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Chair Aric Putnam

Vice Chair Robert Kupec

Senator Torrey Westrom

Members, Senate Agriculture, Broadband, and Rural Development Committee

Dear Chair Putnam and Members of the Committee,

I'm writing to express my strong support for Senator Kunesh's bill appropriating funds for Farmers' Markets and Direct Marketing Producers (SF 2900).

I own and operate Medicine Creek Farm in Pine County. I raise grass fed beef and lamb and pastured pork, and direct market all my products to over 500 customers primarily in the metro regions of the Twin Cities and Duluth. I am also a member of the Emerging Farmers Working Group (EFWG), advising the MDA on ways to improve equity and access for other farmers like me.

One commonality of the vast majority of emerging farmers is that we are highly likely to be direct-marketing all our products. Many vegetable producers rely on farmers markets for much—if not all—of their income. Livestock producers often use both farmers markets and online ordering, making deliveries to urban areas or partnering with vegetable CSAs and community drop sites.

Emerging farmers have chosen to direct-market for both practical and values-based reasons. First and foremost, we want to produce food for our local communities. As heard in EFWG meetings, many emerging immigrant and Native American farmers are providing culturally relevant foods for their friends and family that are difficult or impossible to find in the grocery store. Some have lived in food deserts or are working toward food sovereignty for their tribes. We want to invest in our local communities, provide resiliency in the face of global uncertainty, and feed our neighbors.

The practical reason to direct-market our products is that many of us do not have access to the capital to scale to a size where we can create a reliable income stream from wholesale or commodity markets. Direct marketing is the only way many emerging farmers can manage to start a farm business and set a price that covers the cost of production, allowing us to avoid the instability of commodity market price fluctuations.

But direct-marketing also presents challenges, particularly with access to infrastructure such as that needed to comply with food safety regulations, meat processors (and particularly to harvest bison

or Halal livestock) and commercial kitchens to create value-added products. Operating at a smaller scale also means our overhead costs are higher, and the tools, equipment, and fences we need are difficult to finance.

We also generally have an added workload of managing websites, e-commerce stores, social media, and invoicing systems to sell our products and manage online relationships with customers. In addition to producing high quality meat and produce, we have to also be tech-savvy salespeople, accountants, marketing specialists, customer service representatives, and often even cooking educators.

The funding provided in SF2900 could go a long way to supporting emerging farmers, whether that's making their farmers market more successful so they can spend more time growing and less time marketing, or grants to direct-market farmers to help with the costs of wearing many hats or investing in infrastructure and equipment.

Please continue to support and invest in emerging farmers who are feeding their fellow Minnesotans. I appreciate your consideration of this proposal and thank Senator Kunesh for her leadership as well as the Committee's work on behalf of Minnesota's food producers.

Sincerely,



Hannah K. Bernhardt