

# Minnesota Agriculture

Voice of Rural Minnesota



## *National Farmers Union award winners*



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April 2024

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# Planning with agent ensures business lives on

Sandy Shapiro

Scott liked to dream big. Although he came from humble beginnings, he and his brother David worked hard and together turned a two-man enterprise into the largest heating and air conditioning business in their area.



Sandy Shapiro

This allowed Scott and his wife, Cathy, to fulfill another dream—to build a home in the country and work it as a hobby farm. They wanted to give their two daughters a life that revolved around the outdoors and good living.

Scott's insurance professional, Mike, approached him to discuss the need to not only insure his family's personal needs but also his growing business with his brother David.

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Scott and David ran the business equally and realized after seeing a good friend's business struggle after the death of one of the owners that they needed a plan. Mike encouraged them to create a buy-sell agreement funded with life insurance to ensure the business could continue if one of them were to die. Plus, Scott had a personal life insurance policy that would allow Cathy and the girls to be okay financially if something were to happen to him.

As the business and Scott's financial responsibilities grew, Mike knew it was time to reassess Scott's life insurance needs. They met, found a need to increase Scott's personal and business coverage, and Mike investigated options.

Securing coverage was important but with Scott's schedule, it was difficult to

set aside time to complete a physical. Qualifying for life insurance, however, doesn't necessarily mean the need for a physical exam. For example, EMC National Life, a company that works with Farmers Union Agency, offers valuable and affordable term insurance up to \$2 million without requiring an exam and best of all, can be secured oftentimes in as little as a few days.

Tragically, just weeks after the life insurance applications were approved, Scott suffered a fatal accident. On July 4, this avid outdoorsman drowned while paddle boarding.

While Cathy and her daughters must now make a new life for themselves without Scott, the life insurance has been invaluable. The insurance through the business ensured

that Cathy was compensated for Scott's portion of the company instead of becoming an owner of a business she had no interest in running.

Scott's personal policy cemented their dream. "I have an incredible amount of gratitude, and it's all because of the life insurance," Cathy said. "Without it, we'd be gone from this property. Now my daughters can grow in the home we built, as we create a new life together."

At Farmers Union Agency we provide solutions to individuals, families and businesses. Can we help you?

Elements of the article regarding Scott's life insurance situation are courtesy of LifeHappens.org.

Shapiro is the Director of Sales, Health & Life for Farmers Union Agency.

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# President's message

**GARY WERTISH, PRESIDENT**

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What a great Lobby Day we had on Feb. 20. Thank you to the more than 75 members who traveled to St. Paul to participate in the legislative process. I think it was our best Lobby Day ever, thanks to the efforts of our Government Relations Director Stu Lourey and his legislative team.

Not only did members meet individually or in groups with their legislators, but they also met with several policymakers, including Gov. Tim Walz, Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, Attorney General Keith Ellison, House Speaker Melissa Hortman, House Majority Leader Jamie Long, Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Aric Putnam and House Agriculture Committee Chair Samantha Vang. They also met with agency heads from the Minnesota Departments of Agriculture, Transportation, Natural Resources and Commerce.

Our top issues this session include enacting Right to Repair legislation for farm equipment, moving the MinnesotaCare Public Option forward and funding AGRI, the Agricultural Growth, Research and Innovation program.

In the 2023 legislative session, legislators approved Right to Repair legislation, but they excluded farm equipment. Minnesota Farmers Union members support Right to Repair for farm equipment so they can either fix their own equipment or hire an independent repair technician of their choosing to get repairs done in a timely matter. The state soybean and corn grower organizations are also backing Right to Repair legislation and we thank them for their support.

Right to Repair legislation would not require that equipment manufacturers divulge trade secrets or share intellectual property. It would give farmers and independent repair technicians fair access to tools, manuals and diagnostic equipment needed to repair modern farm equipment.

As I've said before, this is no different than taking your car to an independent repair



*MFU President Gary Wertish looks on as Gov. Tim Walz and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan meet with MFU members during Lobby Day.*

shop rather than the dealership where you bought it. You can choose to take your vehicle to a dealership or independent mechanic. This competition has created opportunities for mechanics to open small businesses. It allows vehicle owners to choose where to have their vehicle repaired and to shop around for the best rates.

If you have a story to share about why Right to Repair is needed, contact MFU's Antimonopoly Director Justin Stofferahn at [justin@mfu.org](mailto:justin@mfu.org) or (612) 594-1252.

Another priority this session is moving the MinnesotaCare Public Option forward. Health care has been a top issue for Farmers Union members for several years as the cost of health care and health care insurance are increasing at an alarming rate.

For too many people, health care insurance is unaffordable or the coverage they can afford doesn't provide the coverage they need. They gamble that they won't have a medical emergency.

In the United States, medical debt has become a leading cause of personal bankruptcy, according to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

That's why a MinnesotaCare Public Option is so important. It would allow farmers and small business owners to buy into an insurance program that provides comprehensive services at an affordable rate.

MinnesotaCare was created in 1992 by Republican Gov. Arne Carlson and a bipartisan coalition of legislators. It provides health care coverage for more than 80,000 Minnesotans who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, but whose incomes are below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. MinnesotaCare has a track record of working well; the Public Option allows more people to participate in the well-established program.

If you would like to share your health care or health insurance story, contact Stu at [stu@mfu.org](mailto:stu@mfu.org) or (320) 232-3047.

A third priority is funding the AGRI program. The AGRI program was established in 2009 to promote the advancement of the state's agricultural and renewable energy industries through ethanol producer payments. When the ethanol producer payments were ending, agricultural proponents in the state got together and created

*continued on page 21*



# Advocacy and policy activities are enjoyable and empowering

## ANNE SCHWAGERL, VICE PRESIDENT

anne@mfu.org

When I think about my history with the Farmers Union, some of the most powerful and empowering moments are while participating in our advocacy and policy decision-making activities.

The staff at Minnesota Farmers Union has been busy at work over the past two months for our members. It feels like a whirlwind few weeks as the staff and leaders have been holding governance meetings, advocating for the priorities established by our grassroots members, and traveling to Scottsdale, Ariz., alongside the elected delegates to the National Farmers Union annual convention.

After a break for the holidays, our advocacy and policy activities roared back into high gear in mid-February with great full board and executive committee meetings. The full board shared their perspectives on emerging issues facing the legislature as well as how to successfully build membership in their communities.

The following week, MFU hosted the best Lobby Day in St. Paul since I have been involved with the organization, in my not-so-humble opinion. A mild February day brought more than 70 members to St. Paul to advocate for our shared 2024 legislative priorities, including the MinnesotaCare Public Option, Right to Repair, the rural veterinary shortage and building climate resilience. The MFU members assembled not only met directly with dozens of elected representatives in small group meetings, but also heard from elected leaders and members of the administration who came to our gathering space in the State Office Building to hear about issues that matter to farmers.

Following a full day of lobbying for our priorities, members and legislators alike were



*MFU members met with Senate President Bobby Joe Champion, DFL-Minneapolis, whose district includes the Mill City Farmers Market, during Lobby Day. Pictured, from left, Ella Daniels, MFU member and director of the Mill City Farmers Market, MFU Vice President Anne Schwagerl, Senate President Champion, MFU Antimonopoly Director Justin Stofferahn and Kelsey Love Zaavedra, Chisago County Farmers Union President.*



*MFU Vice President Anne Schwagerl and Swift County Farmers Union President Jim Falk met with Sen. Torrey Westrom, R-Alexandria, during Lobby Day. Pictured, from left, Jim and Karen Falk, Sen. Westrom and Schwagerl.*

treated to delicious appetizers at Farmers Kitchen + Bar, where our members were able to continue conversations informally around our farming experiences and what challenges and opportunities we face.

Coming on the heels of these successful events, many of the staff members attended the National Farmers Union annual convention. Along with the assembled delegates from Minnesota and all around the country, members and staff heard updates on the work being done at USDA, debated the National Farmers Union policy, networked with other family farmers and attended breakout sessions on a variety of topics. My favorite was on biofuels and next generation low-carbon marketing

opportunities for farmers. This market is developing quickly as demand for lower carbon intensity fuels continues to grow both domestically and globally. Farmers Union has long advocated that these markets need to be fair for family farmers, delivering the value back to the producers who have their hands in the dirt and boots on the ground.

These events make for a very busy “off season” for me, and the staff. I’m starting to wonder if I get an “off season” anymore, as spring planting season is coming quicker than I had imagined.

Have a great (and safe!) start to planting season.



# Minnesota Farmers Union is outstanding (But we already knew that)

**CLAUDINE ARNDT,  
MEMBERSHIP AND  
MINNESOTA COOKS  
DIRECTOR**

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At February’s full board meeting, I had the joy of recognizing the counties that earned National Farmers Union’s Leadership Achievement Award for 2023: Chisago, Dakota, Dodge, Fillmore, Hennepin-Ramsey, Kandiyohi, Pine, Redwood, Scott and St. Louis. The celebration continued at the NFU Convention in Scottsdale in March, where each of these counties was recognized again in front of the National Farmers Union delegation, which had me beaming from ear to ear.

Because Minnesota Farmers Union had 10 counties earn the Leadership Achievement Award and we experienced membership growth in 2023, MFU received an Outstanding Leadership Award. I, for one, have always known that MFU is outstanding, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit it felt good to see our larger Farmers Union family recognize it, too. We were one of only two state organizations that earned the Outstanding Leadership Award.

When I became MFU’s Membership Director in January of 2022, I was quickly introduced to NFU’s Leadership Achievement Award as a place to start, a possible road map for reenergizing membership. We were still very much emerging from the pandemic, and while people were starting to feel more comfortable gathering again, many didn’t know where to begin after being a bit stalled for a couple years. The award criteria (see criteria on page 16) provides a concrete outline of activities and goals that National Farmers Union has determined keeps organizations active and engaged at the local level. It answers the question, “What does it look like to be an active county?” for county leaders, members and, frankly, staff.



*MFU Membership and Minnesota Cooks Director Claudine Arndt and MFU Vice President Anne Schwagerl embrace after MFU was presented the Outstanding Leadership Award at the NFU convention.*

After two years of encouraging folks to use the Leadership Award as a guide, I think the proof is in the pudding. MFU’s membership grew last year. Visit our events page on the website at any given time and you’ll see a bunch of activities in the pipeline. Last year we welcomed 405 new

members to our organization, and I can’t count the number of times a new member asked us, “So, when are the members in my area getting together next?” It felt good to point them to the website’s event page and have opportunities to share with them.

I want to add that there were quite a few counties that came very close to achieving the award and only missed it by an event or the addition of a few members, including: Aitkin, Goodhue, Mille Lacs, Olmsted, Rice and Stearns counties.

At the board meeting, I asked leaders from the award-winning counties to come forward and share a tip for achieving the award or something they’ve noticed shifting in their county since following the outline. Here’s what they had to say:

**Hannah Bernhardt**, Pine County President, reported how the 2023 County

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## New Member Welcome Coffee Hour (virtual) 8:30 – 9:30 a.m. on Wednesday, April 17

Are you new to Minnesota Farmers Union? Our team would like to extend a warm welcome and invite you to join us for a casual virtual coffee hour with MFU staff. Being a new member of an organization can be intimidating, but everyone here is friendly, eager to get to know you and help you settle in. The New Member Welcome Coffee Hour will provide a brief introduction to Minnesota Farmers Union while giving us an opportunity to put a face with a name and learn more about what drew

you to our organization. Please bring any questions you may have. We look forward to meeting you!

Can’t make it? We’ll be changing up the timing of our new member gatherings from month to month to help make them accessible to all who want to join. Dates and times will be listed in the Minnesota Agriculture magazine and at [mfu.org/events](https://mfu.org/events). Members are also welcome to reach out directly to MFU staff with questions.

### New Member Welcome Coffee Hour (virtual)

Time: 8:30 a.m., April 17, 2024

<https://bit.ly/3VgSrZf>

Meeting ID: 878 1619 1731 • Passcode: 534072



# Lobby Day kicks off busy legislative session

## STU LOUREY GOVERNMENT RELATIONS DIRECTOR

stu@mfu.org

Just one week after legislators gathered in St. Paul for the start of the 2024 legislative session on Feb. 12, MFU members from across the state gathered for our annual Lobby Day. More than 75 members made the trip to meet lawmakers and talk about making healthcare more affordable,



*Rice County Farmers Union President Tessa Parks testifies before the Senate Health and Human Services Committee on the Minnesota-Care Public Option. For her and her spouse, Wyatt, access to health care is a barrier to their dream of farming full time.*

passing Right to Repair, creating climate resilience, addressing the shortage of large animal veterinarians, protecting the agriculture budget and a host of other priorities defined through our grassroots process.

Lobby Day participants gathered in a House hearing room that MFU reserved to host meetings throughout the day. The space was packed, leaving standing room only at times throughout the day. Great attendance and blue Farmers Union stickers ensured that even lawmakers we

weren't meeting with felt MFU's presence at the Capitol.

As a group, members met with Gov. Tim Walz, Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, Attorney General Keith Ellison, House Speaker Melissa Hortman, DFL-Brooklyn Park; House Majority Leader Jamie Long, DFL-Minneapolis; Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Aric Putnam, DFL-St. Cloud; House Agriculture Committee Chair Samantha Vang, DFL-Brooklyn Center; House Agriculture Ranking Member Paul Anderson, R-Starbuck, and agency heads

from the Minnesota Departments of Agriculture, Transportation, Natural Resources and Commerce. They also broke out into smaller groups to attend meetings with their local representatives, which were scheduled by MFU's legislative team.

The day kicked off earlier than expected with drop-in visits from House Ag Vice Chair Kristi Pursell, DFL-Northfield; Rep. Ethan Cha, DFL-Woodbury; Rep. Nathan Nelson, R-Hinckley, and Rep. Koahly Her, DFL-St. Paul, all of whom were eager to meet with the group.

Next, we were joined by Deputy Commissioner Andrea Vaubel, Assistant Commissioner Patrice Bailey and Assistant Commissioner Peder Kjeseth from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. They thanked MFU members for their work on green fertilizer and the Emerging Farmers Office. They also answered questions about the projected shortfall in the department's Agricultural Growth, Research, and Innovation (AGRI) program, which houses the state's work on farm to school, biofuels infrastructure, meat processing, urban

agriculture, livestock investment and county fairs. In short, funding for this program was scheduled to sunset in 2025 and the legislature still hasn't filled that gap.

Next, we were joined by Senate Ag Chair Putnam, who started by thanking those in the room who hosted farm visits last summer. In addition to listening sessions, Putnam visited more than 50 farms across the state. If you'd like to host a lawmaker on your farm, please reach out. And know that it's powerful.

After highlighting the grain indemnity fund, meat processing and other issues he was glad to advance with MFU, Putnam took questions on issues expected before the legislature this session. Jim Joens of Nobles County talked about the need for Right to Repair based on his experience working with his son at his independent repair shop. He described frustrating situations—including where equipment was stranded in a roadway—because of how manufacturers continue to restrict access to the critical software functions needed to unlock equipment once they've made repairs.

Alan Perish of Todd County raised consolidation in the dairy industry. According to the latest ag census, Minnesota lost nearly 1,500 dairy farms between 2017 and 2022 despite the state adding cows. Putnam highlighted a bill he's put forward (SF4234) to require a higher level of permitting for dairies having more than 10,000 animal units, a change that is likely to affect just one business now operating in Minnesota.

Next, Attorney General Ellison continued the conversation on Right to Repair and dairy. He also highlighted his partnership with MFU on antitrust work and reintroduced his now expanded antitrust team. Aaron Chervestad of Pennington County raised the issue of cellular communication in northwestern Minnesota. Despite paying for service, coverage is spotty, and the

*continued on page 18*



# Legislation to ‘Unrig Minnesota’s Economy’ introduced in state legislature

**JUSTIN STOFFERAHN,**  
**ANTIMONOPOLY DIRECTOR**  
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Several years ago, antimonopoly leaders nationally were just starting to consider the important role state government can play in protecting fairness and competition in the economy. Much of the focus was on reviving long-dormant agencies like the Federal Trade Commission and the Department of Justice’s Antitrust Division. State attorneys general and state legislators were not often part of that initial work, but in Minnesota and across the country that is changing as state leaders step up.

In the early weeks of the legislative session Attorney General Keith Ellison, House Speaker Melissa Hortman, DFL-Brooklyn Park, Reps. Emma Greenman, DFL-Minneapolis, and Kristi Pursell, DFL-Northfield, and Sens. Lindsey Port, DFL-Burnsville, and Liz Boldon, DFL-Rochester, unveiled a package of legislation to “Unrig Minnesota’s Economy” and help address the harms caused by corporate monopolies in our state.

That agenda includes two key MFU priorities:

- Legislation sponsored by Rep. Pursell and Sen. Rob Kupec, DFL-Moorhead, that would create an agriculture-specific Right to Repair law modeled after the one passed in Colorado last year. This legislation would remove the farm equipment exemption in Minnesota’s current Right to Repair law so that farmers and independent repair technicians have access to the parts, tools, manuals and diagnostic equipment needed to repair modern farm equipment.
- Legislation sponsored by Rep. Steve Elkins, DFL-Bloomington, and Sen. Bonnie Westlin, DFL-Plymouth, that would modernize the Minnesota

Antitrust Act. The legislation would update the penalties under the law, which have not been adjusted in more than 50 years. The legislation would also create important new definitions that would give public and private enforcers of the antitrust law more explicit authority to protect farmers, workers, small business owners and consumers from corporate monopolies.

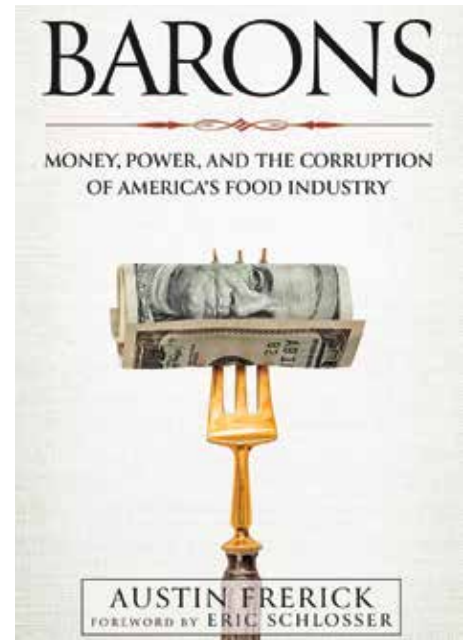
Beyond the specific legislation, the press conference gave policymakers an opportunity to highlight the extreme consolidation in Minnesota’s economy and the impact it has on a wide range of industries. While a press conference is not a law, it is a testament to MFU’s leadership on these issues that this event took place and is an important step in the work ahead.

Joining the elected officials at the event were MFU members Danny Lundell and Linda Larson along with representatives from various labor organizations, including The Awood Center, the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1189 and Minnesota Nurses Association, as well as North Star Prosperity, which is committed to expanding economic opportunity for all Minnesotans.

Right to Repair was a top talking point at MFU’s Lobby Day in February as members met with their legislators, Attorney General Ellison and others about the need to pass ag-specific Right to Repair protections.

Momentum is also building for the federal government to step up on the issue of Right to Repair. National Right to Repair advocates, the Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) and iFixIt, have petitioned the FTC to write strong rules that would give consumers, farmers and independent repair businesses access to the parts, tools and diagnostic equipment needed to fix things like laptops or tractors. In response to the petition, the FTC held a public comment period that closed in early February and the MFU submitted comments

urging the FTC to adopt strong rules that will break the monopoly on repair held by farm equipment manufacturers.



## Upcoming event

MFU will be co-hosting an event featuring Austin Frerick at Moon Palace Books in Minneapolis at 6 p.m. April 3. Frerick, who is a fellow at the Thurman Arnold Project, an academic center focused on antimonopoly, is the author of “*Barons: Money, Power, and the Corruption of America’s Food Industry*.” *Barons*, which spotlights how consolidation is harming the food system, is the story of seven corporate titans, their rise to power and the consequences for everyone else. If you are in the Twin Cities that day, please come on out to Moon Palace Books.



## ATTENTION MEMBERS!

Is your contact information up to date with MFU?

Email changes to [claudine@mfu.org](mailto:claudine@mfu.org).

# More than 75 members attend Lobby Day



Support for a public option that allows family farmers and other small business owners to buy into MinnesotaCare at affordable rates and passing Right to Repair legislation that allows farmers to repair

their own equipment or have it repaired by an independent repair technician of their choice were among the top issues discussed during the nearly 50 meetings. Other priorities include establishing a new

Certified Veterinary Technician license, supporting competitive markets, maintaining a strong budget for agriculture, and maintaining access to high-quality healthcare in rural communities.



From left, Paul Sobocinski, Redwood County; Jon Reinhart, Blue Earth County; Leon Plaetz, Redwood County; Rep. Paul Torkelson, R-Hanska; Jana Thormodson and Theresa Keaveny, Brown County.



Rep. Brian Johnson, R-Cambridge, and Vicki Trytten of Chisago County.



Rice County Farmers Union members Mike Peterson and Lindsey Zemanek met with Rep. Pat Garofalo, R-Farmington, center.



Filmore County Farmers Union President Eunie Biel visited Rep. Greg Davids, R-Preston, during Lobby Day.



Rep. Kristi Pursell, DFL-Northfield, spoke to MFU members on Lobby Day. MFU President Gary Wertish is pictured at right.



From left, Dustin Wiese and his son, Owen, Crow Wing County; Kristine Hendrickson, Wadena County; Rep. Krista Knudsen, R-Lake Shore; Dave Endicott, MFU staff, and Paul Benson, Mahnommen County.



From left, Matt Kruger, Olmsted County; Rep. Duane Quam, R-Byron; John Larsen, Olmsted County; Jim Checkel and Rod Peterson, Dodge County



Aitkin County Farmers Union member Franklin Turnock and Morgan LaSalle from Mille Lacs County met with Rep. Ron Kresha, R-Little Falls, center.



From left, Natalie Beckendorf, Renville County; Cindy VanDerPol, Chippewa County; Rep. Dean Urdahl, R-Grove City, and Josh VanDerPol, Chippewa County.





On left, Kelsey Love Zaavedra is on a farm in rural Kenya looking at a banana plant. She learned about the ways bananas are cultivated and grown. On right, Zaavedra gave a training presentation in Taveta, Kenya, attended by more than 200 farmers.

## Minnesota farmer shares skills with Kenyan farmers

By Kelsey Love Zaavedra

Emerging farmers in Minnesota represent a broad spectrum of people. We have varied backgrounds and come from different cultures but one thing that we share is the desire to live on the land and grow food. Despite the challenges many emerging farmers face in today's agricultural and economic landscape, we possess incredible willpower to grow food against many odds. We do things like move to a new place and start a farm from nothing.

Throughout my time working with emerging farmers, and being one myself, I have learned a lot and discovered numerous cultural, economic and political barriers. At first, I thought it was a Minnesota thing. I later realized it is a national issue. A general pattern is we care about land stewardship but typically start with limited capital, grow specialty crops on small parcels of less than 10 acres, and then directly market our product.

Due to our limited resources, we find ways to adapt and innovate and as a result, we have unique experience and knowledge of alternative farming practices. In other words, by default, we actively contribute to the movement for an ecological and sustainable food system. These are some cool skills if you ask me. Little did I know where they would take me.

This winter I represented Minnesota Farmers Union in rural Kenya from Jan. 26 to Feb. 13. I was there as a trainer alongside an American professor and a Kenyan agronomist through the Champions for

Inclusive Green Growth and Food Security in Kenya Project sponsored by the U.S. State Department. We taught regenerative farming practices. The focus was to empower underserved small farmers by building their climate resiliency and capacity while increasing food security. Climate change is impacting people worldwide, but it is intensifying food insecurity across sub-Saharan Africa. Although Kenya isn't a major contributor to climate change, it is extremely vulnerable to its effects. There are many organizations looking for ways to address this in a timely and effective way.

The Champions for Inclusive Green Growth and Food Security in Kenya Project hosted more than 200 farmers from the community. We spent four days facilitating a comprehensive training in regenerative agriculture and good agricultural practices, focusing on mango and banana cultivation.

Being able to share my farm practices in a drastically different climate and culture was an insightful experience. Regenerative agriculture knows no boundaries. Our flora and fauna may be different but the habits and systems at play have many parallels. Being able to make a personal connection with these farmers was a great way to create a space for meaningful learning. We discovered that we face many of the same issues on our farms: instead of rabbits and deer they have zebras and monkeys. They also have pests and diseases in their crops due to poor cultural practices. They

also struggle with market access and fair pricing. The list of things went on but we all still shared the value of stewarding land despite the challenges we face.

I discovered that the barriers emerging farmers face aren't a national issue, rather it's a farmer issue that crosses cultures and oceans. We are all faced with similar challenges, and small farms have the most potential to address these issues.

Empowering small farms, specialty crops and emerging farmers is one of the strongest paths forward in the face of climate change, food insecurity and changes in agricultural production. We need all farmers to pitch in for solutions, but I believe small farms are the nimble and innovative place to begin.

As I reflect on my experience as a small, emerging farmer and the times I have been dismissed or seen as irrelevant in the agriculture system, this trip was validating on many levels. I am still in awe that the federal government sees regenerative agriculture - and the small farmer - as a way to address climate change and is funding initiatives like the project in Kenya. I hope that the people with influence are paying attention and see our unique skill set as a valuable resource. Otherwise, I'm afraid our country will feel the effects of overlooking us.

*Zaavedra is president of Chisago County Farmers Union.*

# Trip to Philippines includes learning, relationship building and fun

By Gail Donkers

Late last year, I represented Minnesota Soybean Research and Promotion Council and traveled to South Korea and the Philippines along with five other farmers and a staff member representing their state checkoff boards from Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. We visited South Korea and the Philippines Nov. 28 through Dec. 10, 2023. The trade mission is part of a checkoff-funded project that promotes and markets U.S. soy products in Asia via the Pacific Northwest (PNW) out of Port of Grays Harbor in Washington.

The main objective of this trade mission was to learn the market dynamics, how our customers utilize U.S. soy and thank them for their business. Building and maintaining relationships is fundamental in marketing; that was our second objective while on this trade mission. Agriculture is one of the businesses where personal relationships matter in sales transactions.

We had a briefing from the U.S. Soybean Export Council (USSEC) to learn about the market in the Philippines, which is the No. 1 importer of U.S. soybean meal. The Philippine market is a 13 million metric ton feed market, with a sector breakdown of poultry, 56 percent, swine, 31 percent, aquaculture, 12 percent, and others, 2 percent. The U.S. has 75 percent of the soybean meal market. Aquaculture is a growing market.

The top challenges for the Philippine market are increased feed costs, African Swine Fever and government policy. We also learned that 98 percent of Filipinos are Catholic, and religion is very important in their culture.

Our first meeting in Manila was with San Miguel Corporation, one of the largest and most diversified conglomerates in the Philippines. When we walked into their office, we were welcomed by a life size Nativity scene. San Miguel is the market leader in animal feeds, accounting for 20 percent of the market in the Philippines. They are the largest poultry integrator and are expanding from 380 million birds to 880 million



Gail and Jim Donkers at the industry Christmas party. The event theme was traditional Filipino attire - barong tagalog. Gail is wearing a hand painted scarf and Jim has a traditional shirt.

birds over the next five years. The poultry farms are from hatch to processing, all on one site. Their feed production will go from 250,000 metric ton a month to 750,000 metric ton a month once the expansion is complete. San Miguel is also in the process



Jim Donkers at the Santa Maria Dairy Farm Training and Tours Corp and Learning Site for Agriculture.

of building skyways, a highway above the existing highway, which will be like a toll road to make transportation more accessible from the port to their manufacturing locations.

Another visit was to JetBest, which is owned and operated by a father/daughter team and was founded in 1983. They manufacture and distribute animal nutrition and veterinary care products for livestock,

game fowl, ruminants, poultry, aquaculture and companion animals. They operate 13 distribution stores where they sell their three brands, Jetstar (livestock, poultry, aquaculture): Buena Suerte (game fowl), and Whoopy (pet) to their customers. They operate four manufacturing lines that were anywhere from little to no automation with 12 people working to bag feed to a fully automated feed production line.

The owner of JetBest provided lunch and a tour for us around Batangus. We toured the Carmel Miraculous Church, which was founded in 1946, a year after the area was ravaged by the Japanese forces during the World War II. The church is beautiful, very open and elegant.

Next, we went to the dairy farm that the JetBest owner owns with his five siblings. The dairy is called the Santa Maria Dairy Farm Training and Tours Corp and Learning Site for Agriculture. The siblings each have their area of expertise and train students on the dairy farm. They are milking 67 head of Jersey cross cattle in a single sided outdoor parlor. Their corn silage is purchased in 100 kilo bags which are dumped by hand into their feed bunks. Milk production is not the focus of the farm, learning about dairy production is.

Next, we toured a honey farm that was in dense tropical trees. Local honey was the focus of their beautiful agritourism operation which included a restaurant and a VRBO rental. Visitors to the open-air restaurant could enjoy anything from honey coffee and treats to a full buffet. The restaurant had a breathtaking view, it overlooked a pool and several tiny VRBO houses that sat above a beautiful lake.

At the Port of Manilla, we toured LaFilipina's flour and pasta manufacturing plants. After the tour of the production plants, we went to LaFilipina's headquarters for meetings and lunch. LaFilipina is owned and managed by three siblings, and 11 of the 14 members of the next generation are involved in the business. My husband, Jim, and I were fortunate to visit with Hans, who attended college in the U.S. and worked at Cargill in the Twin Cities for three years. LaFilipina is an agribusiness, livestock and food company committed to providing products throughout the Philippines and Southeast Asia. They are the local market leader in flour, fertilizer and animal feeds. From raw agricultural produce, it has expanded to meat processing, pasta manufacturing and logistics operations. They are the largest importer of U.S. soybean meal, importing 550,000 metric ton from the PNW.



Group photo at the dairy farm, from left: Gonzo Marte, Scott Ritzman, Marie Marte, Brent Renner, farm owner, Todd Hanten, Jim and Gail Donkers, Lowell Wilson, Suzanne Shirbroun, Craig Pietig, Eunice Wilson, Lisa Pietig and Ruby.

The grand finale of our trip was hosting the annual Industry Christmas Party in Manilla. The party included everyone involved in the soybean market in Manilla, from dock workers to the owners of the large companies we met with. Each farmer hosted a table and together the people at the table played many games during the evening, from singing modified Christmas carols and acting out a Christmas scene on stage, to playing Rock, Paper, Scissors for the cash

jackpot. The many door prizes were also a hit with attendees. Our table was fortunate to have everyone win a big prize.

As we left the Philippines, we all commented on how amazing the people were that we met. Everyone spoke English, which made communicating much easier. The customers wanted to know about our farms, our families, the fall soybean harvest and what was going on with politics in the U.S.

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*Chef Matthew Jensen and Amber Aspengren*

*By Claudine Arndt*

I had the joy of meeting Chef Matthew Jensen when I approached him about Minnesota Cooks in 2014. I had heard rumors about Matthew and the restaurant he was taking over in Alexandria, Broadway Bistro, and I was eager to unearth whether they were true. Shortly into that conversation, it was clear he was the real deal.

Matthew had uprooted from the Twin Cities to move back to the “farm country” where he grew up and had started working with over a dozen farmers within his first year of running Broadway Bistro. Re-quoting Matthew from my 2015 Minnesota Cooks Calendar story, he said at the time, “We’re one of the only restaurants in the area supporting local farmers at this level: 90 percent of our product comes from within 25 miles during the growing season. We know every farmer, root and hoof.”

In 2016 Matthew renamed the restaurant La Ferme, which means “the farm” or “the farmhouse” in French, a reflection of both his classical French culinary training and

## Chef Matthew Jensen and Amber Aspengren building community with The Crowded Table

his commitment to farmers and local foods. In 2017 Amber Aspengren joined La Ferme’s team after responding to an online post Matthew put out for more growers and servers. Today Matthew and Amber are both business and life partners, as well as farmers, raising grass fed lamb and produce. Their commitment to sourcing and showcasing local foods has only deepened.

Before I unveil Matthew and Amber’s exciting professional update, there is a very fun secondary (but relevant) story, which I will share next.

In 2021 the Minnesota Cooks team decided to try hosting a dinner-on-the farm. Gathering in person was still iffy, but we figured an outdoor event could be safe and fun. Carla Mertz of Iron Shoe Farm wanted to host it and asked us to line up a Minnesota Cooks chef or two. Chef Matthew popped to mind immediately, along with Lachelle Cunningham and Anne Andrus. Everyone jumped on board, and we were so flattered. I’ll never forget Matthew’s enthusiasm as he said, “Are you kidding, Claudine? Of course! Those are exactly the types of events we want to do more.”

The evening of the event was unseasonably hot and incredibly windy. Cooking outside, chefs were struggling to keep fires lit and control flames that were dancing every which way because of the wind, while we were doing our best to keep tablecloths from flying away. Carla led two farm tours and had to shout to be heard. But it was an absolute blast. At the end of the evening, Matthew and Amber expressed how much they enjoyed being part of it, despite the challenges, and told us to please reach out if we wanted to collaborate again, which we did the following year.

Fast forward to the present, I received a text from Matthew in late January of this year, asking for some time to chat. He and Amber had some big news to share. They began that call by telling me they planned to sell La Ferme, but before I could panic, they quickly launched into an explanation of how they wanted to expand their farm-to-table mission beyond the walls of their restaurant. Matthew said, “We want to bring the table to the farm and create community experiences. We’re calling it *The Crowded Table*.”

They said that being a part of the dinner at Iron Shoe Farm helped ignite this desire.

Like many restaurateurs and chefs, the work Matthew and Amber do is about much more than food. Through intimate dining experiences outside on farms, Matthew and Amber want to reconnect guests with farms, farmers, local foods and the soil that makes it all possible. Meals will feature hyperlocal, in season ingredients. They plan to personally interact with guests, educating them about the food they are eating and emphasizing the quality through taste, not lectures. They want to bring people together, elbow to elbow, to build community while building the local economy, something they’ve always worked to do at La Ferme. To accomplish this, they feel it’s time for a change of scenery.

Matthew and Amber joined Minnesota Farmers Union because they want to be part of an organization that works to protect and promote a local agricultural economy. Additionally, they like the idea of connecting with like-minded people and being part of a larger community that cares about agriculture. Look for The Crowded Table’s forthcoming schedule of hyperlocal, intimate, community-focused dinners and brunches coming this year at [www.thecrowdedtablemn.com](http://www.thecrowdedtablemn.com).

# FTC seeks to block proposed Kroger/Albertsons merger



On Feb. 26, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) announced a lawsuit, joined by attorneys general in eight states and the District of Columbia, to block the proposed grocery merger between Kroger and Albertsons, alleging the deal is anticompetitive.

FTC's complaint states the proposed merger, if allowed to proceed, will eliminate competition between Kroger and Albertsons, lead to higher prices for groceries and household essentials, reduce quality of products and reduce the bargaining power of workers.

NFU joined several groups in opposition to the merger after it was announced in late 2022, expressing deep concerns about the negative impacts the acquisition would have on farmers, retail workers and

consumers. At NFU's 121st Anniversary Convention last March, Farmers Union members adopted language explicitly opposing this merger and mergers alike in NFU's 2023 Special Order of Business on Fairness for Farmers.

Much of the case is expected to focus on whether the proposed merger poses a potential risk to competition, as well as Kroger's proposed divestiture of more than 400 stores and eight distribution centers to C&S Wholesale Grocers, which Kroger included as part of the agreement. FTC has rejected the divestiture proposal as being "a hodgepodge of unconnected stores, banners, brands and other assets that Kroger's antitrust lawyers have cobbled together and falls far short of mitigating the lost competition between Kroger and Albertsons."

## Take survey on agrivoltaics

The Solar and Storage Industries Institute (SI2) recently launched its Solar + Farms Survey on the barriers to agrivoltaics. Agrivoltaics refers to dual-use solar, or solar that serves a dual purpose by incorporating food crops or forage for livestock under and around solar panels.

NFU is partnering with SI2 on this U.S. Department of Energy-funded effort. Our goal is to ensure farmers' voices are being heard – along with rural electric cooperatives and solar developers – through this survey.

You can learn more about the survey and take it at <https://www.ssii.org/solar-farms-survey>.

## EPA approves year-round E15

On Feb. 22, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a final rule approving the year-round sale of E15 in eight states. The announcement comes in response to petitions from the governors of eight states (Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin) requesting EPA remove the 1-pound per square inch (psi) waiver for gasoline-ethanol blended fuels containing at least 10 percent ethanol.

In its decision, EPA has removed the 1-psi waiver and will permit the year-round sale of E15 in these states effective April 28, 2025. Prior to this rulemaking, the sale of E15 had been limited during summer months to comply with federal clean air standards, with EPA granting waivers on a case-by-case basis.

NFU issued a statement of support of the announcement, while urging EPA to take additional action to allow consumers to use E15 this summer. NFU will continue advocating for higher-level blends of ethanol, such as E30, which will provide improved air quality, additional carbon reductions and stronger and more consistent markets for family farmers.

## Larew appointed to White House committee

NFU President Rob Larew was appointed by President Biden to the White House Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations (ACTPN). ACTPN is an advisory committee established to provide overall policy advice to the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) on



Rob Larew

matters concerning the development, implementation and administration of trade policy and agreements in the U.S.

The committee includes up to 45 members, recommended to President Biden by USTR Ambassador Katherine Tai, who have expertise in general trade, investment and development issues. The committee includes representatives of non-federal governments, labor, agriculture, small business, services industries, retailers, nongovernmental

environmental and conservation organizations and consumer interests.

"I am deeply honored to represent family farmers and give them a seat at the table during important trade negotiations," Larew said in a statement. "I would like to thank President Biden for his trust. As future trade agreements are negotiated and trade policy is considered, we must ensure that there are fair markets and opportunities for farmers and ranchers."



CLIMATE RESILIENCE ON THE FARM

## Extreme weather variations challenging for St. Louis County farmer

By Lisa Holm

Missy Bakker Roach, owner of Bear River Farm, has been farming and developing local food systems through farmers markets in St. Louis County for almost 20 years. Missy grows and sells potatoes, beans, garlic, tomatoes, peppers, tomatillos, herbs (basil, parsley, cilantro) and salad greens at farmers markets seasonally.

Missy formed the St. Louis County Farmers Union chapter in 2020 and serves as the president. She is also the secretary of the Minnesota Farmers Union.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

### **Q. What is your background and how did you come to be a farmer in St. Louis County?**

**A.** I kind of grew up with one foot in both worlds. My grandparents raised cattle in Cass County and ran a sawmill. I always spent summers with my grandparents. When I lived in Minneapolis with my mom, I felt a bit out of my element and dreamt of being a farmer, growing vegetables and raising chickens. Growing up in the 1980s, you didn't see people getting into farming, most farmers were getting out.

When I met my husband, Tom, he was working as a firefighter in Alaska, and I was working at an elementary school in Walker, Minn. He invited me to go to Alaska with him in the summer and I went. I loved the off the grid lifestyle and culture, part of which was the bustling farmers market. In the summer-time there is nearly 24 hours of daylight, so everything grew fast and abundantly in a short amount of time, and everyone was so excited to showcase their food. I also worked at a greenhouse and was immersed in learning from people that flew in to buy plants from the bush of Alaska; a lot of people only came into



Missy Bakker Roach

*"It has been incredibly rewarding to represent and amplify the voices of farmers in St. Louis County. We need to have a seat at the table. I'm excited by the new generation of farmers, especially in my area."*

town once every six months. It was so fun to learn about people growing things in remote wilderness situations. There is a determination and spirit about that.

Eventually we moved back to Minnesota. Tom started working for Superior National Forest and we bought the 40 acres we have now. We've been here for about 20 years. I'm 20 miles from the nearest town of 500 people and 50 miles from the next largest town of Hibbing.

There weren't many job opportunities when we moved here and by this point,

we had a child. I really wanted to stay home with my kids, that was important to me, so I knew I needed to figure out an income and decided to start growing vegetables and raising chickens. The only problem was that there was no farmers market nearby that I knew of, so I called city hall, and we talked about operating a farmers' market in the park. I put an ad in the paper to see if anyone was interested in developing a farmers' market. The first year of the Cook Area Farmers Market there were only two of us – I brought vegetables and eggs, and the other vendor made bread. The market kept growing every year, and now we have about 25 people. I also helped start a market in Babbit and the Virginia Farmers Market, where I've been selling for about nine years. It's been a constant process of scaling up and trying to meet demand. Amid all this we've had a local foods renaissance with more people wanting to know where their food comes from, so this happened at a good time.

I tried offering a CSA one year but realized I needed to focus on either a CSA or farmers' markets. I chose farmers' markets because that was kind of my baby. I really wanted [the farmers' markets I was part of] to succeed, and for other farmers to continue to have that market. So, I really dove into farmers' markets and tried to be the best farmer I could; I went to conferences to learn about soil health and read all the books I could get my hands on.

I also became involved with Iron Range Partnership for Sustainability (IRPS), where I work now, which was another great resource for learning. IRPS released a local foods study along with the Iron Range Rehabilitation and Resources Bureau. The study showed



Missy Bakker Roach has a small high tunnel and pollinator habitat. Garlic is her major crop and she's nervous about the crop because of the warm winter weather.

that although we're not known as an agricultural region, we can grow things up here in St. Louis County - and we need the infrastructure to do it, therefore we need funding and education. They put on a Good Agriculture Practices (GAPS) training and had scholarships available for folks to attend farming conferences which I utilized.

Overtime, I became more involved with growing our local food system and figuring out how to improve it, for example by having SNAP and market bucks available at farmers' markets. I'm always thinking about leveling up and how to make local foods more accessible.

Farmers' markets are a way that rural folks are making an income. It's not necessarily a side hustle like people can assume. These people are working all year long to bring goods to market. The money that vendors make at farmers markets can go far in a small town. When my tractor broke down last year and I wasn't able to get it fixed, I couldn't get a lot of things I rely on planted, like potatoes and beans, and so I didn't have an income from those, and it really added up; I was down thousands of dollars.

**Q. How has your farm structure changed in recent years and how are you planning for the future? Has climate change informed your plans?**

**A.** I'm always looking for ways to improve my operation. Precision irrigation has made my operation more efficient. I want to manage the resources that I have wisely and be cautious of larger issues like drought. I built a greenhouse, have a small high tunnel, and have used

row covers. There are tools that I can use to work with the weather, but when it's extreme, I have a hard time being resilient and able to pivot.

In the last 10 years, it's really been this pendulum of extremes. Right now, it's been a warm, dry winter. It's been so warm that the ground is in a thaw/freeze cycle, and I have garlic in the ground that I'm nervous about. Garlic is my major crop. In anticipation of what's happening to the garlic, I feel like I need to have diversity in my farm and what I'm growing so that I'm not depending on one or two things. It's hard because garlic is my biggest money maker and the crop I'm rotating everything else around. That's been very worrisome this year.

Last year, we didn't even have a spring. It was snowing forever - there was snow on the ground in May. And then two weeks later it was summer. I worry about having these extreme temperature changes in the summer as well. I worry about if the ecosystem can adapt. I plant potatoes at a certain time to mitigate the risk of potato bugs. If we have a torrential downpour that we shouldn't have had, then I can't get in the field because it's muddy. Now that I'm talking about it, I'm realizing this anxiety I live with is really stressful.

**Q. What barriers do you see to the adoption of conservation practices**

**A.** A barrier is that people don't know the government agencies or programs that can help their farm, including educational programs. The internet is so bad and expensive up here, so a lot of people don't invest in it and just operate differently.

I am excited about the University of Minnesota Extension's Deep Winter Greenhouse grants. I'd also like to pursue the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. The stereotypes of what a "real" farmer is creates imposter syndrome. Thanks to the local food renaissance in the last 10-15 years, people are saying you don't have to have 1,000 acres to be a farmer. If you're contributing to the food system in a meaningful way, providing nutritious food to your community, why is that not a farmer? There has been some stigma around it. As I was trying to level up my production, I thought a lot that these kinds of programs don't apply to me. I've realized, no, they're talking to me! I feel more reassured that I am valued as a producer.

**Q. If you could tell Congress to do one (or two) things that would help the next generation of farmers, what would it be?**

**A.** Investing in climate resilience is the biggest thing that comes to mind and continuing to develop more regional food infrastructure. Policy makers must be conscious of the bigger picture and understand the connection between investing in farms and vibrant rural communities.

I feel like a lot of the policies and money that is being directed to farming in Minnesota reflects the work that MFU has put in for years. The Farmers Union is out in front of issues. It is dynamic in its response, and it's supportive in its community. It speaks to our membership. I think that it's amazing to get a seat at the table. Our organization is truly grassroots.

# Membership

continued from page 5

Officer Training helped her brainstorm ideas for events in her area, leading her to discover that laidback social get-togethers generate a good turnout and create an environment where MFU's policy work feels more approachable.

**Mike Seifert**, Scott County President, said that networking with other county leaders and simply keeping the Leadership Award guide handy is helpful for staying on track.

**Missy Bakker Roach**, MFU State Secretary and St. Louis County President, has found that cultivating partnerships with other farm organizations and groups has helped build membership in her area, as has the free membership offer for brand new members.

**Karl Hakanson**, Hennepin-Ramsey County President, expressed that tapping into MFU's membership team – and his County Vice Presidents – made all the difference in checking all the boxes (a great reminder that we don't expect county leaders to organize and energize counties by themselves).

**Eunice Biel**, Fillmore County President, gave a big shout out to Gail for her help and noted how MFU's stellar reputation makes it easy for her to talk to others about the organization.

**Donnel Williamson**, Kandiyohi County Secretary/Treasurer, remarked how changing the leadership in their county helped bring new ideas and energy to the table. Hosting a local foods event and an antimopoly event helped stir up interest about MFU in their area.

**Paul Sobocinski**, Redwood County Vice President, shared that focusing on building relationships and member outreach was key to their county's success in earning the award. He also expressed how having local events and bringing in different perspectives is important.

**Rod Peterson**, Dodge County President, gushed about the role that MFU staff (Gail!) play in supporting counties' success, and then went on to describe a series of "lunch and learns" that Gail organized throughout the year. These events helped

## Leadership Award Criteria

- Hold at least four meetings per calendar year.
- Have your organization represented at a minimum of two state and/or national meetings during the year.
- Participate in or conduct at least two community activities or programs during the calendar year.
- Have your organization represented during the calendar year at one local and/or state cooperative organization function.
- Experience a membership increase over the previous year.

make MFU more visible and provided education to attendees, including both the public and legislators.

**Linda Larson**, Dakota County President, feels that hosting events that provide education is key. She is committed to helping urbanites and suburbanites understand

that because they eat, they are connected to agriculture, too. Her pro tip is to stop calling events "meetings," emphasizing that "no one wants to go to another meeting!"

Finally, **Kelsey Love Zaavedra**, Chisago County President, couldn't attend the board meeting in person due to being a vendor at the Mill City Farmers Market that day, but she shared this note, "First, MFU has solid leadership and genuinely wants their membership to succeed, so that is a great foundation to start with. Secondly, as I reflect on what MFU is to me, it's community, and nobody explains community better than Wendell Berry: 'A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.'" Kelsey concluded, "Experiencing my first full year as a county president through this lens and with the support of many is what resulted in receiving the leadership award."

Even more than "congratulations," I want to express my deep gratitude to all our county leaders and members who work to galvanize members and participate in our grassroots democratic process (and, to be clear, when I say "democratic process," I mean "democracy"). We recognize that you volunteer your time and energy with us. Without your time and energy, our organization simply couldn't function as it is meant to. It takes all of us working together, and we're deeply grateful that so many of you signed up to be on this journey with us.

## New members from February 2024

Welcome to the new members who joined MFU in February. We look forward to getting to know you and thank you for your membership. We encourage experienced members to invite new members to events in your area. Working together we make a stronger Farmers Union.

Beth Arel, FRT+VEG Consulting, LLC, Hennepin County

Nancy and Keith Babin, Babins Back Acres, Pine County

Dustin Bergman, Clearwater County

Jane and Dean Bredlau, The Greensted, Goodhue County

Andrew Ehrmann and Betsy Allister, Rice County

Pam Hartwell, Mom's Farm LLC, Winona County

Rebecca and Gary Heimark, Aitkin County

Tim and Tracy Ignaszewski, Waseca County

Jeff and Judyth Johnson, Rice County

Mary and Stewart Metelak, Becker County

Angela Phillips Permaloff and Laurie Phillips Permaloff, Blessing Way Pastures, Chisago County

Bjorn Solberg, Hugh's Gardens, Norman County



# Join Membership Engagement Committee for their April 9 meeting

By Rachel Sannerud

One of the driving principles of Minnesota Farmers Union, and my personal favorite, is that we are a grassroots membership organization. We work for the betterment of farm families across Minnesota. There are so many different routes that bring farm families to Farmers Union. What drew me to join, and what keeps me showing up as a member, is the strong network of family farmers we bring together.

I am the chair of the Membership Engagement Committee, and I like to think of our committee as a focus group that works with Farmers Union staff to engage that strong network of farmers I love so much. We build on the strength and potential of Farmers Union membership. We engage members through education and leadership building opportunities and make space for all family farmers to be a part of Minnesota Farmers Union. How do we engage and train our county leaders, so they can put their best foot forward for their local folks? How do we keep our programming evolving, so we can reach



Rachel Sannerud

new farmers, diverse farmers? These are the kinds of bigger questions we pose as a committee, and we work with staff to boost their work in these directions.

It's important to me that our grassroots organization continues to create space and opportunities to welcome folks into our network. My experience as a new member was so welcoming, it was like a bear hug of peers and seasoned farmers looking to boost me up. I want to create that same space for all our members, new and seasoned. I volunteer my time as chair of the Membership Engagement Committee to do just that, and if that's something

that energizes you too, we'd love for you to join us. We ask our committee members to make time for our regular meetings when they're able, but there is no minimum commitment to being a part of our committee.

In the past, we've worked with staff to refine leadership and training materials so we can empower our county leaders. This year, we're thinking big about what is attracting new members to the organization, what they're looking for when they join and how we can best invite them into our strong network of family farms.

We meet regularly as a committee virtually via Zoom, about every month, on Tuesday evenings at 7 p.m. Our next meeting is April 9. Please reach out to me directly or to Claudine Arndt at [claudine@mfu.org](mailto:claudine@mfu.org) to be added to our email list and to receive the Zoom meeting information.

*Sannerud is president of the Mille Lacs County Farmers Union. She can be reached at [rachel.m.brann@gmail.com](mailto:rachel.m.brann@gmail.com).*

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Text **farmstress** to **898211**



## Membership application

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_

County: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip code: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell phone: \_\_\_\_\_

**Type of farm:** *Check all that apply*

<input type="checkbox"/> Crops	<input type="checkbox"/> Organic
<input type="checkbox"/> Beef	<input type="checkbox"/> Poultry
<input type="checkbox"/> Dairy	<input type="checkbox"/> Sheep
<input type="checkbox"/> Hogs	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetable or fruit
<input type="checkbox"/> Horses	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other please list: _____	

**Membership:** *Fee includes family unless student is checked.*

<input type="checkbox"/> New member	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 year - \$75
<input type="checkbox"/> Renewing member	<input type="checkbox"/> 3 years - \$200
	<input type="checkbox"/> Student - \$20

JOIN TODAY!

Mail this card to:  
**Minnesota Farmers Union**  
 305 Roselawn Ave. E. #200  
 St. Paul, MN 55117

Or sign up online: <https://www.mfu.org/join-renew-membership>

## Government relations

*continued from page 6*

companies offer little help, he said, citing a combine fire last fall where the 911 call was dropped.

Ellison talked about the choice we made to illuminate all of America through rural electrification and made sure Chervestad was connected with the staff in his office who could follow up.

House Agriculture Chair Vang also highlighted her past work with the group and raised Right to Repair in recognition that it is of particular interest to farmers. Nikki Warner of Hennepin County kicked things off with a question about the agriculture budget and the shortfall in AGRI to which Chair Vang made clear that the shortfall needed to be addressed to maintain current programs. Kelsey Love Zaavedra of Chisago County raised the issue of farmers who have less than 10 acres not qualifying for the homestead tax credit, an issue MFU is working to address this session. Denny Lundell of Goodhue County and Dan Wilson of Winona County highlighted the importance of the Agriculture Committee's work on broadband.

Throughout the rest of the day, members discussed the Beginning Farmer and Ag to School Tax Credits with Revenue Commissioner Paul Marquart; road repairs and clean fuel policy with Transportation Commissioner Nancy Daubenberger; deer depredation, wolves, and land management with Natural Resources Assistant Commissioner Bob Meier, and insurance rates with the Department of Commerce. Members also had meetings with House leaders, Speaker Hortman and Majority Leader Long, both of which highlighted the need for better and more affordable healthcare and a MinnesotaCare Public Option.

"As a general farm organization, it's important that we make our voices heard on issues that affect all farmers," said MFU Vice President Anne Schwagerl, in a release following Lobby Day. "The high cost of healthcare is one of those issues. For too long, we've heard from members who are priced out of coverage, or whose kids can't afford to leave their jobs in town to take over the family farm. If we want vibrant rural communities, thriving rural schools and new farm families on the land,

making health coverage more affordable is critical. We've worked on this issue now for years and we're counting on lawmakers to get it done."

"Thank you to all the MFU members who traveled to St. Paul to share your stories with legislators during Lobby Day. Your engagement is irreplaceable as legislators move forward to enact legislation that impacts all of us," said MFU President Gary Wertish. "A thank you also to the policymakers who took time to visit with Farmers Union members. By working together, we will build a Minnesota where everyone can build a life in agriculture."

Following Lobby Day, MFU again hosted a legislative reception at Farmers Kitchen and Bar, which provided members an informal opportunity to connect with policymakers. If you weren't able to join us for Lobby Day, we hope you consider it in next year.

### Budget update released

Later in February, state budget officials released an updated budget forecast showing an expected \$3.7 billion budget surplus in the current two-year budget cycle (2024-'25)—up \$1.3 billion from the \$2.4 billion forecast in November. This improved financial picture stems from increases in projected revenue, largely due to higher-than-expected corporate profits. State spending will largely stay the same under the new projection.

In the next biennium (2026-'27), the numbers also improved markedly, increasing from a thin \$82 million surplus to a more comfortable \$2.24 billion. Unfortunately, concerns about a structural imbalance persist as the state is still taking in less in total revenue than it is spending.

Some important notes on the forecast. First, it's just a forecast—an informed prediction. Second, it includes both \$3 billion in the state's rainy-day fund (the largest ever) and \$980 million for an expected bonding bill. Third and finally, per legislation passed last session, the forecast now accounts for inflation.

For MFU, this is important for legislative priorities that require new funding, the largest of which is taking the next step in establishing a MinnesotaCare Public Option. Following news of the budget surplus and together with other organizations leading on a Public Option, Wertish authored a letter to Gov. Walz and Lt. Gov. Flanagan.

"Today, and on behalf of our many members who have joined you at the Capitol in recent weeks, we are writing to request that you include a MinnesotaCare Public Option in a supplemental budget, he said, referencing conversations during Lobby Day. "The health and financial well-being of too many families is at stake not to act ... This is the next big step toward making truly affordable, high-quality healthcare a reality for every Minnesotan."



*Executive Committee member Josh VanDerPol testifies on the importance of the Agricultural Growth, Research and Innovation (AGRI) program.*

### Member testimony

Also important from a budget perspective is our work to fund the state's AGRI program. MFU Executive Committee member and Chippewa County President Josh VanDerPol offered testimony on Vang's bill to fund this program (HF3763).

"What's even more important to know about AGRI is that the undesignated funds give MDA the ability to respond quickly to new challenges and opportunities," he shared with the committee, referencing his experience as a livestock producer. "When COVID-19 shut down the large packing plants, putting pressure on the already

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stressed system of small and mid-sized processors that serve farms like mine, MDA sprang into action. They created a rapid-response mini-grant program to help support small processors, helped small meat lockers purchase PPE for employees and provided a matching service for livestock producers who couldn't find processing."

On the Senate side, MFU offered testimony several bills including those requiring labeling of lab-grown meat (SF4026), accepting SNAP at farmers markets (SF3404), expanding farm-to-school and early care to in-home providers (SF3528) and updating financial reporting for farmer-owned cooperatives (SF4288).

"I think we should strive for that transparency across our agricultural markets and clear, informative labeling is a great place to start," said Pine County President Hannah Bernhardt in support for the labeling proposal and citing how her business relies on genuine relationships with customers.

MFU also submitted updated testimony on Rep. Steve Jacob's, R-Altura, bill (HF4044) to pilot a \$5-per-acre tax credit to promote Minnesota's Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program.

"MAWQCP certified farms on average see a 49 percent reduction in nitrate loss through the adoption of conservation practices like reduced tillage, cover crops and nutrient management," Wertish said in his letter to lawmakers. "Piloting a tax credit in counties in southeast Minnesota could accelerate interest in this impactful program and advance adoption of soil health practices across the region."

Also related to water quality, MFU joined others in renewing support for increased funding for Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). The proposal (SF4422) led by Sen. Grant Hauschild, DFL-Hermantown, would increase funding for districts from \$12 million to \$16 million.

This is a snapshot of our legislative work—and much more to discuss at the federal level. If you have questions, thoughts or concerns about our legislative work, reach out to Stu at (320) 232-3047 (C) or [stu@mfu.org](mailto:stu@mfu.org).

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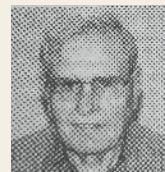


## APRIL 2004

The drive to limit imported milk protein concentrates (MPC) entered a new phase in late March. Minnesota Farmers Union members joined dairy farmers from around the nation in the NFU Dairy Fly-in.

With sugar beet growers facing the threat of increased sugar imports under the Central American Free Trade Agreement, MFU helped to circulate a petition in opposition to CAFTA.

Curt Wegner is serving as the Stearns County Farmers Union president, a role he's held for about 15 years. He and Carol have been married for 53 years and they raised five children. They help their son, Tim, raise corn and soybeans.



Curt Wegner



Minnesota's delegation to the Dairy Fly-in met with Sen. Mark Dayton and NFU President Dave Frederickson. Pictured are Alan and Karen Perish of Browerville, MFU President Doug Peterson, Dayton, Pat Irrthum of Wanamingo, Eunice Biel of Harmony and Frederickson.

## APRIL 1934

In the passing of John A. Simpson, another great soul has been called to a place among the immortals and righteousness and truth have lost a mighty defender. Simpson died at 5:30 a.m. March 15, with his hand in his wife's. John Simpson died fighting for his Farmers Union cause. Simpson was national president of the Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union. For two decades, he was an aggressive left-wing champion of organized farmers, and an enthusiastic and ardent advocate of a farmer class movement.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act as passed by the special session of Congress in 1933 had several serious defects. It did not include cattle along with hogs. It omitted rye, flax and barley as basic crops. The only possible hope of making the Agricultural Adjustment program a success is to include the whole catalog of farm products.

## APRIL 1984

President Ronald Reagan April 10 signed into law a bill to modify the 1984 and 1985 wheat programs, make slight changes in the feed grain program and freeze target price payments for 1984 and 1985. The bill's freeze provisions inflict a potential \$3 billion income loss on American farmers over the next three years.

A permanent farm program should be established in the United States providing family farmers "a base of support at cost-of-production levels," National Farmers Union Vice President Stanley Moore said at the 82nd annual National Farmers Union convention held in New Orleans.



Plans for the coming season of Minnesota Farmers Union youth camps are well underway. Pictured are, from left, Legislative Representative and Assistant Camp Director Julie Bleyhl, Family and Youth Director Kathy Lauer and outgoing Family and Youth Director Ann Vellek.

## Stuffed Peppers

Recipe from Ana Niederoskov

### Ingredients

- 4 large bell peppers (any color)
- 1 pound lean ground beef (at least 80%) or ground pork
- ¼ cup chopped onions
- 1 cup cooked rice (brown or white)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1 clove garlic finely chopped
- 1 can (15 ounces) tomato sauce
- ¾ cup shredded mozzarella cheese (3 ounces)

### Directions

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cut thin slice from stem end of each bell pepper to remove top of pepper. Remove seeds and membranes; rinse peppers. If necessary, cut thin slice from bottom of each pepper so they stand up straight. In 4-quart Dutch oven, add enough water to cover peppers. Heat to boiling; add peppers. Cook about 2 minutes; drain.

In large skillet, cook meat and onion over medium heat 8 to 10 minutes, stirring occasionally,

until beef is brown; drain. Stir in cooked rice, salt, garlic and 1 cup of tomato sauce; cook until hot.

Stuff peppers with beef mixture. Stand peppers upright in ungreased 8-inch square baking dish. Pour the remaining tomato sauce over peppers.

Cover baking dish tightly with foil. Bake 15 minutes at 350 degrees. Uncover and bake about 15 minutes longer or until peppers are tender. Sprinkle with cheese.



Email your favorite recipe to [janet@mfu.org](mailto:janet@mfu.org) for publication in a future issue.

## President's Message

*continued from page 3*

the fund to capture the money within the agriculture department. Since 2013, the agriculture department has used the funding to respond to emerging needs.

The language that established AGRI contained a sunset date of 2025, so funding for the program wasn't included in the state budget beyond 2024. Last session, MFU worked to make sure the sunset provision was eliminated. This session, MFU and a host of other organizations are working to be sure AGRI is funded going forward.

AGRI funds meat processing work, farm business management scholarships, county fair grants, livestock investment grants, crop research grants, sustainable agriculture demonstration grants and farm-to-school grants, among others.

Without legislative changes, several programs funded by AGRI will see significant cuts and the department's ability to administer programs will be hindered.

Contact Stu if you have stories to share about why the AGRI fund is valuable.

### Full board

Lobby Day came just days after a well-attended full board meeting on Feb. 17. The full board is comprised of all the county presidents from across the state.

The event began on Feb. 16 with an evening social at the Delta Hotels by Marriott Minneapolis Northeast. Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen addressed the group, talking about issues he expected to address during the legislative session.

On Saturday morning, the full board gathered at the MFU office in St. Paul for a good discussion on various policies that impact family farmers with Stu and the legislative team. It was the grassroots of the organization in action.

During the meeting, Missy Bakker Roach was re-elected as state secretary. The state secretary is elected by the entire full board.

The meeting also included the election of the Executive Committee, which assists the president in the governance of the organization. One person is elected from

each of the state's five districts. The person must be a county president to be elected to the Executive Committee. All the members were re-elected. The Executive Committee is chaired by Carol Anderson of Benton County. Ted Winter of Nobles/Rock is the vice chair. Other members are Linda Larson of Dakota County, Steve Linder of Red Lake County and Josh VanDerPol of Chippewa County.

### Appointments

Some of you may remember that MFU worked last year to establish a Prescription Drug Affordability Board to rein in the high cost of prescription drugs. In February, I learned that I was appointed to the Prescription Drug Affordability Council. The 18-member council will provide advice to the board on drug cost issues and represent stakeholders' views. My term runs through January 2027.

Others serving on the board include Stefan Gildemeister, the Minnesota State Health Economist who spoke during a panel discussion at our state convention in November; Dr. Joel Farley, Professor and Associate Department Head, Department of Pharmaceutical Care and Health Systems, University of Minnesota; Dirk Killelea, Pharmacy Services Manager at Minnesota Community Care and Eric Tichy, PharmD, MBA, Vice Chair of Pharmacy Formulary at the Mayo Clinic Health System.

The governor appoints members to the council based on their knowledge or expertise in the pharmaceutical business, practice of medicine, patient perspectives, health care cost trends and drivers, clinical and health services research, and the health care marketplace.



*MFU President Gary Wertish with Gov. Tim Walz and Ukrainian Ambassador Oksana Markarova.*

### Support for Ukraine

As the war in Ukraine enters its third year, Minnesota Farmers Union continues to support Ukraine. To me, it's just like when the United States protected democracy during World War I and World War II.

As you may remember, we hosted Ukrainian Ambassador to the United States Oksana Markarova, farmer and philanthropist Howard Buffett and officials from the German Marshall Fund in our office last year.

After the visit, I wrote a letter to our congressional delegation asking them to swiftly act on more aid for Ukraine. Unfortunately, that aid remains stalled in Congress.

Buffett emailed me a personal thank you for writing the letter and I was invited to attend a ceremony in Washington, D.C., where Gov. Walz and Ambassador Markarova signed a letter of understanding establishing an agricultural partnership between Minnesota and a northern region in Ukraine called Chernihiv.

"Once we drive the Russians out, we will have some cooperation," Walz told MinnPost. "It's a really important showing of friendship and a real important showing of ties."

I was the only other person invited to attend the ceremony. I believe the United States has a responsibility to send aid to Ukraine to protect democracy. It's also important to note that much of the money authorized for military aid by Congress is spent in the United States, with American companies in more than 40 states, including Minnesota, manufacturing weapons used by Ukrainian soldiers.

### Farm bill

As Congress debates yet another stopgap funding package, my hopes fade for passage of a farm bill this spring.

It seems Sen. Chuck Grassley is thinking the same thing. "I don't see any movement at this point and if we don't get some movement in committee during the month of March, I don't see how it's going to get out," the Iowa Republican told KMAI and Radio. Grassley, who has served in the Senate for more than 43 years, has worked on several farm bills.

I'm hopeful that the farm bill will be extended beyond September, which gives farmers certainty during the critical harvest months. It's likely that the bill will be kicked into 2025, when the new Congress convenes.



**DAN MAHONEY**  
**EXECUTIVE OFFICER, MN FSA**  
daniel.mahoney@mn.usda.gov

# Producers can enroll for Dairy Margin Coverage through April 29

Producers are able to enroll for 2024 Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC), a safety net program offered through the USDA's Farm Service Agency that provides producers with price support. This year's DMC signup ends April 29. For those who sign up for 2024 DMC coverage, payments may begin as soon as March 4 for any payments that triggered in January 2024. DMC payments are calculated using updated feed and premium hay costs, making the program more reflective of actual dairy producer expenses. These updated feed calculations use 100 percent premium alfalfa hay.

FSA has revised the regulations for DMC to allow eligible dairy operations to make a one-time adjustment to established production history. This adjustment will be accomplished by combining previously established supplemental production history with DMC production history for those dairy operations that participated in Supplemental Dairy Margin Coverage during a prior coverage year. DMC has also been authorized through calendar year 2024. Congress passed a 2018 Farm Bill extension requiring these regulatory changes to the program.

DMC is a voluntary risk management program that offers protection to dairy producers when the difference between the all-milk price and the average feed price (the margin) falls below a certain dollar amount selected by the producer. In 2023, Dairy Margin Coverage payments triggered in 11 months including two months, June and July, where the margin fell below \$4 per hundredweight, a first for Dairy Margin Coverage or its predecessor Margin Protection Program.

FSA has revised DMC regulations to extend coverage for calendar year 2024, which is retroactive to Jan. 1, 2024, and to provide



an adjustment to the production history for dairy operations with less than 5 million pounds of production. In previous years, smaller dairy operations could establish a supplemental production history and receive Supplemental Dairy Margin Coverage. For 2024, dairy producers can establish one adjusted base production history through DMC for each participating dairy operation to better reflect the operation's current production.

For 2024 DMC enrollment, dairy operations that established supplemental production history through Supplemental Dairy Margin Coverage for coverage years 2021 through 2023, will combine the supplemental production history with established production history for one adjusted base production history.

For dairy operations enrolled in 2023 DMC under a multi-year lock-in contract, lock-in eligibility will be extended until Dec. 31, 2024. In addition, dairy operations enrolled in multi-year lock-in contracts are eligible for the discounted DMC premium rate during the 2024 coverage year. To confirm 2024 DMC lock-in coverage or opt out in favor of an annual contract for 2024, dairy operations having lock-in contracts must enroll during the 2024 DMC enrollment period.

DMC offers different levels of coverage, even an option that is free to producers, minus a \$100 administrative fee. The administrative fee is waived for dairy producers who are considered limited resource, beginning, socially disadvantaged or a military veteran. To determine the appropriate level of DMC coverage for a specific dairy operation, producers can use the online dairy decision tool.

USDA also offers other risk management tools for dairy producers, including the Dairy Revenue Protection (DRP) plan that protects against a decline in milk revenue (yield and price) and the Livestock Gross Margin (LGM) plan, which provides protection against the loss of the market value of milk minus the feed costs. Both DRP and LGM livestock insurance policies are offered through the Risk Management Agency. Producers should contact their local crop insurance agent for more information.

For more information on DMC, visit [fsa.usda.gov](https://fsa.usda.gov) or contact your local USDA Service Center.

## Wilson is new Policy Intern

My name is Molly Wilson, and I joined the staff as the Policy Intern this spring.



Molly Wilson

I am a political science and journalism major with a math minor at Bethel University in St.

Paul. I will be graduating in May. My dad grew up on a pig farm in northwest Iowa, which has since been converted to a tree farm. My grandparents still live on the farm. I have lived in Columbia Heights my whole life.

I'm excited to learn more about the Minnesota Farmers Union and look forward to working with you.

## April calendar of events

**April 1** Office closed, Easter holiday

**April 3** 6 p.m., Author Austin Frerick at Moon Palace Books, Minneapolis

**April 4** 7 p.m., Zoom In with MFU's Ariel Kagan: "The USDA Ag Census – Minnesota Shines!"

**April 9** 7 p.m., Membership Engagement Committee Zoom. Email [Rachel.m.brann@gmail.com](mailto:Rachel.m.brann@gmail.com) or [claudine@mfu.org](mailto:claudine@mfu.org) for more info.

**April 10** 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m., Regenerative Agriculture Conference: Litter the Landscape with Livestock, Braham Event Center.

**April 10** 8:30 a.m. – 4 p.m., Women in Ag Leadership Conference, Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, Chaska

**April 17** 8:30 a.m.-9:30 a.m., New Member Welcome Coffee Hour. Email [claudine@mfu.org](mailto:claudine@mfu.org) for more information.

Find the latest news online at [mfu.org/events](https://mfu.org/events)

## Penzenstadler is new Membership Intern

My name is Elle Penzenstadler, and I am very excited to join Minnesota Farmers Union as the membership intern. I am in my junior year of college at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities studying animal science with a minor in agricultural communications and marketing. I am also an avid member of my



Elle Penzenstadler

sorority, Lambda Delta Phi, as well as Block and Bridle club on campus. Following my graduation this fall I plan to attend graduate school to obtain my master's in animal nutrition and become a livestock nutritionist.

I grew up on a registered Hereford cattle and show pig operation in Chisago City. I was an active member of both 4-H and FFA, showing livestock at the county, state and national level. When I am not showing, I enjoy helping younger youth with their

projects, mentoring the next generation and advocating for agriculture.

In my free time I enjoy playing volleyball, watching football and Gopher sports, hanging out with friends, being outside and playing with my three corgis Finn, Sully and Athena.

I am super excited to learn from the Minnesota Farmers Union staff and I look forward to everything I will accomplish in this role.

## MFU scholarship deadline is April 22

Minnesota Farmers Union offers \$1,000 scholarships to members who are pursuing post-secondary education. Applications are due April 22.

Applicants must be completing their final term or have completed their final term of their senior year in high school and have plans to attend or are currently attending a post-secondary institution.

To apply, applicants must complete the Farmers Union Scholarship Application, write an essay and have two letters of reference emailed to [glen@mfu.org](mailto:glen@mfu.org) by the application deadline.

Applications must be in the MFU office by 5 p.m., Monday, April 22, 2024.

Minnesota Farmers Union reserves the right to print any portion of the winning applicant's scholarship essay in Minnesota Agriculture.

Find the application at <https://mfu.org/scholarship-application/>. Direct questions to [glen@mfu.org](mailto:glen@mfu.org).

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