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February 25, 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 and Chair Sundin:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), I write to share our strong support for investment in the meat processing technical training programs under development at Central Lakes and Ridgewater Colleges. The bottleneck in meat processing, made more severe by a lack of a trained workforce, continues to present a significant challenge for our family farmer members as they work to expand their operations and meet local demand. Continued strong investment in these programs is central to developing needed capacity in this sector and building a meat and poultry processing system that is more distributed, resilient, and fair.

MFU is a grassroots organization that has represented Minnesota's family farmers, ranchers, and rural communities since 1918. Our livestock producing members are experiencing a shortage of processing that is limiting their farm businesses. This bottleneck has been a persistent challenge for many years and was intensified by the closure of large packing plants due to COVID-19. In the early months of the pandemic, well over half of the mostly direct-market farmers surveyed reported a lack of processing—and only 17% said they had enough processing. A majority of respondents (54%) said that they would raise more livestock if there was more processing available.

At the height of the pandemic, large packing plants shut down due to outbreaks of the virus. This deeply unfortunate reality caused a bottleneck in processing that resulted in farmers killing and composting or rendering market-ready hogs. Soon after, volunteers at the University of Minnesota partnered with farm organizations to conduct case studies with several small to medium sized processors. From those interviewed, skilled labor was the single most limiting factor to expansion.

Central Lakes and Ridgewater Colleges are working closely with their system office, farm groups, industry partners, workforce development agencies, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, and others to address this workforce shortage by starting meat processing technical training programs set to begin next fall. These flexible, practical programs will give students the skills they need to not only join teams at regional processors, but also take over existing plants to ensure these rural businesses continue into the next generation.

Coupled with investments in upgrading processing facilities through Minnesota's successful AGRI Value Added program, helping processors attract and retain employees, and incorporating of meat cutting into high school agriculture education, these investments in the colleges will help Minnesota's rural economy emerge from the pandemic more resilient than before.

Thank you for the investments your committee approved last session to address the meat processing bottleneck and for your continued attention to this important issue. 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, prominent "G" and "W".

Gary Wertish
President, Minnesota Farmers Union

CC: Governor Tim Walz and Lt. Gov. Flanagan
Commissioner Thom Petersen