



Emerging Farmers' Working Group

2024 Legislative Report

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Minnesota Department of Agriculture
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Thank you to all the Emerging Farmer's Working Group members that have served in the past four years for your time, dedication, and steadfast advocacy for those not in the room. The list to thank people is too long but I will start off with my biggest thank you to Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan, Commissioner Thom Petersen, and Deputy Commissioner Andrea Vaubel for always supporting emerging farmers wherever they may reside within our state and Minnesota Agriculture. Finally, I want to thank the amazing EFO staff – Lillian Otieno, Director of EFO, Emily Toner, Grant Specialist Senior, and Anthony Adams, Outreach Coordinator – for the fantastic work you do to make sure information is not a barrier for all farmers.

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Overview

The Emerging Farmers' Working Group (EFWG) created in 2020 is into its fifth year and the working group address the needs of all farmers, including emerging farmers throughout the state. In 2024, we had nine working group members finish their two-year terms and added 11 new members. We have members that represent new counties in the state such as Fillmore, Pope, Brown, Stearns, Morrison and Mower. This report will focus on the growth and progress that the EFWG has done to help eliminate systemic barriers to entry into agriculture and the work of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) to continue being a national leader in supporting rural and urban emerging farmers.

Each session of the Emerging Farmers Working Group (EFWG) is structured to address and support the evolving needs of Minnesota's emerging farmers. Agendas are designed to include timely updates on policies, programs, and grant opportunities relevant to the emerging farming community, while also spotlighting resources from both state and national perspectives. Presentations from experts, including representatives from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Tribal Liaison Office, and local organizations like The Good Acre, provide members with insights into best practices, financial assistance, and sustainable farming methods. Additionally, each session includes opportunities for interactive community discussions, allowing members to share their unique challenges, exchange ideas, and gain peer support. These discussions foster a collaborative atmosphere and ensure that all voices are heard and valued. By combining informative presentations with open dialogue, each session empowers members with knowledge, resources, and a sense of community, equipping them to make informed decisions and to effectively advocate for their communities. Some highlights to mention in 2024 were: Key topics included an overview from the Commissioner's Office, and a welcome address by Assistant Commissioner Patrice Bailey. Additionally, the group had the privilege of hosting an information session led by the Minister of Agriculture of Cameroon, who shared valuable insights into agricultural advancements and initiatives in West Africa. He provided an overview of the strategic efforts in Cameroon to boost agricultural productivity and sustainability, with a focus on enhancing food security, promoting climate-resilient farming practices, and expanding opportunities for emerging farmers.

The USDA Agricultural Census by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service in Minnesota offered comprehensive data on key metrics impacting farmers in Minnesota and nationwide. This presentation examined trends in farm ownership, production volumes, economic contributions, and demographic shifts, shedding light on the evolving landscape of U.S. agriculture. The data provided crucial context on emerging farmer demographics. Furthermore, the session created space for questions and interactive discussions, allowing members to explore how these insights could inform decision-making, optimize resource allocation, and identify potential opportunities within Minnesota's agricultural sector. We also invited The Good Acre which is the largest food hub in Minnesota. They work with emerging farmers and food entrepreneurs to achieve economic prosperity and is in St. Paul. The Good Acre's critical role in supporting emerging farmers, showcasing their programs and resources designed to strengthen and sustain small-scale farming operations. One of the central points of discussion was The Good Acre's Local Emergency Assistance Farmer Fund (LEAFF) program, which provides purchasing support for local farmers by connecting them with food distribution networks and markets. This initiative has been instrumental in helping farmers access stable income streams and expand their reach within the community.

One of the emerging farmers working group members, Marcus Carpenter who owns a farm called “Route One” which has opened pathways for aspiring farmers, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. Marcus shared his personal experiences and best practices in which he serves as a key advocate and trainer. Route One provides hands-on agricultural training to new and emerging farmers, focusing on practical skills, sustainable practices, and business development. Another highlight that farmers really connected with was the announcement of the Farm to School and early care grants as well as the Local Food Purchase Assistance program (LFPA). These initiatives provided a critical bridge between local farmers and community institutions, helping farmers secure stable markets while promoting fresh, locally grown food in schools and other public spaces. Farm to School and early care grants has been instrumental to emerging farmers in growing food for local schools around the state, which benefits the farmer. Early Care grants has helped family childcare providers that want to buy and serve Minnesota agriculture products.

Lastly, another highlight I would like to mention is the Down Payment Assistant Grant through the MDA. Many emerging farmers from across the state and some on the working group have applied and received help buying a farm which is designed to help first-time and small-scale farmers overcome the financial barrier of land acquisition.

New Farm Advocates

In 2024, there was a need for farm advocates that identified with emerging farmers not just across the state but understood the complexities that farmers deal with in both the urban and rural areas in Minnesota. This program has been instrumental in making landownership more attainable, enabling emerging farmers to build stable and lasting operations and be able to start generational wealth for their community and families.

Two new Farm Advocates were hired through a collaborative recruitment effort between the Rural Finance Authority [Farm Advocate program](#) and the Emerging Farmers Office. The additions to this program serving emerging farmers allows the MDA to reach new clients with these crucial resources, for one-on-one assistance for Minnesota farmers who face crisis caused by either, a natural disaster or financial problems and more. The two new Farm Advocates are:

Friendly Vang Johnson manages Friendly Hmong Farms and is also a member of the Emerging Farmers Working Group. Friendly has years of experience working with farmers in various states both as a federal employee with USDA and running her own programs in support of Hmong farmers and farmers of color. Friendly also speaks Hmong. More on Friendly and her farm [Friendly Hmong Farms](#).

Laura Cullip co-owns and operates Loon Organics Farm with her partner. She is also a farmer trainer, delivering modules in a joint MDA produce safety department, University of Minnesota Extension and farmers co training team for the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), produce safety trainings among other adult education trainer experiences. Laura speaks Spanish. More on Laura and her farm [Loon Organics Farm](#).

Year Five Initiatives & Outcomes

Strengthening the Emerging Farmers Network

EFWG continued to strengthen connections across communities through informative sessions and interactive discussions. Presentations from organizations like The Good Acre, updates from tribal liaisons, and introductions to legislative and state program leaders allowed members to gain a deeper understanding of the broader support network.

Improved Support and Resources for Emerging Farmers

The working group has focused on expanding resources and providing actionable insights. These included down payment assistance, grant opportunities, and increased support from the Tribal Liaison Office. The EFO shared funding and program access updates, helping members navigate financial pathways and plan for future growth.

Community Engagement and Feedback Collection

Through facilitated discussions, EFWG gathered input on emerging farmers' needs, preferences, and experiences. Members expressed strong support for EFO's outreach activities, highlighting the importance of educational workshops, networking events, and community engagement. This feedback will shape the outreach officer's role and help tailor EFO resources.

Conclusion

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Emerging Farmers Working Group has made substantial progress over the years in supporting and empowering emerging farmers across Minnesota. By adhering to the values of inclusivity, integrity, and engagement, the EFWG is creating a sustainable foundation for emerging farmers to thrive.

Appendix A: 2024-2026 Emerging Farmers' Working Group Members

- Cameron Bailey, Hennepin County
- Anika Bowie, Ramsey County
- Molly Byron, Waseca County
- Marcus Carpenter, Hennepin County
- Tara Conway, Hennepin County
- Gigi DiGiacomo, Hennepin County
- Katie Drewitz, Fillmore County
- Catherine Fleming, Hennepin County
- Heather Gaston, Pope County
- Kiersten Hansen, Brown County
- LuVessie Knox, Hennepin County
- Rev. Dr. Maren McDonell, PhD, Carver County
- Rozalyn Maney, Hennepin County
- Tara Ostendorf, Stearns County
- Jason Montgomery Riess, Washington County
- Jina Rahimi, Ramsey County
- Adi Salagram, Hennepin County
- Taran Skwira, Morrison County
- Relyndis Tegomoh, Ramsey County
- Friendly Vang-Johnson, Hennepin County
- Melanie Woodford, Mower County

Appendix B: Existing Resources for Emerging Farmers

Note: This list of resources available to emerging and historically underrepresented farmers.

Federal

- USDA American Rescue Plan Technical Assistance
- USDA Small and Mid-Sized Farmer Resources
- USDA Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Loan
- USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA)-Outreach Programs, Pandemic Assistance, FSA Veterans in Agriculture
- USDA Local and Regional Food Sector Toolkits and Handbooks
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)
- USDA New Farmers Website
- USDA Rural Development
- USDA FSA Stakeholder Tool Kit
- USDA Urban Agriculture Tool Kit

State

- Community Financial Development Grant (CDFI)
- Down Payment Assistant Grant
- Beginning Farmer Infrastructure Grant
- Aggie Bond Beginning Farmer Loan Program
- Beginning Farmer Tax Credit
- Board of Water and Soil Resources
- Dual-Training Pipeline (Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry)
- MDA FarmLink
- Farm to School
- MDA Grants
- MDA Agricultural Growth, Research, and Innovation Program
- Farm Business Management Scholarships
- Livestock Investment Grant
- MDA New Markets Program
- Sustainable Agriculture Demonstration Grant
- DEED-Office of New Americans
- Value-Added Grant
- Minnesota Grown
- Starting a Food Business Roadmap
- Workplace Safety Consultation (Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry)

Non-Government Resources

- Agua Gorda Cooperative
- AURI

- Big River Farms
- Black Family Land Trust
- Blue Zones
- Carpenter Nature Center
- Clean Energy Resource Teams
- Compeer Financial Emerging Markets, Local Food & Non-Traditional Ag
- Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship
- Dream of Wild Health
- Driftless Grown
- Emerging Farmers Conference
- Farm at the Arb
- Farm Commons
- Farmer Veteran Coalition
- Farmers' Legal Action Group
- Farmland Access Hub
- Food Animal Concerns Trust
- Grow and Farmer Fund
- Hmong American Farmers Association
- Hmong American Partnership
- Holistic Management
- Iroquois Valley Farmland REIT
- Lake Superior College Eco-Entrepreneurship Program
- Land Access Workshops
- Land Stewardship Project
- Local Food Advisory Committee (MISA)
- Main Street Project (Northfield)
- Midwest Sustainable Ag Working Group
- Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA)
- Minnesota Organic & Sustainable Education Service
- Minnesota African Immigrant Farmers Association
- Minnesota State Horticultural Society
- Minnesota Dairy Initiative
- Minnesota Farm Bureau
- Minnesota Farmers Union
- Minnesota Farmers Union-New Leader Academy
- Minnesota State Agricultural Centers of Excellence
- Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Services (MOSES)
- National Center for Appropriate Technology-ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture Program
- National Farmers Union-Beginning Farmer Institute
- National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
- Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust
- Northern Growers & Markets Conference