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Mississippi River and its watershed since 1993.

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February 10, 2025

Re: Support for “continuous living cover” agriculture programs

Dear Chair Putnam and Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Veterans, Broadband, and Rural Development,

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) strongly supports public investments in “continuous living cover” agriculture programs, in particular the University of Minnesota’s Forever Green Initiative and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s *Developing Markets for CLC Crops* grant program. These efforts are cornerstones of a market-based strategy to improve our state’s water resources, public health, rural economic development, and agricultural resilience, while ultimately minimizing the costs to taxpayers of farm conservation.

Friends of the Mississippi River is a non-profit organization established in 1993 to engage people to protect, restore and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in Minnesota. FMR’s focus on sustainable agricultural has been a mainstay of our mission for years because we know we cannot achieve our conservation goals – among them: improving aquatic habitat, pollinator diversity, and landscape resilience in the face of a shifting climate – without reducing the unintended negative impacts of conventional farming practices.

To this end, we are working alongside the University of MN’s Forever Green Initiative (FGI) as founding members of the Forever Green Partnership, a major effort to advance alternative crops and cropping systems in the Upper Midwest that can simultaneously address critical natural resource challenges, including degraded water quality, lack of wildlife habitat, and rising emissions.

FGI’s globally recognized team of plant breeders, commercialization specialists, agronomists, and food scientists are working in tandem to develop new perennial and winter-annual crops that can transform agricultural production systems in our region. Whereas presently, millions of acres of Midwestern cropland have no living plants for much of the year between harvest and planting, FGI cropping systems would cover that land with green, growing plants. Known as “continuous living cover,” this approach to farming has incredible potential to mitigate urgent concerns and prevent future harms.

A wide body of research shows that continuous living cover systems drastically reduce nitrate leaching and soil erosion. Several of the crops that FGI is developing provide pollen and nectar resources to pollinators. In addition, maintaining living plant cover over the winter is likely to improve food and shelter resources for wildlife. These systems also have the potential to be more climate resilient, since they can improve soil health and protect the land from high-intensity

rainfall events; and researchers are optimizing crop traits for a variety of future climate conditions including drought tolerance. Two core FGI crops – winter camelina and pennycress – are the focus of substantial interest as feedstocks for ultra-low-carbon renewable biofuels, animal feed, bioplastics and more.

Crucially, these crops are poised to produce significant revenue streams for farmers, a departure from the current “best management practice” approach to farmland conservation, which is both expensive to subsidize and difficult to scale. However, as with other agricultural and technological innovations, early-stage public support is required to catalyze the virtuous cycle of market-based conservation. For farmers to adopt “continuous living cover” systems, there must be commercial demand for such crops and mature supply chains at each stage of production, aggregation, distribution, and marketing. That is why we are working with the MN Department of Agriculture and other stakeholders to make early investments in small and mid-sized Minnesota businesses that comprise these supply chains, via MDA’s *Developing Markets for CLC Crops* program. This program has invested \$1m to date in a variety of companies poised for commercial breakthrough, but the allocated funds are exhausted, and we need further state support to meet demand.

These programs bring a sizable return on investment for Minnesota’s economy, public health, and our environment, and we urge you to continue such forward-looking strategies for growth.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter LaFontaine". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent loop at the end.

Peter LaFontaine
Agricultural Policy Manager
Friends of the Mississippi River