place for you! Working at a summer camp is hard work, but it’s worth the effort. You’ll leave camp with unique skills, new friends and a ton of great memories. Our campers and staff become a community, and we work hard to ensure that everyone is having a fantastic summer camp experience. From leadership experience, team building exercises and more, our counselors gain important life skills from their first day of training to the last day of camp.

Our counselors have FUN, but they also learn a lot about their skills and their passions. A summer at camp is truly an experience you’ll never forget.

A Minnesota Farmers Union Camp Counselor is responsible for planning, leading and implementing core and non-core programs and experiences for children in small and large group settings. They will also be responsible for the general safety and development, growth, and skill achievement of the participants in their group. The counselor will provide high quality outdoor educational and recreational experiences for participants that focus on the MFU core values of cooperation, leadership, respect and responsibility.

**Required qualifications**
- Education classes or experience in camp, youth programs, recreation, working with children or a related area.
- Upon hire, completion of MFU-provided First Aid and CPR certification.
- Ability to lead, plan, organize and implement program activities.
- Ability to work as a member of a team and the ability to accomplish tasks with little direct supervision.
- Strong organizational and communication skills.

If interested, contact MFU Education Director Glen Schmidt at glen@mfu.org or (651) 288-4066 for more information. Apply online at mfu.org/mfu-camp-staff-application.
MEMBER IN FOCUS

Mike and Linda Frost, Olmsted County

The climate is changing. And farmers are on the front lines of the battles it’s waging.

Mike, Linda and Matthew Frost of rural Pine Island know it well, raising grains and beef on hilly ground and seeing more frequent heavy rains than ever before.

“I remember when I was in high school, they talked about global warming,” Mike said. “It was a theory about how carbon dioxide emissions from coal and fossil fuels leading to more downpours, and they said, ‘If it happens, it’ll be pretty obvious.’”

So the family turned its focus to soil health, practicing no-till and minimum-till and signing up for the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP). They haven’t had to change too dramatically, since Mike’s parents also worked hard on conservation practices. And they love to learn about what they can do to become better farmers.

Good decisions

The Frosts’ land has been in the family since 1855, when Mike’s great-grandfather homesteaded it. His grandfather started milking registered Holsteins in 1913, which Mike’s father and Mike himself continued to raise for 90 years. Mike, a 1984 University of Minnesota graduate, went to West Germany for a few months with FFA following graduation, then came home and went into partnership with his dad on the dairy.

One of the good decisions they made was in transition planning. When Mike’s father died in 1996, Mike was able to buy the rest of the farm thanks to what they’d set up. He married Linda, also a dairy farm kid from Goodhue, in 1997, and had their son Matthew shortly thereafter. They made the difficult decision to sell the dairy cows in 2004, which they don’t regret.

“We were skeptical because if you’ve been doing the same thing for a long time, it’s scary to do something different,” Mike said. “But we would have had to invest a lot in upgrades, we only had 60 cows, and I didn’t want to grow the business. The milk prices were pretty high, so the cows sold well. Looking back, we figure that was a good time to have sold them.”

They’ve had small herds of Angus beef cattle on and off since then, and they do now, along with working on implementing more regenerative agriculture practices and putting some of their 378 acres in the Conservation Reserve Program. The MAWQCP recommended they add some cover crops, which they’re receptive to doing.

Good luck and good decisions have made that more possible.

“In 2012-13, the crop prices were doing well, so we were able to pay down debt on the farm, and that’s really helped us,” Mike said. They also have an asset in their son Matthew, who’s studying engineering at the University of Wisconsin-Stout and likes fixing computers and cars. If he’s home, he’ll help out with whatever tasks he can.

“He likes to help with the technical side of farming,” Linda said.

Health care perspectives

Recently, MFU has called on the Frosts to speak up about health care costs with government leaders. Experiencing a stark increase in monthly premiums a few years ago, they’re well-equipped to point out the need to make individual market-based insurance more affordable.

“Our premiums went from being in the $400s per month to $2,409 per month, with a $6,500 deductible per person, over 10 years,” Mike said. “Linda is on Medicare now, fortunately, so that helped with the costs. We could have gotten more subsidies, but you feel like you should be able to do this yourself and not have to rely on the government. I think it’s good [to pay some of the premium cost] because then you have skin in the game. But when it’s such a high price, you have no choice.”

And, Linda added, “If you’re not healthy, it’s going to cost you.”

Invitation from a neighbor

The Frost family joined MFU about 15 years ago, thanks in part to their neighbor Mike Clemens.

“Mike Clemens’ dad bought the land around us, so we knew their family,” Mike Frost said. “He stopped by and talked to us about Farmers Union. I liked how it was focused around family farms and how members can easily present policy ideas at county conventions, which then get discussed at the state level. And I like a lot of the policies we support.”

Clemens was previously the Olmsted County Farmers Union President before his trucking job became an obstacle to it. John Larsen of Mantorville stepped up as President and Mike Frost became Vice President. He’s embraced opportunities to get involved in the legislative activities of MFU.

We went on the National Farmers Union Fly-In in 2016,” he said. “My thing was ethanol, and also Country-of-Origin-Labeling. We should do what we can to support the American farmer.

“Some of the representatives from urban areas were really interested in learning more about farming, which was great to see and I think is a result of having nutrition programs in the Farm Bill.”

Mike also attended Lobby Day Drive-In last month and spoke up about the importance of the Rural Finance Authority. He also enjoyed sharing his farm’s conservation story with Attorney General Keith Ellison.

Work in progress

The Frosts love to learn and have sought out all kinds of unique opportunities. Mike has served on local advisory boards, including one for an energy company and one with Rochester’s Mayo Clinic Bio-Bank. They also enjoy going to educational meetings about different farming practices.

“The Frosts are big believers in education,” Mike said. “Even when you’re farming, going to meetings and talking to other farmers about what works is really important.”

Matthew’s had a solid educational experience as well, not just at school or on the farm but in the whole process of food delivery. He’s worked several positions at Hy-Vee and at the Kemps dairy plant, and recently worked with the GrubHub food takeout serves as a driver. He’s taken food from farm-to-door.

The Frost family knows that farming is going to change a lot, for better or for worse. But it’s always worth it to do a good job.

“Farming is kind of like practicing,” Mike said. “You keep trying to get better at it and leave the land for the next generation.” ▲
On Feb. 22 at the Full Board meeting I spoke about our membership goals for 2020. You may have seen the NFU membership awards featured in previous issues of Minnesota Agriculture— if you haven’t, it is also included in this issue and you should review it as we will be aiming to have some counties achieve the Leadership Achievement Award to be recognized at National Farmers Union Convention in 2021. My hope is that we have at least 10 counties achieve this award for Minnesota to be recognized next year as an Outstanding State.

In order to achieve these goals, I have asked counties to volunteer to be a part of targeted tracking and quarterly check ins to make sure we are all on track to meet the requirements of the awards. I have also begun tracking every county’s membership totals by month and will do so every month this year to better target membership renewal efforts.

I asked for volunteers at the Full Board meeting and have 13 counties as of the date I am writing this article willing to participate, but we’d be more than happy to have more. Most of the requirements boil down to having more frequent meetings and doing something in your local community that promotes Farmers Union. This could include a county happy hour at a local brewery, helping host a Breakfast on The Farm or a picnic. Does your county provide money to a 4-H auction or one of your members host some type of agritourism event? All these things are community engagement and would fulfill a requirement of the Leadership Award.

I truly believe that many counties are already meeting more than half of the criteria for these awards, and I want those counties to receive the recognition they deserve. In addition to receiving recognition at the 2021 NFU Convention, any county that achieves the award will receive $200 from the state office for the county—similar to the Early Bird Bonus— as well as recognition at the annual MFU Convention.

If you would like to host a meeting, happy hour, bowling night, potluck, etc. please give the state office at least 14 days’ notice to send out postcards, create a Facebook event and include it in the weekly E-news and Minnesota Agriculture. Please feel free to call or e-mail me any time to discuss these awards and any ideas you may have for them.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the need for social distancing at this time, please do not schedule any official meetings or events until further notice.

New MFU chapters

I’m also pleased to report that three counties organized into MFU chapters this year! Hennepin and Ramsey counties formed a combined chapter, and St. Louis County also organized. This follows the organization of Kittson County last fall.

Hennepin/Ramsey County members elected Robert Woods as President, Kajsa Beatty as Vice President and Mike Rivard as Secretary/Treasurer. St. Louis County elected Missy Roach as President, Paul Fish as Vice President and Robin Pliml as Secretary/Treasurer. The Kittson County President is Chuck Dziengel.

If you’re in an unorganized county and would like to organize, please give me a call at (651) 288-4064.

Newly elected Hennepin/Ramsey County officers: Mike Rivard, Secretary/Treasurer; Robert Woods, President; and Kajsa Beatty, Vice President

Newly elected St. Louis County officers: Robin Pliml, Secretary/Treasurer; Paul Fish, Vice President; and Missy Roach, President
Get Social With Minnesota Farmers Union!

Do you like to use Facebook, Twitter or Instagram to keep up with news you care about? You’ll find us there, too. Follow Minnesota Farmers Union on social media to find out about events, policy happenings, photos and more.

Facebook: Minnesota Farmers Union
Twitter: @mnfarmersunion
Instagram: mnfarmersunion

Tag us in posts we should see and we’ll like and share them.

MDA Produce Safety Program

FSMA Produce Safety Rule Grower Trainings through April 2020

Register now for the upcoming grower trainings brought to you by the MDA Produce Safety Program and the University of Minnesota Extension along with other partners. Attendees will learn food safety practices, Produce Safety rule requirements and answers to questions about the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety rule.

If your farm is not excluded or exempt from the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety rule, at least one supervisor or responsible party from your farm must complete a training course that uses FDA-recognized curriculum or an equivalent. The MN grower training course meets this requirement. The cost for the training is currently subsidized at $35 per attendee.

For more information on dates and locations of the Grower Trainings and to register online, please visit mda.state.mn.us/growertraining.

Dates & Locations: Apr. 9 • Winona and Apr. 14 • Lamberton

NEW Spanish-language trainings:
Produce Safety Rule Grower Training • Apr. 18
Produce Safety Alliance Train-the-Trainer course • Apr. 18–19

Chicken Mixed Vegetables Pan Fried Noodles

Chin Dian Café & Prairie Pride Farm

Yield: 4-6 servings

1/2 lb. egg noodles
6 cups water
4 T canola or vegetable oil, divided
1/2 lb. skinless, boneless Prairie Pride Farm chicken breasts, sliced
1 cup Chinese broccoli (or broccoli), chopped and blanched
1 cup yu choy (or bok choy), chopped and blanched
1/2 cup carrots, julienned
3 T black bean stir fry sauce
1/2 cup Prairie Pride Farm chicken stock
1 T cornstarch dissolved in 2 T water

In a medium pot, bring 6 cups water to a boil over high heat. Add noodles and boil for about 1 minute, or until noodles are soft. Drain cooked noodles through a colander and set aside.

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a large frying pan over medium-high heat. Add cooked noodles to hot oil and spread them out evenly. Pan fry noodles for 3 minutes on each side until both sides are crispy. Transfer noodles to a serving platter, and set aside.

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a wok over medium-high heat. When oil is hot, add sliced chicken. Stir fry chicken until cooked, stirring constantly to prevent sticking (reduce heat, if necessary). Add blanched Chinese broccoli and yu choy and carrots to wok and toss well with chicken. Add black bean stir fry sauce, chicken stock, and cornstarch slurry into chicken and vegetable mixture. Stir well and cook until sauce is slightly thickened. Turn off heat. Pour finished mixture evenly over noodles. Serve hot.

Chef’s note: Nina suggests purchasing a whole Prairie Pride Farm chicken for this dish, using the chicken breasts in the stir fry and the remainder of the chicken to make a flavorful chicken stock.
**UPCOMING EVENTS**

**Minnesota Ag and Rural Leadership (MARL) Program**

The Minnesota Ag and Rural Leadership (MARL) Program is now accepting applications for Class XI. Individuals with a passion for agriculture and rural Minnesota, are 21 years or older, are leaders in their communities and are willing to have open-minded conversations are encouraged to apply.

MARL members will be expected to attend eleven seminars during the 18-month program. MARL Seminars are normally held from noon Wednesday to noon Friday, with some exceptions. The time commitment for seminars of MARL Class XI will be 21 days the first year and 24 days the second year. Nine seminars rotate around the state, one is held in Washington, D.C. in Year 1, and an international study seminar will be held abroad – destination TBD, in Year 2.

To apply, go to [www.marlprogram.org/application](http://www.marlprogram.org/application) by April 24. You can also nominate someone who you think is a good candidate for the program at this page and view the program schedule for Class XI.

MFU has had great representation in MARL since its inception. Programming Director Michelle Medina is a member of Class X currently, and President Gary Wertish was part of Class VII and Membership and Outreach Rep Peter Ripka was in Class VI. Many other MFU members have participated as well! Don’t hesitate to reach out to any previous class member and ask about it.

**Minnesota Cooks Day Correction**

Oops! The Minnesota State Fair accidentally told us the wrong date for Minnesota Cooks Day 2020, so to avoid any confusion, please pull out your black sharpie immediately and mark **Sunday, August 30** as the correct day. We look forward to seeing you there!

**The Farmer and the Chef:**
*Farm Fresh Minnesota Recipes and Stories*
by Bruce Miller, Claudine Arndt & Katie Cannon – Minnesota Farmers Union
Recipes from breakfast to dessert accompanied by stunning photography showcasing Minnesota farmers and the bounty they harvest. Recipes are created by some of Minnesota’s finest chefs and professional cooks who serve up local food at popular restaurants around the state.

Available for pre-order on Amazon!

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**FUIA Agent Highlight:**

**DENNIS KLOCOW, JR.**
(507) 532-0418
1220 E College Dr, Marshall
dklocow@iw.net

**Why is working with Farmers Union Insurance Agency and Minnesota Farmers Union important to you?**

**Working together as a team is a concept that I champion. By treating my relationship with my insureds as teamwork, it helps create a smooth flow between my customers and me. By utilizing resources from both organizations, we Agents have a better exchange of information that help our clients’ insurance needs.**

**What community organizations are you passionate about?**

I was on our local fire department for many years and enjoyed helping our community. However, I resigned to take care of my oldest son who has Cerebral Palsy. I have also been very involved in sports and enjoy working with kids as well. I was the track coach for Lakeview School in Cottonwood but have now retired; I still continue helping kids develop their athletic skills in my K5 Gym and find it very rewarding.

**Please tell us a little bit about your family life.**

I am married and have three kids. My wife works at Schwan’s Foods in Marshall. My oldest son lives in a group home in Marshall and works at Advance Opportunities, whose mission is to advance the lives of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through creative community partnerships, vocational training and employment opportunities. My daughter graduated from Moorhead State University with a degree in Speech Pathology in December 2019, and will be heading to graduate school next Fall. She is also very involved in bodybuilding and fitness competitions. My youngest son is a Junior at Lakeview School and is involved in football, basketball and track.

**What is your number one concern when reviewing and selling farm insurance?**

My main concern when selling insurance to farmers is their Health Insurance. I want to make sure they have the coverages they and their families need and that the premiums are affordable for them.

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**Photo © 2019 Katie Cannon Photography**