



305 Roselawn Ave E. | Suite 200 | St. Paul, MN 55117
Phone: (651) 639-1223 | www.mfu.org

March 13, 2023

Chair Aric Putnam
Senate Agriculture Committee
95 University Avenue W.
Minnesota Senate Bldg., Room 3215
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Putnam and members of the committee:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), I write to share our strong support for the meat processing bills before your committee. The bottleneck in meat processing continues to be a challenge for our family farmer members as they work to expand their operations and meet local demand. Helping local and regional processors navigate the web of standards and regulations, upgrade their facilities, and train new employees will help strengthen these small businesses and benefit our family farmer members.

MFU is grassroots general farm organization that has represented Minnesota's family farmers, ranchers, and rural communities since 1918. The meat processing bottleneck—laid bare by COVID-19—is a top concern for our family farmer members. That's why at our annual convention in November, delegates from across the state voted to make expanding local and regional processing one of our top Special Orders of Business for 2023. We support:

- **Funding the AGRI Value Added program for meat and poultry processing (SF2620, Kupec)** – this flagship program to support meat and poultry processors has a strong track record of success and continued investment is well-timed. First, helping processors start up, expand, and modernize their facilities will help them serve more farmers, directly addressing the bottleneck experienced by our members across the state. Second—and much like farmers—many processors are reaching retirement age. Investing in upgrading their facilities will ensure that these businesses are able to transition to the next generation.
- **Establishing a meat processing navigator position at MDA (SF1592, Kupec)** – this proposal mirrors that brought forward by Governor Walz in his budget and will help more processors get off the ground. Given the severe bottleneck in local processing and a growing demand for locally-raised meat, many of our members are exploring opportunities to process their own livestock and that of their neighbors. In this work, MDA's inspection staff is an excellent partner, providing advice and ensuring that our members don't make expensive mistakes in design and construction. That said, at present MDA's primary mission is inspection and they can only do so much.

Adding a navigator position will help MDA expand their direct service to processors who are working to get businesses started, helping them achieve inspected status, comply with regulations, and access state and federal funding. Not only that, but since it's housed in the inspection program, this position will bring a one-to-one federal match.

- **Funding grants for worker training, recruitment, and retention** (SF2681, Kunes) – this investment in scholarships and worker placement is well-timed with two colleges—Central Lakes in Staples and Ridgewater in Willmar—starting meat cutting technical training programs to teach students the art of meat cutting. As the state went for a generation without any formal training for meat cutting, lack of a trained workforce continues to be a top challenge for meat processors as they work to meet demands from livestock producers and consumers. This program will leverage existing partnerships to help more students—including those for whom English is a second language—access the technical training programs and find employment in the industry.
- **Funding training grants to help navigate regulations** (SF861, Rarick) – both college meat cutting programs were designed in close partnership with industry and will have flexible options for customized training. Providing support for processors or their employees to attend trainings at these colleges or other institutions could help those businesses up their inspection status, add new species, incorporate halal, kosher, or other practices, or execute a generational transition. All these actions will serve local farmers well.

Taken together, this work will help rebuild a system that was long neglected in Minnesota. We have a long way to go, but we are grateful for your committee's work to build a food system that is more distributed, resilient, and fair for workers, consumers, and farmers.

Thank you to your committee for your strong support of local meat processing. 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, flowing style.

Gary Wertish
President, Minnesota Farmers Union