

# Minnesota Agriculture

Voice of Rural Minnesota



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March 2026

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**Two MFU members inducted into  
FFA Hall of Fame**

Two Minnesota Farmers Union members are among the eight new inductees into the Minnesota FFA Hall of Fame.

Commissioner Thom Petersen and Medford FFA advisor and agricultural education teacher Tim Larson will be inducted.

Petersen has dedicated his career to advancing Minnesota agriculture, agricultural education and FFA programs, using advocacy, policy, and personal engagement to create statewide impact. From his work as a lobbyist for the Minnesota Farmers Union to his role as Commissioner of Agriculture, Petersen has championed policies and initiatives that expand student opportunities. He supports the Minnesota FFA Foundation's Blue Jackets-Bright Futures program. Recognized with Honorary State and American FFA Degrees and the MAAE Bellringer Award, Petersen embodies Minnesota agriculture's "Head Cheerleader," fostering growth, leadership and community development across the state.

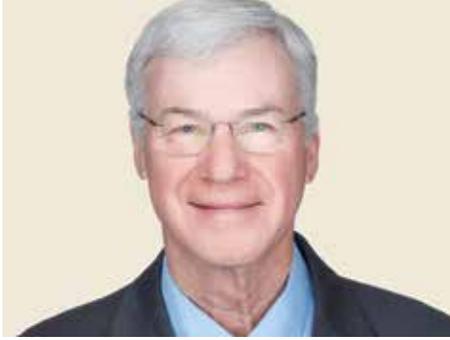
Larson has devoted his career to fostering student growth, leadership and agricultural education through his work as an agricultural education teacher and FFA advisor. He teaches in Medford. His

influence extends to mentoring new educators and providing guidance to FFA programs statewide. A recipient of the State and American FFA degrees, Larson has served as president and past president of the Minnesota Association of Agricultural Educators. He has strengthened Minnesota's agricultural education programs and created a lasting impact on students, colleagues and communities.

The Minnesota FFA Hall of Fame is a collaborative effort between the Minnesota FFA Association, Minnesota FFA Alumni and Supporters, and Minnesota FFA Foundation.

A selection committee consisting of FFA members, alumni and supporters, agricultural educators and foundation representatives selected the final inductees. "The committee evaluates nominees, based on information in the nomination packet, using criteria that emphasize each individual's influence within Minnesota FFA, their commitment to advancing agricultural education, and their substantial service to agriculture and agribusiness," said Steve Olson, co-chair, Minnesota FFA Hall of Fame Committee.

—Minnesota FFA



# President's message

**GARY WERTISH, PRESIDENT**

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**Editor's note:** This column was written Feb. 9, before White House border czar Tom Homan announced President Trump had agreed to end his deportation surge in Minnesota.

Operation Metro Surge is now in its third month in Minnesota, with the White House claiming that more than "4,000 criminal illegals" have been removed from Minnesota.

We have no way to know how many people have been taken from their Minnesota homes, but we do know that people forcefully removed from Minnesota include children, asylum seekers, undocumented immigrants and immigrants who were here with legal work documents working their way through the system to become United States citizens. In some cases, even U.S. citizens have been taken. The vast majority of those removed have committed no crimes and were working. I know of one case where an undocumented person who has been here for 20 years has been deported. This person owned and operated a business providing jobs while raising a family and contributing to the local economy. He is an example of most immigrants who are here to better their lives. Most immigrants are not the "worst of the worst" and are victims of a broken immigration system. There is not a disagreement that convicted criminals need to be removed but the way that President Trump's Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection is operating is not only causing chaos but also creating fear. It has resulted in the deaths of two Minnesota citizens: Renee Good and Alex Pretti.

Because the actions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the Twin Cities metro area have been making national and international headlines, Minnesota Farmers Union held a press conference with Minnesota Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Aric Putnam and Vice Chair Rob Kupec and Deputy Agriculture Commissioner Andrea Vaubel at the State Capitol to draw attention to the affect the

ICE surge is having on greater Minnesota and agriculture. We've read reports of people being arrested in Dodge Center, Northfield, St. Cloud and Willmar, and we're sure that list is missing many of the communities where ICE is causing chaos, creating fear and disrupting lives.

In agriculture, immigrants are a vital part of the food supply chain. About 2.1 million immigrants work in jobs growing, harvesting, processing and selling food in the United States, making up 21 percent of workers in the U.S. food supply chain, according to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). The Institute reports that a third of workers in the meat processing industry are immigrants and 34 percent of workers in commercial bakeries are immigrants. A Texas A&M report found that 51 percent of all hired dairy laborers in the United States are immigrants and 79 percent of the nation's milk supply relies on this labor.

The Minnesota restaurant industry has been particularly hard hit by Operation Metro Surge and the chaos and fear campaign being conducted throughout the entire state. Immigrants both own restaurants and work in them, and many people are afraid to leave their home. As a result, restaurants are closing or struggling to stay open. In Willmar, El Tapatio Mexican Restaurant closed after agents visited the spot for lunch and later returned, detaining its owners and a dishwasher. One manager interviewed for an article in the *Minneapolis St. Paul* magazine had six staff members taken. Business across the restaurants interviewed has dropped 20 to 70 percent since Operation Metro Surge began.

This ICE surge will have a negative effect on the state's February economic forecast and is hurting the state of Minnesota economically. State Auditor Julie Blaha, along with 15 other fiscal officers from throughout the United States, warned on Feb. 6 that ICE operations are resulting in "severe economic disruption." They asked the Trump administration to immediately

scale back enforcement activities to ensure economic stability.

Here's what members are telling us about the situation across Minnesota.

- Various employers, including dairy farmers, are driving their immigrant employees to and from work because they are afraid to come to work. Friends and co-workers are doing the same.
- Immigrant farmers and farmers of color aren't showing up to sell at farmers' markets because they're afraid. Some are unsure if they're going to put in a crop this spring. Immigrant customers and customers of color are also staying away from markets.
- Specialty crop growers are reconsidering their plans as they don't know if they'll be able to find help for planting and harvest.
- A livestock producer who was set to deliver livestock to the processing plant got a call that they were shut down for the day. ICE was spotted in the community, and enough workers didn't show up to their shift that they needed to idle the plant. In another case, workers were followed home after their shift at a small processing facility.
- Not only have restaurants and immigrant-owned businesses closed in the Twin Cities, but in many small communities, employees stay home and restaurants close when ICE comes to town
- School attendance across the state has been dropping as ICE extends its presence with students and their families opting for e-learning as a safer option. If students don't go to school, school districts lose much-needed funding. In addition, child care centers are also struggling because parents are staying home from work and keeping their children home.

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# Let us carry forward the proud tradition of MFU with women's leadership leading the way

**ANNE SCHWAGERL,  
VICE PRESIDENT**

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This year, as we celebrate the United Nations' 2026 Year of the Woman Farmer, Minnesota Farmers Union joins farmers across the world in lifting up a powerful truth: agriculture has always depended on women — and our future depends on their leadership more than ever.

This is a year for gratitude, pride and joy. A year to celebrate the skill in steady hands, the wisdom carried across generations, and the courage it takes to farm in challenging times. A year to honor the women who have always been here, shaping our land, our communities and our organization.

From the very beginning of Minnesota Farmers Union, women have been central to our story.

When our organization was founded more than a century ago, farm women were already organizing alongside their neighbors for fair prices, cooperative development and strong rural communities. They hosted meetings in kitchens and schoolhouses, organized chapters, kept family farms running through wars, droughts, and depressions, and built the cooperative spirit that still defines us today.

Generations of women leaders helped make Farmers Union what it is: an organization rooted in fairness, democracy, and the belief that family farmers deserve dignity and opportunity.

Today, that legacy is alive and thriving.

Across Minnesota, women farmers are leading with creativity, resilience and vision. They are innovators in soil health and conservation, champions of climate-smart agriculture, builders of resilient local food systems, and entrepreneurs creating new markets for farm families. They are running diversified operations, managing large and small farms alike, and bringing fresh energy to cooperatives, boards and community leadership.

And they are doing so while continuing the work women have always done — balancing production and stewardship, business and family, tradition and innovation.

At Minnesota Farmers Union, women's leadership is visible at every level. From township boards to county chapters, from our Women's Conference to the state convention floor, women are shaping policy, strengthening programs and guiding our advocacy. They are mentoring new farmers, organizing neighbors and standing up to corporate consolidation in defense of fair markets and local control.

This year invites us not only to celebrate — but also to tell our story more fully.

Too often, the contributions of women in agriculture have gone unrecorded or unnamed. The Year of the Woman Farmer calls us to change that. It calls us to lift up the leaders in our history and to share the stories happening on farms today. It calls us to make sure the next generation sees a future in agriculture where women belong.

When women farmers succeed, our farms are stronger. Our cooperatives are stronger. Our rural communities are stronger.

This year, let us celebrate boldly. Let us honor the women who came before us, applaud the leaders of today, and welcome the farmers of tomorrow. Let us carry forward the proud tradition of Minnesota Farmers Union — grounded in cooperation, education and legislation — with women's leadership lighting the way.



## Membership application

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

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

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

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

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

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

Type of farm: Check all that apply

- Crops
- Beef
- Dairy
- Hogs
- Horses
- Other please list: \_\_\_\_\_
- Organic
- Poultry
- Sheep
- Vegetable or fruit

Membership: Fee includes family unless student is checked.

- New member
- Renewing member
- 1 year - \$75
- 3 years - \$200
- Student - \$20

**JOIN TODAY!**

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



# Wertish joins press conference discussing impact of ICE surge on agriculture and across state

## STU LOUREY GOVERNMENT RELATIONS DIRECTOR

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At the time of writing this on Feb. 9, state lawmakers are one week away from reconvening in St. Paul for the regular legislative session, and congressional leaders are preparing for release and markup of a new farm bill. This comes as the national opposition grows to the 'surge' of immigration agents and their actions in Minnesota. MFU has continued to speak out, engage with elected officials, and ensure that our members are heard. Be sure to register for MFU Lobby Day on March 3 to share your voice directly with your elected officials in St. Paul.

In a press conference held on Jan. 14, MFU President Gary Wertish joined Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Aric Putnam, DFL-St. Cloud, Senate Ag Vice Chair Rob Kupec, DFL-Moorhead, and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Deputy Commissioner Andrea Vaubel to discuss the impact the surge of ICE agents has had on agriculture, rural communities and our entire state.

Putnam opened the press conference saying, "We're in a moment of profound crisis where we are struggling to make sense of what is happening to us in the state of Minnesota because of decisions made by the federal government."

President Wertish referenced concerns he's heard from MFU members in recent days. "[This is] causing chaos, its traumatizing families, it's making us less safe, and it needs to end."

Wertish called out ICE for creating a "culture of fear" in communities across

the state, leading to people staying home from work or school. According to an analysis from Fox 9, just over 5 percent of the people arrested by ICE in recent weeks are violent criminals.

Wertish also discussed MFU's long support for comprehensive immigration reform. "Central to that work is the rule of law and having a fair process, but we're not seeing that here.

"If our federal leaders want to strengthen rural communities . . . This surge is not the



*MFU Membership Director Gail Donkers met with Sen. Amy Klobuchar at a Mower County farm on Feb. 7.*

solution," he continued. "We still do not have a farm bill, but ICE saw its budget triple. [Our] congressional representatives need to stand up for Minnesota, the rule of law, and basic human decency."

The reconciliation package passed in July provided an additional \$75 billion for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and as of Feb. 9, federal lawmakers are negotiating the potential of additional funding for the agency.

In answering questions from reporters, Deputy Agriculture Commissioner Vaubel made a broader point about food prices and the ICE surge. "The food supply will be significantly affected if this continues," she said. "This affects you even if you don't think it does."

## USDA suspends funding

Also in January, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins announced that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was suspending funding to Minnesota, citing fraud in the state. This created confusion, including what was included in the \$129.8 million in grants the agency reportedly suspended.

"I've always been a good partner with USDA. USDA has always been a good partner to us," said Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen. "And to put, you know, this kind of uncertainty into our food safety, into our livestock safety, our workers, our people, you know, is concerning."

Minnesota's congressional delegation has worked to ensure that funding for key projects and programs—from avian influenza testing to food processing—remains in place. If you are experiencing challenges working with the federal government on a grant-funded project, please reach out. We'll be glad to connect you with a congressional office.

"At best this is just adding to the stress and uncertainty experienced by so many farm families right now," Wertish said of the funding freeze.

## E15 policy stalls again

Also on the federal level, a provision to allow for the year-round nationwide sale of E15 fell out of a partial government funding bill in the final days of negotiation. This is despite the hard work of the National Farmers Union, an array of agricultural organizations, members of our congressional delegation, and even a call to action from President Trump.

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# May the International Year of the Woman Farmer raise awareness of the role of women in agriculture

## GAIL DONKERS MEMBERSHIP DIRECTOR

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The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) launched the International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026, a global campaign aimed at recognizing women's indispensable – yet often overlooked – contributions to global agrifood systems.

Research shows that women have played an important part in how we source and harvest food since 10,000 B.C. Unfortunately, women have been the silent and unseen contributors to our food system and there isn't much written in the history books about women who farm.

We all saw Caroline on the TV show *Little House on the Prairie* harvest and sell her eggs at the store to buy sugar and flour, but she was never called a farmer - Pa was the farmer. Fast forward to the Second World War where we saw women taking over the family farms and tending the fields to help provide food and supplies to the troops. After the war they were replaced by the soldiers returning home. It wasn't until the late 1990s that the number of female farmers began to grow drastically. This was due to two changes: the U.S. Census and the destigmatization of what farm employment means. Because of these changes, women are now more likely to call themselves farmers than in years past. Women have traditionally done behind the scenes jobs like keeping the farm books, marketing the grain, or working off-the-farm to provide insurance for the family.

One of the challenges women have faced is limited representation in agricultural decision-making roles. We are seeing more women running for – and being elected to – county, state and national agricultural boards. We only need to look at MFU's history of women in leadership roles, starting with Norma Hanson as the MFU Vice President from February to November 1995 and our current MFU Vice President Anne Schwagerl as role models for change.

Women constitute a significant share of the global agricultural workforce and are central to food production, seed conservation and nutrition. Yet they remain under-recognized and under-supported. May the International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026 global campaign raise awareness of the role of women in agrifood systems and the challenges they face.

## Welcome new members

Welcome to the new members who joined MFU in December and January. 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. Thanks for Farmers Union Agency for paying for the membership for agricultural education teachers across the state.

- Kimberley Harris, Olmsted County
- JoAnn and Donald Andringa, Polk County
- Emma Ascheman, Benson FFA, Swift County
- Hannah Baumgartner, Norman County East FFA, Norman County
- Kaela Berg, Dakota County
- Jacob Brandt, Sibley East FFA, Sibley County

- Owen Busse, Sibley County
- Allan Chute, Northern Lights Community School, Itasca County
- Dylan Colbert, Windom FFA, Cottonwood County
- Brooke Converse, Milaca FFA, Mille Lacs County
- David Coolidge, Olmsted County
- Keith Cooper, Brew d'Etat, LLC, Scott County
- Madison Douvier, West Central Area FFA, Grant County
- Calvin Erickson, Hills-Beaver Creek FFA, Nobles-Rock County
- Matthew Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald Organics LLC, McLeod County
- Amber Fleischhacker, Crow Wing County
- Abraham Fofanah, Sherburne County
- Connor Foley, Hancock FFA, Stevens-Traverse County
- Shephanie Funk, Worthington FFA, Nobles-Rock County
- Lily Gross, Radish Farm Stop, Hennepin-Ramsey County

- Maren and Amanda Grunnet, Lucky Lavender Farm, Rice County
- Daniel Gunderson, Morrison County
- Jordyn Hellerud, Grand Rapids FFA, Itasca County
- Esmeralda Huerta, Wright County
- Gina Huhnerkoch, Granada-Huntly-East Chain FFA, Martin County
- Travis Johnson, Climax-Shelly FFA, Polk County
- Lily Krona, Crookston FFA, Polk County
- Paige Lehrkamp, Yellow Medicine East FFA, Yellow Medicine County
- Alice Lewandowski, St. James FFA, Watonwan County
- Amara Livingston, Goodhue FFA, Goodhue County
- Rebecca Meger, LeSeur Henderson FFA, Le Sueur County
- Rachel Nelson, Academy for Sciences and Agriculture FFA, Hennepin-Ramsey County
- Audi Nickel, Mountain Lake FFA, Cottonwood County
- Leslie Nielsen, Dakota County

- Alison Offerdahl, Park Rapids FFA, Hubbard County
- Tracy Ore and Ariann Kramer, Stearns County
- Nathan Plowman, Pillager FFA, Cass County
- Spencer Potter, Greenway FFA, Itasca County
- Tucker Regner, Dilworth-Glyndon-Felton FFA, Clay County
- Diane and Michael U. Seifert, Ravenview Farm, Scott County
- Taber Sheldrup, Martin County West FFA, Martin County
- Jake Siltala, Sebeka, Wadena County
- Emma Ray Voge, Morrison County
- Josh Voller, Aitkin FFA, Aitkin County
- Richard Wenschlag, Ulen-Hitterdal FFA, Clay County
- Jasmine Larson Williams, Dakota County
- Traci Wutzke, Bertha-Hewitt FFA, Anoka County
- Dorothy Zimmerman, Clay County



CLIMATE RESILIENCE ON THE FARM

# Beekeeping today is like walking into a casino for a poker game; you have no idea what hand you'll be dealt

By Jada Csikos-Monroe

Mike and Cathy Mackiewicz own Bone Lake Meadows Apiary in Scandia. Mike manages up to 50 beehives to make local honey, and Cathy uses the beeswax to make candles and a line of body care products. They market their products through an online store and at local farmers markets and gift shops in the St. Croix River Valley, as well as Summer Kitchen Cooperative's online store and farmstand. Mike teaches classes about beekeeping to school-aged students and helps students enter their honey into competitions at the Minnesota State Fair.

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

## **Q. How long have you been beekeeping?**

**A.** I got into the beekeeping kind of unbeknownst to me about 25 years ago when my kids gave me a beehive with live bees as a Father's Day gift. They knew that where I grew up in northwest Wisconsin there were beekeepers and that I was drawn towards the magic of beekeeping. I never had the opportunity to keep bees until we moved to our rural property in Scandia. From day one I was hooked, one hive turned into three, and three turned into six, and then before I knew it there were 50 hives. I've been beekeeping since the year 2000 so this will be my 26th year.

## **Q. How do you decide where to put your beehives?**

**A.** Because I have up to 50 beehives, the most convenient management would be to put them all on one piece of land and let the bees fight to survive on



Mike Mackiewicz

limited resources. But instead, I split them up onto different family farms in my area. The first step of setting up a hive is finding a sheltered area on the landscape where they won't be hit by wind and heavy rain. When I work with local farms and orchards that are in need of pollinators on their properties, we'll first walk their land to see if it's a good piece of property, I assess if there's enough space and food for my bees, and walking the landscape helps me decide how many hives it could sustain. I also want to know if the landowner's practices are aligned with mine and that they are pesticide free, because I wouldn't put my bees on a property if I knew there's risk of chemical spray. Over the years I've established relationships with family farms in my area, and I know that what they're doing is in line with what I want for my bees.

## **Q. Has extreme weather in the St. Croix River Valley effected your beekeeping operation in recent years?**

**A.** Every year is a little different. Years ago, you could almost predict how much honey each parcel of land would produce, but now every year it's like walking into a casino for a poker game and you don't know what hand you'll be dealt.

In 2025 we experienced severe thunderstorms with high winds that knocked over hives and trees. It used to be that all you had to do was put a brick on top of the hive to keep the cover on, but now we have to have stakes in the ground and invest in ratchet straps. We had three windstorms over 74 miles per hour last year, and I had neighbors with commercial hives lose about 50 hives from getting knocked over by the wind.

The rainfall from these storms was also extreme. If you look at the yearly average inches of rain for my area the number looks pretty good, but we are experiencing all that rain in four or five episodes, and there's extended periods with no rain and it's super dry. In a perfect world we like a quarter inch of rain a week, but lately we have super-cell thunderstorms coming through with two to five inches of rain. The excess moisture throws off the flowering process of plants so they think they don't need to flower and start to focus on roots instead. Heavy rainfall can also knock the nectar out of plants, which is the bees' source of food. Last year the

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# Women who farm

I grew up on a diversified dairy, hog and crop farm about two miles from where I now live. I grew up during the farm crisis of the 1980s and didn't want to farm, I wanted the steady paycheck that came from a job in town. It seemed delightful not to worry about how you'd have the money to pay bills.

Well, I married a man who wanted to farm and entered a career in newspapers. Now, I'm part of the farm work crew and bring home a paycheck from Minnesota Farmers Union.

The idea for this issue to honor women who farm is from the United Nations, who declared 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer. I don't like how it says that woman farmer is different from farmer, but I wanted to recognize the women of Minnesota Farmers Union who are farming. As you'll see from the articles on the next few pages, farming is different for everyone. Some women are full time on the farm, others are not. All contribute to the farm and our beautiful mosaic of Minnesota agriculture.

Oftentimes, the stories of women in agriculture are unrecorded. This issue is an attempt to capture and share stories of women who farm in Minnesota in 2026. I hope you enjoy reading their stories as much as I did.

Happy International Year of Women who Farm.

*Janet*

## Allie Kuppenbender

With a degree in sustainable agriculture and studio art from the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., my goal was always flowers. They are what interested me most on the campus farm and made my seemingly disjointed majors actually make sense. After all floral design is basically fine art with flowers as the medium. Vegetable, livestock, and row crop farming are all heavily male-dominated. But most flower farmers I had met, worked with or for, heard talk, and looked up to were women. Flowers and flower farming are aesthetic by nature and so I suppose it makes sense that it is one of the few (only?) subsets of farming that is actually female-dominated. Even though the majority of my days are filled with transplanting, harvesting, bed prep, being out in the elements, marketing and selling our crop—all things very familiar to any farmer—the beauty of a field of flowers is so visceral that it makes sense women are the ones leading the way in this field.



Bleed Heart Floral began in 2019 with the purchase of our land in Mazeppa. We sell cut flowers exclusively to our local market both wholesale to florists and retail via a bouquet subscription (CSA), bulk buckets, and wedding/event design. It's been an interesting and not often linear ride but we are to the point where 2025 was our first season where flower farming was my family's sole source of income. We finally feel like a "real" farm. Being able to work together and farm full time was always my husband Tony and I's goal.

However, while I am the one with the practical farming knowledge and the day-to-day experience as my husband worked off the farm to support us being able to get to this point, anytime we are in a traditional ag space, it is automatically assumed that he is the farmer. Further, flowers are often not even thought of as an agricultural venture since it is so female-dominated. Instead, it is viewed as a garden or backyard hobby. We, with the support of MFU, have worked to create legislative change to include floriculture into the broader definition of agriculture. Because flower farming is farming. Women are farmers.

## Carol Kolseth

I grew up on a dairy farm near Thief River Falls. Dale Kolseth and I were married in 1992. Our farm, located north of Plummer, has been in my husband's family since 1914. We raise wheat, soybeans, alfalfa, and grass hay on 2,400 owned and rented acres. We do not have any livestock; all of our hay is raised for commercial production. This will be the first year we raise a quarter of corn.



When we were first married, I worked full time in town as a bookkeeper and Dale farmed full time with his dad. That

changed one evening when I brought lunch to Dale in the field while he was combining wheat. He asked if I wanted to ride along for a round. I climbed in and as we went down the field he started showing me which levers controlled each function. At the end of the round, he unloaded into the truck and then said "ok you can combine now. I have to dump the trucks." That was my training to run a combine. Since then, I've learned to operate just about everything on our farm except the sprayer.

Because I was willing to help with anything, my husband started to leave notes on the kitchen table telling me which field

## Judith Erickson

I co-own Pleasant Valley Orchard & Ciderly along with my husband, Jim Birkholz. I became involved in agriculture through the role of supportive spouse.



Photo by Tracy Blowers

I grew up on a corn, soybean and livestock farm in southern Minnesota so was familiar with farm life when we bought 70 acres in rural Chisago County to start an apple orchard in 1990.

I've never viewed myself as a farmer's wife. I know there are many women out there who play the role of the supportive spouse, whether through taking care of the business details, farming alongside their spouse or working outside the farm to make ends meet. I hope that my story shines a light on the work that we do to make agriculture a sustainable life style.

Pleasant Valley Orchard direct grows and markets apples, pears, strawberries and pumpkins. The orchard became my husband's primary job while I continued my career alongside supporting the family orchard business. In 2024 I retired and while in semi-retirement my orchard related role has only grown.

When we bought the farm in 1990, it was a corn and soybean farm and former dairy farm. The first person to farm this land did so in the 1850s. It is historic land and was the ancestral home of the Wahpekute and Anishinabewaki (Land Trust Alliance). We began planting trees in 1991 and started selling apples in our barn in 1993. Original plantings included a heavy focus on classics like Haralson, but we were also in on the ground level of the perennial favorite Honeycrisp.

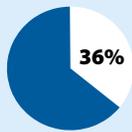
We have 18 acres of apples and pears, 3 acres of pumpkins and squash and a few acres of strawberries. We continue to have old favorites like Haralson, Wealthy and Sweet16 alongside new releases from the University of Minnesota like Sweetango, First Kiss, Triumph and Kudos. We direct market all our fruit, and offer pick-your-own on the weekend.

We don't have a lot of bells and whistles; our goal is to offer high-quality fruit in a family-friendly atmosphere. Our bakery adds value with homemade apple pie, crisp, hand-dipped caramel apples and other favorites. You'll also find orchard standards of apple cider, doughnuts, hayrides and a few farm animals. In 2024, we added hard cider made from our apples to our offerings.

Jim, and now our son Sam, are the growers. That is their primary focus, but as a direct market farm, the rest of the business falls into my purview. I'm HR, administration, marketing, scheduler, and manager of the fall retail season, including staff. We couldn't direct market our products without a dedicated team of seasonal part-time employees.

As a team, Jim, Sam and I work together to ensure our conservation and community values are reflected in our approach to agriculture and what we offer the public. We're a Sustainable Agriculture Demonstration Farm and are Ag Water Quality Certified. In 2015, we received WCCO's Best Orchard Award from viewers; in 2018 Best in Marketing from the Chisago Lakes Chamber; in 2025 we were recognized as one of the top 20 orchards in the United States by USA Today, also in 2025 we were recognized as Outstanding Conservation Farm of the Year from the Chisago County Soil and Water Conservation District and in early 2026 Jim and I were awarded the Falls Spirit Award from the Falls Chamber for their contributions to the St. Croix Falls/Taylors Falls community.

On my own, I would have never gone back to farming. But as a family, I couldn't be prouder.



Female farmers accounted for 36% of the country's 3.4 million producers in 2022.



In 2022, there were **35,623** female farmers in Minnesota.

Female producers were more likely to be a beginning farmer – 33% of female producers had farmed 10 or fewer years.

Source: 2022 Census of Agriculture

to go to when I got home from work. After a few more years of working full time and then farming til dark and all weekend, I decided the farm needed me more so I quit my job. This allowed us to only need seasonal help until 2012. We now have one full time employee.

My husband has always been open minded and never underestimated what women can do in agriculture. When his dad died in 2004, he asked his mom if she wanted to rake hay. She did for the first time at age 63 and also started helping with tillage. It has been the same way with our only child Lisa. She started driving a tractor and raking hay at 10 years old.

Unfortunately, through the years, not everyone has been as accepting of women working and managing a farm. I've turned many heads being the only woman at a chemical or co-op meeting. I've had to deal with condescending comments hauling grain and hay with a semi, even though I've had a CDL for almost 20 years.

It is slowly getting better for women in row crop farming. One of the agronomists I work with is a young woman. There are even a few women behind parts counters today. Technology has helped level the playing field. Most settings on our machinery can now be adjusted using a touchscreen. It's easy for me to bid on

online auctions versus standing in a crowd of men.

We are looking forward as our daughter Lisa and her husband are in their second year of farming 850 acres of rented land. We are helping them get established by letting them use our machinery and shop and donating our labor.

My involvement with ag organizations includes serving as secretary/treasurer of the Pennington County Farmers Union and formerly a board member of our local co-op and FSA county committee minority adviser.

## Jen Yost

Hi, I am Jen Yost from St. Peter in Nicollet County. It is truly an honor to share with you my involvement in agriculture. I do consider myself a transplant in agriculture, having not grown up on a farm but rather marrying into it. I have learned throughout the last (almost) 20 years the highs and lows that can be experienced in the farming practices we do, the blood and sweat invested, and teaching and observing our three daughters growing up in a farming community. If we were talking in person right now, I would probably have bags under my eyes and have my hands full with lambs (fingers-crossed).



On our farm we have 50 to 60 wool and hair breed ewes that will be lambing between January and March and then a few more lambing in the summer. In addition to lambs, we raise bucket calves for market, we are contract pig growers for

Compart Family Farms and raise organic and conventional crops: oats, rye, corn, soybeans and alfalfa.

When I am not in our barns, I am either at my job off the farm or helping my husband, Jake Yost, with tillage, paperwork/emails or any other farm needs and of course running to sporting events year-round. For me and my family, women in agriculture are a core part of our family farm. Our three daughters, Hadley, 11, Jaylin, 16, and Kyla, 18, are all involved in 4-H and the older two are both officers for the St. Peter High School FFA chapter. All three help in our barns, especially during the lambing season; they may be helping to pull a lamb, bottle feeding or hand milking ewes, checking barns after sports and before bed and doing daily chores. In the summer they take on more of the daily chore duties and are washing, walking and training animals for the fairs. Our oldest daughter, Kyla, is set to attend Iowa Western in the fall of 2026 for agricultural business management, welding and wrestling. She also helps in

the hog barns, especially washing barns during turnovers, and checking on the 9,000-plus Compart pigs.

Farmers Union has been a great educational resource with many leadership opportunities and a supportive organization to those in agriculture, but of course if you are reading this you know that. I am the treasurer/secretary for Nicollet County Farmers Union and in the past have been involved in the FUEL (Farmers Union Enterprise Leadership) program, day camps and other events. The FUEL program was a phenomenal experience meeting other couples from South Dakota, Wisconsin, Montana and North Dakota. Through this program we learned ways to excel in leadership, parliamentary procedures, working with others, and relating it to agriculture.

I wish the best to all of you in this upcoming planting season, garden growing season, birthing season, produce making season or any other agricultural goals you invest your time, money and sweat into.

## Colleen Kelm

I grew up on a small, diversified farm near Grand Meadow, where my appreciation for agriculture began at an early age. At 9 years old, I told my Dad I planned to become a veterinary technician. Life, however, led me down a different path.



In 1982, at the age of 18, I married a fourth-generation dairy farmer and began a lifelong career in agriculture.

The 1980s were a defining and difficult decade for the farm and us. The agricultural economy was under severe strain. Interest rates on our first operating loans climbed to more than 16 percent, placing constant pressure on every decision we made.

In 1984, following the sudden loss of my father-in-law, we were faced with the responsibility of keeping the farm operating during one of the most challenging periods in agriculture. I stepped fully into farm work and out of necessity, quickly learned

to operate tractors, work the fields, (nothing compares to the smell of freshly turned spring soil), haul loads, assist with milking, and care for calves. Long days, limited resources, and financial uncertainty were part of everyday life, yet those years built the resilience, work ethic, and determination that still guide our operation today. Our sons, born in 1985 and 1987, grew up in the barn and on tractors. We purchased a tractor with a cab so they could safely sit in a car seat and ride along.

Over the decades, our operation has grown from 40 to 240 cows, evolving from pipeline milking systems to modern robotic milking technology. I have experienced every stage of that growth—from driving open tractors to today's cab-equipped machinery—and have been actively involved in the decisions that helped move our farm forward into a profitable and sustainable future.

Today, our oldest son, Josh, his wife Brittney, and their three children farm alongside us, representing the fifth and sixth generation. From the time they

were born, the next generation has been present in the barns and tractors. Brittney has also expanded the operation through diversified beef sales under her business, Kelm's Crazy Acres.

Our son Jason and his wife Jamie live next door with their two boys and own Kelm Lawn and Landscape. They and the boys continue to support the farm by hauling round bales and helping with silage harvest.

Farming is more than an occupation—it is a calling to feed, fuel, and clothe the world. As a woman in agriculture, I entered a field where few females were present at the time, yet I have been fortunate to work with individuals and businesses who respected my experience and knowledge. I take pride in having played an active role in shaping a farm that is built to last for future generations.

Two years ago, I launched my Facebook page, Kelm's Moostead, to share what farming for the future—growing with hope and living in faith—truly looks like.

## Kelsey Wulf

I don't come from an agricultural family but always dreamed of living on a farm. When I went to college, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I knew I



wanted to help people. I came to realize that agriculture could be the way I helped my community. Agriculture is truly at the root of so many things, from water quality and animal welfare to workers' rights and human health.

With zero experience farming, I headed back to school. Fergus Falls had a one-year Sustainable Food Production Program that was a true gem. We got our boots on the ground at dozens of local farms, everything from cattle operations to vinegaries. We learned practical, hands-on skills like fencing and animal husbandry.

After that program, I spent my early 20s continuing to develop my experience. I worked at a grass-based dairy, spent a spring as a shepherd, served in the AmeriCorps in community garden programs and Habitat for Humanity. Finally, I wound up back in the Fergus Falls area when I moved to Lida Farm, an organic vegetable CSA. I spent four years living and working at the farm. They were and are incredibly kind

people, and during my time there I was able to work on starting my own enterprises.

While at Lida, I also worked for the University of Minnesota, coordinating our county 4-H program and the Master Gardener program. Through my Extension work I met my husband.

We moved to our now home in 2018, a five-acre farm outside of Underwood. We raise family milk cows, laying hens, a modest garden, and three (soon to be four) wild children.

I transitioned to being home full-time after our first daughter was born. Within two years, we welcomed a second daughter. I couldn't see how, with two young children and a husband on the road a lot, I would be able to produce a quality and consistent product from our farm that would bring in a legitimate income.

What I turned towards was what I knew best, writing and talking to people. I started a blog and YouTube channel the spring of 2020 called Rough and Tumble Farmhouse. I share everything from how to get grease stains out of your clothes to how to tell if your cow is in labor.

I call myself "your best friend on the homestead" and that's what I truly hope to be for people. A resource you can come to for

honest and straightforward information that isn't too technical but still comes from solid research and experience.

Since starting the blog, I've been published in *Woman's World Magazine*, become a regular contributor to *Homestead Living Magazine*, and am working with a national publisher to release my first book in the fall of 2027.

I love connecting with all the amazing people I've met through the blog and YouTube channel, but I truly find the most joy working in agriculture here at home by coordinating bus tours to local farms, managing the Deep Roots Festival with the Sustainable Farming Association, and now serving on the board of our local MFU chapter.

When it comes to being a woman in Minnesota agriculture, I think of the intro to one of my favorite podcasts, *The Rural Woman Podcast*. "...I saw women who were strong but humble, often taking a back seat. These women were leaders who deserved a seat at the table. They are rural entrepreneurs who live and breathe their work, full of grit and pride. We may not all live, farm, ranch, or homestead the same way, but we are all connected, we are rural women, and our stories are worthy of being told."

## Karen Falk

I didn't grow up on a farm; my mom did though. I never thought I'd live on a farm, but then I met Jim, who became my husband and now I live on a farm. We've been married for 46 years and during that time I've learned a lot about farming. I was an elementary teacher for 34 years, so farm hand was my second job.



We started out with corn, soybeans, oats, wheat and alfalfa and had a Hereford cow/calf herd. There was always a fence to check, cattle to count in the pasture, hay to rake and haul, parts to run for, grain to swath, and the list goes on. Then in 1985, Jim decided to build a seed cleaning plant and there were new things to learn. Forty-one

years later besides cleaning seed, we clean specialty soybeans for domestic and international markets and are excited to work with local Minnesota specialty wheat farmers.

We've had visits from international buyers and hosted various interest groups at our farm. We take pride in the farm business we've built and work hard to maintain it. I've taken charge of all the lawn and gardens and have worn out many lawnmowers. I can't count how many gallons of paint I've applied.

Now that I'm retired from teaching, I have more time to help on the farm so there are more new things for me to learn. International shipments require special procedures. All products can be traced back to the grower. That means lots of samples shipped, stickers applied to bags,

shipping containers filled with carefully wrapped pallets surrounded by cardboard sheets and decorated with desiccant bags, all documented on clipboards and with digital photos.

I have been a family partner on our farm and enjoy being a supportive helper using my strengths and also being aware of my limitations. There's a job fit for everyone, everyday.

The opportunity to be surrounded by nature and to experience all the seasons have to offer, the sunrises and sunsets, changing colors and weather moods is something I treasure. Now that our son, Andrew, has rented some of our farmland, in addition to his own land, hopefully, we can continue the transition to the next generation, just as the Falk family has for more than 100 years.

## Therese Romsdahl

Agriculture is a second career for me. I was born in Watonwan County, but my parents migrated to the Twin Cities suburb of Prior Lake in the late 1970s



when I was 13. I went on to marry, raise my daughter Kelly, and have a 30-year career at a suburban police department as a records manager. I was widowed at age 38, and after being widowed for many years I met my husband Brian Romsdahl, who was also widowed. Brian was raising two teenage daughters and farmed the family farm in Watonwan County with his father Buddy (Buddy was a lifelong Farmers Union member). When we married in 2011, I retired from the police department and moved to the farm.

Our blended family includes three daughters, all married, and 6 grandchildren. We are a traditional small family farm. The first few years we were married I worked off the farm to secure our health insurance. Brian

farmed with Grandpa Buddy and daughters Jennie and Laura. Grandpa Buddy has passed, and we now farm with daughter Laura and her husband, Hunter Quiring, whose home is on the same building site as ours. Both Laura and Hunter also work off the farm and Brian and I help with childcare for their two children.

When we were first married, Brian raised corn, soybeans, alfalfa and beef cattle. We are starting to prepare for retirement and farm fewer acres, rent some of Brian's land out, and still raise beef cattle with Laura and Hunter.

We all work hard and have our own skills. I use my bookkeeping and organizational skills on the administrative side, and help wherever I'm needed, including taking care of kids, being the parts runner or extra hand during a repair, feeding cattle, or helping when the vet comes to work cattle. Brian, Laura and Hunter have a lifetime of farm knowledge and skills they bring to the table. Laura has an agriculture degree and is employed at a Soil

and Water Conservation District. She and Hunter are conscientious stewards of the land and bring fresh ideas and energy to the operation.

I love farm life, no two days are ever the same. I love the physical work, and watching crops and cattle grow. But a farmer must be a problem solver, willing to go from tending children and running the household, to grabbing the kids and heading to the repair site, chasing cattle, or driving the extra tractor to rake hay before it rains. She needs exceptional coping skills and good stress management skills.

I came from a career where my paycheck came every two weeks. I earned paid vacation and sick time, and I always had health care provided by my employer. That isn't the case with farming. Boy did I have a lot to learn about health insurance, managing a line of credit, keeping track of elevator load tickets, and organizing farm taxes.

I believe women in agriculture have always worked in non-traditional roles, and I love the versatility of farm life.

## Meg Moynihan Stuedemann

Never did I ever... think I would grow up to be an agriculture professional – much less a dairy farmer. But a sense of adventure led me to where I am today.



I grew up in Milwaukee and Nashville, never questioning my comfort or identity as a city person. Then I left for Peace Corps service in Thailand the February after I graduated from college, and the two and a half years I spent there changed everything.

I was posted to a northern province called Nan, adjoining Laos. This was the first time I had ever lived in a rural, agricultural community. I walked in squelchy rice paddies in my bare feet. I harvested wheat with a hand sickle. I helped a headman's wife start a village pig bank and helped a school start a duck raising project. I saw fires set to burn the residue on rice paddies that had escaped and licked the sides of our soft mountains in the darkness during

the dry season. I learned to expect rain at a definite time every afternoon during the rainy season and saw how the rivers swelled, chocolate with mud from eroded soil. I spent time in rural villages where all the young people had left for paying jobs in towns and cities, leaving only elders and little kids.

Here, I recognized that agriculture is where human beings and natural resources intersect. I also learned from fellow volunteers that it was conceptually possible for agriculture to be simultaneously productive, profitable and protect the environment — and that concept was called sustainable agriculture.

I realized I could be much more effective if I knew how farming and agriculture worked, so I started looking for a university where I could learn about agricultural production and sustainable agriculture. That turned out to be the University of Minnesota.

I'll skip ahead and tell you that after I earned my master's degree in agronomy, I moved to Michigan then returned to Minnesota

for a job at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). It was an MFU member, dairyman Dave Minar, who gave his friend Kevin my phone number. And four or five years after that, Kevin and I got married at the Sibley County Courthouse one afternoon and went home to milk cows.

We have a 170-acre farm in Le Sueur County that Kevin bought in 1988, and we milk about 70 head, shipping to Organic Valley. I have never accepted there's anything I can't do, so I promptly learned to milk cows, vaccinate calves, drive tractors, attach and detach implements, operate the TMR mixer, round bale, feed hay, clean the free-stall barn and cow yard with a skidsteer, spread manure, fix water lines, string polywire, pay bills, do bookwork, trap mice, and watch Gunsmoke at noon.

My job at the MDA helps our farm, and my farm experiences and insights are a big help to my work at the MDA, where I help develop new projects and programs and lead our efforts on supporting farmers in stress. Some days I'm at my wit's end, but it's a diversified, rewarding and fun life.

## Hannah Bernhardt

I grew up on a corn and soybean farm in southern Minnesota, but I never thought I'd be a farmer. I loved animals and being outside, but my childhood was overshadowed by the 1980s farm crisis. Most of the messages I picked up about farming, whether spoken or unspoken, were that farming was a terrible way to make a living. I went away to Mount Holyoke College in western Massachusetts and spent four years trying to use what I was learning about politics, economics, anthropology, sociology and social justice movements to understand why farmers in the Midwest were struggling and why more of them didn't seem to organize for change.



Photo by Scott Srebiele

I also experienced many small farmers on the East Coast choosing to operate outside of the commodity system I was familiar with. Organic farming and vegetable Community Supported Agriculture models were particularly interesting to me. I saw farms choosing to use sustainable practices

that helped them be less reliant on huge agribusiness companies for their inputs and selling directly to customers so they could set their own prices. Commodity farming felt like gambling, and direct marketing looked like a way to make farming more economically secure; yet I couldn't realistically see small-scale vegetable farming fixing the problems Midwestern farmers were facing.

It took me a decade to make my way back to farming. I started a career in politics and government but was always looking for a way to advocate for farmers. When the National Young Farmers Coalition started, I was excited to volunteer and found myself attending organic farming conferences, hanging out with young and beginning farmers, and visiting their farms. Eventually I decided to apprentice on a large grass-fed livestock farm in upstate New York where I fell in love with shepherding and animal husbandry in a pasture-based system. I also felt I had found a scale and model of farming that would translate well to the Midwest.

Back in Minnesota, I met my husband Jason, and we took the Land Stewardship

Project's Farm Beginnings Course and purchased our farm in 2016. I now raise grass-fed beef and lamb and pastured pork using adaptive managed grazing, and I direct market my products online. I have continued learning about soil health, and I enjoy educating about regenerative agriculture and giving customers a taste of farm life in person through agritourism. I've also continued to stay active in policy because I believe we will only make lasting change if farmers are willing to work together to advocate for a better food system.

As a woman in agriculture, I don't see myself any differently than the long line of women who have always been an essential part of producing food for their communities. My grandma was born the same year women achieved suffrage, and while no one called her a farmer, she would casually tell stories about being in the field on one tractor while my grandpa was on the other. While my husband still has to sometimes say, "don't talk to me, she's the farmer," I benefit from the ongoing fight for equal rights for women in the many ways I'm allowed to speak and lead, and I'm grateful to Farmers Union for amplifying my voice.

## Heather-Marie Bloom

I didn't grow up farming. I grew up in the suburbs of the Twin Cities. My parents had a small vegetable patch in the garden, but they mostly nurtured native flowers for insect habitat. My parents instilled in me a love of nature and caring for the earth. After college, friends of mine started a Catholic Worker Farm that was an intentional community and every time I visited I was inspired by the community and that they grew and preserved their own food.



In 2005, I moved to Duluth to pursue art teaching. Every weekend I would go to the farmers' market, later joining a CSA (Northern Harvest) and eventually working for them for one season. I started Rising Phoenix Community Farm in 2011 as a sole-proprietor, woman-owned business. For the first 11 years, I did not have

a permanent home. I moved five times, moving the farm each time while leasing land in Carlton and Saint Louis counties. Those were some of the most challenging, and rewarding, years of my life. In 2018, I met my now-partner John, and he began to assist me on the farm. In 2020, we were finally able to buy our "forever farm": a 40-acre farm of our own in Barnum. Together we run a vegetable and flower farm, Rising Phoenix Community Farm, selling CSA shares at an on-site farmstand and to restaurants. One of our guiding principles is caring for the land while feeding people and building community.

When I first started farming, my mentors were men, some my age, some older. All were a great inspiration and a lot of technical help as I was first starting. I know I can reach out to them whenever I have a question, and at times, I still do. But now, 16 years on, my inspiration and network is all the women that are farming around me. Flower farmers, herders, vegetable farmers.

Queer, straight, BIPOC, older, younger. This is not what I counted on when I started farming: a community of hardworking women farmers, all struggling and rejoicing and helping one another.

Forty years ago, if someone was asked to conjure an image of what a farmer looked like, and what they farmed, I'm sure most people would have come up with a rather cliched idea of what that was: an older white man with overalls, milking cows. Obviously, some of that is based on reality. But what gives me hope and encourages me in my continued path as a farmer is that that image is changing.

**Farms with one or more female producers accounted for 41% of total U.S. agriculture sales and 46% of U.S. farmland.**

Source: 2022 Census of Agriculture



Members gathered in Alexandria for the MFU Women's Conference in January.

## Women's Conference combines training and creativity to build resilience and relationships

By Jada Csikos-Monroe

MFU members and staff gathered for the 2026 MFU Women's Conference on Jan. 15. The conference kicked off at La Ferme, a farm-to-fork restaurant on Alexandria's busy Broadway Street.

The conference began with a COMET (Changing our Mental Health and Emotional Trajectory) training led by Meg Moynihan and Emily Krekelberg. Moynihan is with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and Krekelberg is with U of M Extension. The COMET training provided strategies for initiating conversations with friends and loved ones about mental health and wellbeing. Highlights included a video to understand the difference between sympathy and empathy and a seven-step strategy for initiating conversations about mental health. After the COMET training, attendees enjoyed a dinner of locally sourced foods before heading to Arrowwood Resort and Conference Center for social time.

The second day of the Women's Conference opened with breakfast at Arrowwood Resort and remarks from MFU Vice President Anne Schwagerl, who expressed gratitude for those in attendance and emphasized the importance of gathering in person.

Next, Tina LeBrun, executive director of the Southern Agricultural Center of Excellence, shared her experience working with producers in the Farm Business Management

program and emphasized the importance of good farm recordkeeping.

She was followed by a panel of MFU members who spoke about their marketing strategies: Rachel Sannerud of Pluck Flower Farm, Hannah Bernhardt of Medicine Creek Farm, and Cindy VanDerPol of Pastures a Plenty Farm.

Following the panel, keynote speaker Kris Shelstad spoke about rural resilience. Shelstad moved back to her hometown of Madison after a career in military service, and she saw a need for a third space in her community. In 2022, Shelstad founded Madison Mercantile as a community hub. The Mercantile includes a coffee shop, space for community gatherings, a stage set with a full band ready for performances and rehearsals, and an Innovation Center that has resources for emerging businesses. Work is underway to add a food hub with cold storage.

After her keynote, the conference shifted to a creative seed art activity led by Colleen Carlson with U of M Extension. Carlson works in Carver and Scott counties. Two participants were recognized for their creativity, with one receiving an award for Best Use of Materials and another for Best in Show.

Following a lunch of Minnesota staples including wild rice and tater tot hotdish, Jothna Harris with Change Narrative led a storytelling workshop to equip individuals to share their experiences with the changing climate.

Then, Jody Dahlseid, general manager of Millerville Co-op Creamery, sent participants on their way with a pound of butter created in Millerville, at one of the last creameries in the state still producing small batch butter.

**A special thank you to  
the sponsors of the 2026  
MFU Women's Conference**



# Senate passes resolution marking 2026 as International Year of the Woman Farmer



The U.S. Senate passed a resolution on Jan. 29 celebrating the designation of 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer. Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, and Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., ranking member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, introduced the resolution in the Senate. Reps. Ashley Hinson, R-Iowa, and Chellie Pingree, D-Maine, introduced companion legislation in the House.

“Every day, women across America work to feed, fuel, and clothe our world – and they should receive credit for incredibly demanding jobs. That’s why I am proud to partner with Sen. Klobuchar in introducing this resolution to ensure that female ag producers receive the recognition they deserve for their hard work,” Fischer said.

“We can’t have a strong rural economy without the contributions of the women farmers working every day to feed and fuel the world. By recognizing 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer, we are celebrating the role of women in agriculture, encouraging women and girls to pursue careers in agriculture, and ensuring that women in agriculture have a seat at the table and supporting them once they’re there,” Klobuchar said.

“Agriculture is more than just the backbone of our economy—it is a way of life.

Women have always been at the center of that story. Nearly one-third of farmers in my district are women, leading operations, balancing the books, and strengthening our rural communities, often while raising families. I’m proud to lead a resolution making 2026 the International Year of the Woman Farmer because it’s long past time we recognize the vital role women play in feeding, fueling, and sustaining America,” Hinson said.

“As a longtime farmer, I know both the opportunities and the challenges that women in agriculture face. I’m proud to come from the state of Maine, where more than 43 percent of farm operators are women. Designating 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer gives us a platform to highlight women’s leadership and create momentum that supports the next generation. This recognition is long overdue. Women have always been at the heart of agriculture although they have not always received equal support or visibility. It’s critical that we work together to remove barriers and build career pathways for women who want to farm, innovate, and lead,” Pingree said.

National Farmers Union (NFU) celebrates the resolution’s passage.

“In the United States and across the world, women farmers play vital roles in

agriculture that are often overlooked,” said Ohio Farmers Union President Bryn Bird. “Globally, women make up 41 percent of the agrifood workforce through all parts of the food chain and production lines and are often the head of their households at the same time. By celebrating IYWF 2026, we are taking steps towards a greater level of collective recognition for these unsung heroes that keep us all fed and clothed.”

The United Nations (UN) declared 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmers (IYWF 2026) and designated the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to lead the global campaign aimed at recognizing the efforts of women in agrifood systems across the world.

According to the USDA 2022 Census, the United States had 1.2 million female producers, accounting for 36 percent of the country’s total producers. Additionally, 58 percent of all farms had a female producer. These farms accounted for 41 percent of U.S. agriculture sales and 46 percent of total U.S. farmland. In 2022 alone, farms with one or more female producers sold \$222 billion in agricultural products.

Learn more about NFU’s activities for the International Year of the Woman Farmer at [nfu.org/events-programs/international-year-of-the-woman-farmer](https://nfu.org/events-programs/international-year-of-the-woman-farmer).

## Fun and fellowship at Women’s Conference



From left, keynote speaker Kris Shelstad and Jody Dahlseid; Brenda Rudolph and Rachel Sannerud, winners of Seed Art Contest at the conference. Rudolph won Best Use of Materials and Sannerud won Best in Show. Rudolph is wearing the Farmers Union hat she won as a prize. Third photo, Jody Dahlseid, general manager of Millerville Co-op Creamery, donated butter as a gift to attendees. Fourth photo, seed art created by Women’s Conference attendees.

# Capturing conservation in action in northwestern Minnesota



By Lisa Holm

There's nothing more picturesque than Minnesota's vast snow-covered landscape on a clear and sunny, although very cold, day. That's one of the reasons MFU's Climate and Working Lands Team started a new photography initiative to document how members across the state are caring for the land – and the challenges they face along the way. Our goal is to build a photo library that highlights conservation practices, resource concerns, equipment and landscapes. These images will support our communications and outreach, helping us tell the story of how farmers are practicing conservation on working lands in a compelling, visual way.

This winter, MFU Vice President Anne Schwagerl and I visited farms in northwestern Minnesota alongside professional photographer TJ Turner and staff from local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). In January, we spent time on farms with Mark and Beth Askegaard of Clay County, Aaron Chervestad and Mike and Linda Hanson of Pennington County, Steve Linder of Red Lake County and Brittney Johnson and the Oksnesses from Otter Tail County.

## Cover crops for wind erosion

At the Askegaard's organic grain farm in Moorhead, we captured their oat cover crop stubble that was planted last fall. Winter cover is an important tool for managing wind erosion, which is a challenge for farmers throughout the Red River Valley. They also regularly utilize buckwheat and clover as cover crops to fix nitrogen and improve phosphorus availability.

## Water management and the shifting ag landscape

Water management—particularly drainage—is one of the top agricultural and resource concerns in northwestern Minnesota. The region is naturally wet, and tile drainage has expanded significantly over the past decade. While drainage is essential for crop production, it requires ongoing monitoring and investment to responsibly manage erosion and water quality. Practices such as bank stabilization and side water inlets, along with management decisions that build soil health, are important tools for operational sustainability in the northwest.

Farmers Union member and Pennington SWCD board member Greg Hilgeman also highlighted the major decline of livestock agriculture in the region, noting the loss of dairy followed by cattle operations. This shift has made it financially difficult to justify grazing on tillable acres and has resulted in the loss of generational knowledge. To address this, he supports expanding the Conservation Reserve Program enrollment nationally while increasing

opportunities for grazing and haying to help rebuild livestock systems and improve land stewardship.

Aaron Chervestad, owner of HayDay Farms, utilizes a fall calving system, with calves born in August and September and sent to market around Memorial Day. Wind exposure is a key challenge for grazing cattle in this area, which he mitigates through the use of bale windbreaks.



## Prioritizing cow comfort and energy-saving technologies

Mike and Linda Hanson, along with their sons and extended families, operate a 180-cow dairy that is the last remaining Grade A dairy in Pennington County. They prioritize animal comfort and operational efficiency through robotic milking, cow-mounted transponders, and energy-saving technologies such as low-energy fans and LED lighting. Together, these practices reduce labor demands, minimize animal stress and support consistent milk production.

Their operation integrates a range of conservation and sustainability practices, including manure management, buffer



strips, side water inlets and water reuse systems. Feed quality is a key focus, both to support animal health and to reduce methane emissions. The Hansons also noted climate-related challenges—particularly heat stress and longer, later falls—which influence dairy management decisions.



### Building soil health with native plant systems

On Brittney Johnson's farm in Underwood, livestock are managed through bale grazing with sheep and rotational grazing of chickens, supporting nutrient cycling and pasture health. One primary resource concern is soil fertility, particularly the challenge of building and maintaining nutrients. Johnson works with the West Otter Tail SWCD staff, who helped her establish

a native prairie on her farm. The prairie's deep-rooted plants build soil structure, increase organic matter and create channels that improve water infiltration and drainage. Prairie vegetation provides continuous ground cover which protects soil during winter months when snirt (snow mixed with dirt) formation occurs.



### Winter bale grazing as a nutrient management strategy

Bale grazing in the winter allows Phil and Wendy Oksness's livestock to be out in the pasture, instead of in the barn, where the animals do the work of distributing manure and nutrients in the field. Moving bales regularly prevents soil compaction, spreads nutrients across the pasture, and supports healthy soil biology. This practice also helps manage weeds,

improves water infiltration, and keeps animals healthy by providing high-quality forage while encouraging movement during the cold months.

This spring, we plan to continue documenting a wide variety of farms and practices in Minnesota. Priority areas include:

- Conservation practices such as grassed waterways, riparian buffers, prairie strips and cover crops.
- On-farm activities like managing silage, bringing out hay bales and moving livestock.
- Modern equipment including no-till drills, strip-tillers, drones, weather stations and renewable energy systems.
- Resource concerns such as erosion, marginal land use and water management challenges.

By working with farmers and SWCDs, we aim to showcase both the progress being made and the opportunities ahead for conservation on working lands.

If you think your operation would be a good fit for this project and are interested in learning more, please reach out to Lisa Holm at [lisa@mfu.org](mailto:lisa@mfu.org).

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## President's message

*continued from page 3*

Meanwhile, Jerry Hagstrom and Chris Clayton of DTN reported that a bipartisan group of former agricultural leaders sent congressional ag leaders a letter on Feb. 3 warning about the deteriorating state of the farm economy and stating there is a risk of "widespread collapse of American agriculture."

"We write as a group of bipartisan former leaders of American agricultural commodity and biofuels associations, farm leaders, and former USDA officials," the letter reads. "We have spent our entire careers working to build U.S. agriculture and are dismayed at the damage that is being done to American farmers.

"Farmer bankruptcies have doubled, barely half of all farms will be profitable this year, and the U.S. is running a historic agriculture trade deficit," the letter continues. "These metrics reflect a sharp reversal from record farm export surpluses and farm incomes experienced just a few years ago."

The authors cite the increased cost of farm inputs, loss of market access, weakening international trade partnerships, cuts to domestic and foreign food aid, failure to adequately support biofuels, disruptions to farm labor and cuts to USDA staffing and research as contributing factors to the disarray in U.S. agriculture.

They offer nine suggestions:

1. Immediately exempt all farm inputs from tariffs.
2. Repeal tariffs that are disrupting agriculture export markets.
3. Pass Trade Promotion Authority to enable the administration to pursue and secure meaningful, enforceable, free trade agreements that can be passed by Congress and have the full force and effect of law.
4. Direct the administration to prioritize the negotiation of binding trade agreements with countries that need our agricultural products and that can help offset other market disruptions.
5. Encourage the administration to expeditiously complete the review of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, favorably resolve the pending dairy

dispute settlement case with Canada, and ensure that the USMCA is extended for the next 16 years.

6. Pass legislation to enable nationwide E15, year-round ethanol, and sustainable aviation fuel to boost domestic markets for U.S. corn and soybeans.
7. Pass a new farm bill.
8. Pass farm labor reform including reform to the H-2A program.
9. Restore funding for land-grant agriculture research, critical USDA staffing, and domestic and international food aid programs.

The letter is signed by at least two Minnesotans: Harold Wolle, past president of the National Corn Growers Association, and Randy Doyal, former CEO of AI-Corn Clean Fuels.

They are spot-on with their recommendations, though I'd argue for the removal of all the tariffs imposed by the current president. Trump's policy of using tariffs is questionable as he claims he is getting framework deals done. Now his obsession with taking over Greenland has caused the European Union to pause a trade agreement with the United States.

Farmers Union has been calling on Congress to pass a farm bill since before the 2018 farm bill expired in 2023 and our calls have gone unheeded. Instead, Congress increased price support for commodities and cut funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. Other programs have been extended year-to-year as Congress has failed to utilize its opportunity to implement programs to strengthen rural America. The farm bill is so much more than a farm bill, it's rural economic development, which is sorely needed across the nation.

H-2A reform is also sorely needed. Created during the Reagan administration in 1987, the H-2A program is the largest temporary visa program in the United States, according to the Bipartisan Policy Center. In fiscal year 2020, 213,000 visas were issued for temporary foreign farmworkers. The program allows U.S. employers to sponsor foreign workers to work in agricultural jobs in the U.S. for less than a year if employers can demonstrate there are no U.S. born workers for the position.

Several reforms have been attempted, with the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021 receiving bipartisan support in Congress. However, it didn't pass and the program is no longer working well for either employers or employees, according to the Bipartisan Policy Center. In 2025, the Trump administration put in place a new regulation to lower wages for workers hired through the H-2A program, which is expected to ripple through the agricultural economy and impact all seasonal ag workers. Estimates from the Economic Policy Institute show all farmworkers will lose \$4.4 billion to \$5.4 billion annually under the Trump rule.

Combined with less pay and harassment from ICE, I'd guess fewer immigrants will seek visas to come to the U.S. for seasonal farmwork. People who have options will go to other countries. This will impact agriculture. We're already seeing that as members who raise specialty crops are evaluating their options. I'm sure growers in states like California, Florida and Michigan, where a number of specialty crops are grown, are considering their options as well. This will impact consumer selection in the grocery store too.

### Session starts

It's against this backdrop that the Minnesota legislative session convenes. The session starts on Feb. 17 and must conclude by May 18. There's no doubt the national discourse will impact what happens at the state legislature, where agreements must be reached across party lines.

Minnesota Farmers Union will once again gather input from residents across the state during People's Town Halls. People's Town Halls were held in Austin, Owatonna, Barnesville, Perham and Morris in February, and more are being planned for this month. Watch the website for details.

Lastly, MFU is holding its Lobby Day on March 3 and I encourage you to attend if you're able. Contact Stu Lourey at [stu@mfu.org](mailto:stu@mfu.org) or go online to [mfu.org/events](https://mfu.org/events) to learn more. Come and talk to your legislator, start or nurture a relationship with the people who represent you in the state government and spend some time with other members of Minnesota Farmers Union. It promises to be a great day.

## Government relations

*continued from page 5*

This move would help boost domestic corn markets and is strongly opposed by fuel refiners and those representing oil producing states.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., reaffirmed her support for E15 and recapped discussions about a skinny farm bill during a farm visit in Mower County. MFU's Membership Director Gail Donkers joined and highlighted the need to update the farm safety net, end across-the-board tariffs, and invest in resilient domestic markets.

### Rural health care challenges

The most recent near-complete funding deal passed by Congress came on the heels of the shutdown in late 2025, wherein congressional Democrats withheld their votes in an attempt to secure a funding extension for tax credits that make health insurance more affordable for farmers and others who purchase health insurance on the individual market. Despite bipartisan support, a deal on healthcare seems to be stalled.

MFU Swift County Treasurer Harmon Wilts testified before a state Senate Subcommittee on federal impacts. Alongside hospitals and public health experts, he gave a picture of what it's like to try to access care in rural areas.

"There's not a lot of extra money to be paying big insurance premiums," Wilts shared, citing that his monthly bill had gone up from \$1,313 in 2022 to \$2,169 with the start of the new year.

He also shared a growing concern about access to care. "It's gotten to the point where the rural hospitals . . . they check you and if you need something else, you go to Saint Cloud," he said. "Saint Cloud is about an hour and a half for us . . . My parents are in their 80s . . . [and] traveling to Saint Cloud is not a good option for them anymore."

### Legislative outlook

Lawmakers have started sharing their priorities for the upcoming session. A bipartisan panel of Minnesota House and Senate agricultural leaders addressed attendees at Ag Expo.

To start, Commissioner Petersen highlighted the need to secure additional funding for the Rural Finance Authority (RFA), which makes loans to farmers in distress, beginning farmers, and others. The RFA's funding is approved by the legislature and made available via the sale of bonds.

On Jan. 15, Gov. Walz released his bonding request, which included \$50 million in additional bonding authority for the RFA. Though this request needs to be approved by the legislature, it is an important expression of priority from the administration.

Next on the legislative panel, Putnam told attendees that his "top priority" is "reauthorizing and reinvigorating" Minnesota's Farmer-Lender Mediation program, which assists farmers who are in financial distress.

House Ag Committee Co-Chair Paul Anderson, R-Starbuck, highlighted work on Minnesota's Grain Indemnity Fund, which he long championed along with MFU. And House Ag Committee Co-Chair Rick Hansen, DFL-South St. Paul, relayed a sobering story about being asked to notarize a document delegating parental authority for someone who feared being picked up by ICE.

A long-held priority for MFU that was not addressed during the forum is finally passing right to repair for agriculture equipment. In February, President Trump's U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued guidance clarifying that the Clean Air Act supports an individual's right to make their own repairs, contrary to claims made by manufacturers. This reaffirms a similar determination the EPA made in a letter to National Farmers Union in 2023, an important continuation of policy across the Trump and Biden administrations. The EPA announcement follows USDA Deputy Secretary Stephen Vaden voicing support for the Federal Trade Commission's ongoing lawsuit against John Deere.

"We appreciate that the Trump administration has continued the efforts started under the Biden administration to make this a reality," Wertish said. "[We] will continue its bipartisan efforts to remove the farm equipment exemption in Minnesota's right to repair law . . . [and] we urge the Trump administration to use the tools at its disposal to create a more competitive

market for farm equipment repair that will benefit farmers and independent repair technicians."

### Rail merger concerns

Also on competition, the leaders of 10 state departments of agriculture, including Minnesota Department of Agriculture Commissioner Petersen, sent a letter to the Surface Transportation Board (STB) last week raising concerns with the proposed megamerger by railroad companies Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern.

"Over generations, farm families and agribusinesses have experienced rail consolidation, which resulted in fewer choices and increased shipper vulnerability where competitive alternatives are limited," they wrote. The letter calls on the STB to measure the merger by its impact on the public interest and that any merger approval must benefit competition.

### Impact of tariffs

Finally, and in case you missed it, MFU Vice President Anne Schwagerl was featured on a BBC program highlighting the impact of tariffs and other pressures on the farm economy.

"As producers, we're used to a certain level of uncertainty . . . But last year with the number of retaliatory tariffs, we've seen our markets be incredibly volatile," said Schwagerl, also highlighting high input costs. "Many grain producers in the upper Midwest, we're growing grains below the cost of production."

When pushed on the impact of one-time federal assistance, she insisted that farmers want to earn a fair living based on markets.

As always, this is just a snapshot of recent policy updates and legislative work. If you have questions, concerns, thoughts, or issues that require attention, please reach out at [stu@mfu.org](mailto:stu@mfu.org) or (320) 232-3047.

### ATTENTION MEMBERS!



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



## MARCH 1986

Farmers must join forces with labor, churches, land grant colleges, rural businesses and others to Fight Back against devastating policies that will mark this era as the Awful 80s, National Farmers Union President Cy Carpenter said March 3 at the organization's 84th annual convention.

Improving farm income, eliminating unfair tax regulations for non-operator farmers

and providing for increased credit to farmers and rural businesses were among the top issues discussed by the more than 600 members and delegates attending the 84th NFU Convention in Spokane, Wash.

Blue Earth County Farmers Union will hold its quarterly meeting on March 25. Don Campbell of Lake Crystal will show slides from a tour of China and Russia.

## MARCH 1946

Ten farmers from the small farming community of Power, Mont., celebrated Lincoln's birthday with an emancipation proclamation of their own when they shipped a carload of choice wheat to help feed workers on strike against General Motors Corporation in Detroit. The farmers dug into their grain bins and loaded the grain into a car "to show farmers sympathy for the rights of labor and to support agriculture's best market, the American working man."

Iowa farmers were asked to join in supporting a pay-as-you-go post-war agricultural program in which farm production and pricing would be placed in the hands of farmers. The program is called the National Agricultural Relations Act, and it has been endorsed by farm organizations and farmer cooperatives in Minnesota, Nebraska, North and South Dakota and Texas.

## MARCH 2006

Farmers Union members from south central and southwestern Minnesota attended the first MFU Lobby Day of 2006. More than 30 people, including a high school group from Sleepy Eye, came to the Capitol on March



Three Minnesotans received the NFU Silver Star Award at the NFU Convention. The award goes to members who have recruited or renewed 25 members during the previous year. MFU President Doug Peterson, far right, presented the award to, from left, George Klose of Kandiyohi County, Alan Perish of Todd County and Tim Henning of Nobles County.

15. Minnesota Farmers Union thanks Farmers Co-op of Hanska for contributing to the bus fuel fund for this trip.

During the NFU Convention in Denver, House Ag Committee members talked about federal farm policy. The group was divided on financial issues. The federal

deficit has ballooned in recent years. On one side of the ledger, we have seen tax cuts for the rich; on the other side is record spending. Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo., said that the federal deficit now amounts to \$27,000 for every person in the United States.

## Cherry Tomato Pasta *Submitted by Nikki Warner, Hennepin-Ramsey County*



### Ingredients:

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 6 cloves of garlic, smashed
- 4 pints of cherry tomatoes
- ½ teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
- 1 teaspoon of kosher salt
- Pinch of sugar
- ⅓ cup of grated parmesan
- 1 cup torn basil leaves, two sprigs
- 12 ounces of pasta

### Instructions:

1. Heat oil in a large pot over low heat. Add garlic and stir until softened and fragrant - about 2 minutes.
2. Increase heat to medium and add tomatoes, red pepper flakes, basil sprigs and salt. Cook until tomatoes burst - about five minutes - smashing some with the back of a spoon until sauce comes together, another 5 to 10 minutes. Season to taste, add pinch of sugar, pluck out basil sprigs.
3. Cook pasta, drain, add pasta to pot with sauce, stir and add parmesan. Top with torn basil. Enjoy.

Share your recipe with other readers of *Minnesota Agriculture*. Send it to [janet@mfu.org](mailto:janet@mfu.org).

# Beekeeping

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storms came during the short window for summer honey collection in June, July, and the first part of August. Those interruptions can really impact honey yields.

The second extreme weather event from 2025 was smoke from the Canadian fires. That had an impact on the bees because the smell of smoke put them on high alert, and a nervous bee is a defensive bee. When there's poor air quality bees don't want to leave their hive. There were periods of time that the hives shut down for a week with bees not wanting to go far because it affects their respiratory system. Unfortunately, this occurred during peak pollination and foraging time for the bees. I know a lot of beekeepers that mentioned their honey had a cloudy, off taste and nobody knows if it was caused by the fires and soot in the air, but it was hard to get the pristine crystal-clear honey that Minnesota is known for this past year.

Over the past 10 years I'm also seeing that our falls have become unseasonably warm and the first frost comes later than usual. The first frost serves as nature's stop sign signaling to wildlife that winter is coming, and without that signal bees get confused. Lately when the first frost doesn't happen until November, bees try to keep foraging for food that isn't available anymore. When bees fly around to forage in the fall they burn calories and have to feed off the existing honey in their hive. Then what can happen is that bees end up using their winter resources too fast and they're dead by January. To remedy this, I've been leaving 100 or more pounds of honey in the hive for the bees during the winter when I normally would only leave 60 pounds or so. It's important to me that the bees can survive the winter.

**Q. You mentioned that honey quality may have been affected by poor air quality last year. Did the extreme thunderstorms have an effect on the quality of honey too?**

**A.** Excess precipitation can impact honey. If the plants that bees feed on get too wet, the honey you get is really wet too. The moisture content of honey sold to consumers must be under 18.6 percent because the water will convert to alcohol at a higher percentage. There is a certain timeframe after collecting honey that you can draw the moisture out with heaters, sort of like what corn farmers do to draw moisture out of their crop. When we get all this rain, honey moisture content can get to 25 percent or higher, which is hard to remedy. Case in point, at the 2025 Minnesota State Fair some of my student's honey lost points because the moisture content was too high, and that makes up a large percentage of their overall score.

**Q. What management practices help your bees stay resilient to climate change?**

**A.** To me sustainable beekeeping is about keeping home raised bees and getting them through the winter. Insects have genetic lines just like any other animal, and bees that know the ecology in the area pass those genetics to their offspring which makes it easier for the next generation to find what they need to survive. In contrast, when you bring bees from out of state to Minnesota, they have to figure out unfamiliar pollen and nectar sources that they're not used to. When we get loose regulations allowing for bees to move to our state from different regions of the country, those bees can bring in pests that shouldn't be up here in Minnesota, like the hive beetle, for example. Bees are just like animals in that they can be affected by pests and diseases.

Because of those challenges with bees from out of state, I do a lot to keep my existing lines of bees alive so I can use them to make more hives. I'm all for keeping it local and raising bees that

know our seasons. I work with local beekeepers for survival stock and I'm doing whatever it takes to keep hardy stock alive through the winter. I've traveled to Scandinavian countries to learn about their beekeeping practices, and learning from beekeepers closer to the Arctic Circle informs my practices here in Minnesota.

**Q. Besides raising Minnesota-born bees, what helps you stay resilient as a beekeeper?**

**A.** I find agreement with neighbors that we all want healthy food regardless of how you vote, and there's relief when I see that I can work together with neighbors on the same mission of producing Minnesota grown, free-range products. This happens through one-on-one relationships, working markets together, being together at community events, and being involved in food justice networks. It's important how you treat people. People show up to buy my honey because they know it's good stuff based on these values. And standing behind your product this way resonates with a lot of consumers.

**Q. If you could tell lawmakers one or two things to help your beekeeping practice, what would it be?**

**A.** I'm a supporter of the University of Minnesota Lawns to Legumes Program and their work with beekeepers to create seed mixes so that people can grow native pollinator plants on their land. I love when farmers grow native pollinator plants in ditches and on the strips between their crops, and when farmers use buckwheat because that's such a great way to get away from chemicals by using natural nitrogen enhancement strategies. You get a really dark molasses type of specialty honey from buckwheat. So, I'd ask for more grants and resources for farmers that want to do more rotations.

## Get social with Minnesota Farmers Union!

Find out about events, policy happenings, photos and more.



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**DAN MAHONEY**  
**DEPUTY STATE EXECUTIVE**  
**DIRECTOR, MN FSA**  
 daniel.mahoney@mn.usda.gov

USDA Service Centers commonly receive questions about natural disaster assistance for crops that are not covered by crop insurance. Information on three primary programs that customers are commonly unaware of is provided in this article.

### **Noninsured Disaster Assistance Program (NAP)**

Farmers and ranchers rely on crop insurance to protect themselves from disasters and unforeseen events, Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Noninsured Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) provides producers with another option to obtain coverage against disaster for crops that are not insurable through the USDA's Risk Management Agency. NAP provides financial assistance to producers of non-insurable crops impacted by natural disasters that result in lower yields, crop losses or prevents crop planting.

Commercially produced crops and agricultural commodities for which crop insurance is not available are generally eligible for NAP. Eligible crops include those grown specifically for food, fiber, livestock consumption, biofuel or biobased products, or value loss crops such as aquaculture, Christmas trees, ornamental nursery, and others. Contact your local FSA office to see which crops are eligible in your county.

Eligible causes of loss include drought, freeze, hail, excessive moisture, excessive wind or hurricanes, earthquakes and floods. These events must occur during the NAP policy coverage period, before or during harvest, and the disaster must directly affect the eligible crop. For guidance on causes of loss not listed, contact your local FSA county office.

# Three disaster programs that assist farmers who raise crops not covered by crop insurance



Interested producers apply for NAP coverage and pay the applicable service fee at the FSA office where their farm records are maintained. These must be filed by the application closing date, which varies by crop. Contact your local FSA office to verify application closing dates and ensure coverage for eligible NAP crops. Upcoming application deadlines for NAP coverage in Minnesota for the 2026 production season include March 16 for spring-seeded annual crops and sage, and June 2 for ornamental and non-ornamental nursery crops. To learn more about NAP visit [fsa.usda.gov/nap](https://fsa.usda.gov/nap) or contact your local USDA Service Center.

### **Whole Farm Revenue-Micro Farm**

The Micro Farm program provides a risk management safety net for all commodities on your farm under one insurance policy. This insurance plan is tailored for any farm with up to \$350,000 in approved

revenue, including farms with specialty or organic commodities (both crops and livestock), or those marketing to local, regional, farm identity preserved, specialty or direct markets. Micro Farm is available in all counties in all states. A list of crop insurance agents is available online at [rma.usda.gov/agent-locator](https://rma.usda.gov/agent-locator). Producers can learn more at [rma.usda.gov](https://rma.usda.gov) or by contacting their RMA Regional Office.

### **Tree Assistance Program (TAP)**

If you're an orchardist or nursery tree grower who experienced losses from natural disasters during calendar year 2026 and are interested in applying for the Tree Assistance Program (TAP), you must submit a TAP application either 90 calendar days after the disaster event or the date when the loss is apparent. TAP provides financial assistance to help you replant or rehabilitate eligible trees, bushes and vines damaged by natural disasters.

Eligible tree types include trees, bushes or vines that produce an annual crop for commercial purposes. Nursery trees include ornamental, fruit, nut and Christmas trees that are produced for commercial sale. Trees used for pulp or timber are ineligible.

To qualify for TAP, orchardists must suffer a qualifying tree, bush or vine loss in excess of 15 percent mortality from an eligible natural disaster, plus an adjustment for normal mortality. The eligible trees, bushes or vines must have been owned when the natural disaster occurred.

If the TAP application is approved, the eligible trees, bushes and vines must be replaced within 12 months from the date the application is approved. The cumulative total quantity of acres planted to trees, bushes or vines, for which you can receive TAP payments, cannot exceed 1,000 acres annually. To learn more about TAP visit [fsa.usda.gov/tap](https://fsa.usda.gov/tap) or contact your local USDA Service Center.

# A family-run agency with a legacy of service in northwestern Minnesota

By Alex Dickison

For Jay Swanson, insurance has never been just a business, it's an extension of a life shaped by agriculture, service and community commitment. Jay grew up on a crop farm, where he helped grow soybeans, wheat and soybeans, and that agricultural background defines his work today. He continues to work on a farm and understands firsthand the realities farmers face, including weather uncertainty, equipment investments, thin margins, and the importance of protecting what generations have built. That understanding is why the majority of his clients are farmers and business owners across northwestern Minnesota and northeastern North Dakota.

Before entering the insurance industry, Jay owned and operated a laundry service. After selling that business, he transitioned into insurance and opened his first office in Warren more than 25 years ago. Just a few months later, he relocated to Thief River Falls, where his commitment was tested immediately. A major windstorm hit the area, and Jay went straight to work helping clients through claims and recovery. Many of those same clients remain with

him today, a testament to consistency, responsiveness, and trust earned when it mattered most.

In 2015, Jay's son Brady Swanson officially joined the agency after earning his certifications and licenses while attending college at North Dakota State University. What started as a family connection quickly became a professional partnership built on shared values. Brady brought fresh energy and a long-term vision, while maintaining the same hands-on service their clients expect.

Together, Jay and Brady believe that being involved locally is essential. Both are active members of the Lion's Club and serve on the board of their church. Brady is an active member of the Argyle Fire Department and Jay is a retired firefighter. Their involvement reflects a simple philosophy of strong communities building strong businesses.

The agency's success is also deeply tied to the people behind the scenes. Jay's wife, Janelle, plays a critical role by managing payroll and accounts payable for the



**Jay Swanson**      **Brady Swanson**

**Argyle, MN**  
703 Pacific Ave.  
**218-437-8512**

**Thief River Falls, MN**      **Warren, MN**  
223 East 3rd St.      133 W Johnson Ave.  
**218-745-5313**      **218-681-6443**

business on top of working as a teacher. Her support, along with the dedication of their team at all locations at Jay Swanson Agency, has been instrumental in the agency's growth and longevity.

After decades of service, one thing remains consistent. This is a family-run agency serving families, farms, and businesses with practical knowledge, steady guidance, and a commitment that doesn't disappear after the policy is written.

*Dickison is Marketing and Communications Specialist for Farmers Union Agency.*

## Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership program accepting applications

Applications are being accepted for the 2026 Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership (FUEL) program through March 15. FUEL is an intensive course designed to deepen participants' understanding of Farmers Union, cooperatives and agriculture. The program builds leadership skills and knowledge so participants can become stronger advocates in their communities and within Farmers Union.

FUEL empowers future leaders from across the states of Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Apply at <https://bit.ly/FUEL2026Application>.

Tentative FUEL travel dates for the 2026-27 cohort:

- **Mid-late July:** Summer session in Redwood Falls, Minn.
- **Early September:** NFU Fall Legislative Fly-In, Washington, D.C.
- **Nov. 20-22:** MFU State Convention
- **March 2027:** NFU National Convention

Contact Lisa Holm at **763-607-4570** or Gail Donkers at **507-202-2042** if you're interested or have any questions.

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## March calendar of events

- March 3**      **Lobby Day and Lobby Day Reception**, St. Paul
- March 7**      **Introduction to Raising Backyard Chickens**, Scott County Extension office
- March 7-9**      **National Farmers Union Convention**, New Orleans
- March 14**      **Emergency Response Training**, Westbrook
- March 19**      **COMET training**, Ashland Town Hall, Dodge Center
- March 28**      **Rural Health Fair at Dodge County Expo**, Dodge Center

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



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<b>Moorhead</b>	Aaron Schenck
<b>Moorhead</b>	Robin Swanson & Jenna Crabtree
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<b>St. Paul</b>	Abby Moffitt
<b>Thief River Falls</b>	Brady & Jay Swanson
<b>Warren</b>	Brady & Jay Swanson
<b>Willmar</b>	Paul Johannes
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