Dear Farm Bureau member,

We hope you and your families are well during these challenging times. We’re nearly four months into the COVID-19 crisis, and the world has changed. Agriculture has not been spared. Like so many other segments of our economy, agriculture has stepped up to provide essential products and services. Minnesota farmers are #StillFarming, and Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation (MFBF) continues to be there for you.

In Minnesota, we are blessed with a diversity of agriculture from what we grow to how we grow it to what size farm we have. This diversity also means that various agriculture sectors are being hit hard at different times and in different ways. From a decline in gasoline impacting ethanol to trade uncertainties hitting pork and soybeans to major disruptions in key markets for meat, milk, produce and eggs, very few aspects of agriculture have gone untouched.

Just as work on the farm and every aspect of food production has continued, Farm Bureau has been hard at work throughout this crisis. We wanted to take this opportunity to report to members some of the most important actions your organization has worked on during this time frame.

Amplify Your Voice

Farm Bureau’s greatest strength is our members. Throughout the last weeks and months, MFBF leaders and staff have worked collaboratively with our partners in agriculture and directly with elected and appointed officials to make sure that the challenges you are facing on your farms and the issues that your family and community were dealing with were shared with the appropriate decision makers.

As MFBF President, I participate in weekly calls with the Farm Bureau Presidents from all 50 states and Puerto Rico to discuss issues impacting agriculture across the country, identifying actionable items that we could implement to find meaningful solutions for the constantly changing challenges and hear from high level members of the administration and members of Congress for timely updates on the work that was happening at the federal level. We have had the opportunity to work directly with USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue and his leadership team, leadership at the Small Business Administration (SBA) and members of Congress like House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson to share Farm Bureau members’ stories that are happening on the farms and ranches and in the communities all across the state.

Your Farm Bureau staff are also participating in frequent meetings to discuss what is needed to ensure action is taken to support farmers and rural communities, to stay in front of issues and find solutions to continue the important work of Farm Bureau.

We continue to participate in weekly meetings with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) to learn directly from Commissioner Thom Petersen about actions being taken at the state level to address ongoing issues as a result of the global pandemic. These calls provide an opportunity to hear from Governor Tim Walz and from other state agency Commissioners including Department of Revenue and DEED on issues outside of MDA’s purview. In addition, MFBF led weekly calls with various Minnesota commodity groups, Minnesota Farmers Union and AgriGrowth to ensure that we were working together to address the most pressing issues and working collaboratively to find solutions needed for all of agriculture.

Even though our meetings are not currently taking place in the halls of the State Capitol or in offices in Washington D.C., Farm Bureau has stayed in constant communication with our state and federal elected and appointed officials. Whether it is through text, over the phone or “face-to-face” via Zoom or WebEx, we continue to communicate frequently with elected officials and their staff to identify specific actions that need to be taken and updating them on what’s happening from the “boots on the ground” perspective of our membership.

As a Farm Bureau member, your voice is stronger when we join together. We will continue to amplify your voice and share your stories to find solutions to ensure that agriculture not only weathered this storm but comes out stronger. We know that issues will continue to arise as we navigate these unprecedented times. We want to hear from you. Call Kevin any time at 507-327-4555 or Karin at 651-768-2104.
10 Critical Actions

Your Farm Bureau has been hard at work helping our members and all of Minnesota agriculture which includes the food supply system. Since mid-March, we have supported the following critical actions:

1. Agriculture is Essential: We worked closely with MDA Commissioner Thom Petersen and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to make sure that those in Minnesota’s food supply system were deemed essential, allowing anyone from farmers to truckers to processors to grocers to farm markets and greenhouses to continue the important work of keeping food available. We provided a template for essential workers traveling to and from work during the Stay at Home orders. On the federal level, we pushed hard to make sure H2A workers were deemed critical, and the consulates expanded the pool of applicants eligible for interview waivers. This ensured employees could still get into the country. This work continues as we work to ensure that we have access to a stable workforce and the ability to keep workers safe including access to PPE.

2. Support for our Businesses: Farm Bureau advocated for legislation that would help to administer assistance programs that are allocated for all of agriculture and get to where they are needed the most. Through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Health Care Enhancement Act critical programs have already begun to assist farmers and rural communities. We will continue to advocate for adequate funding to provide relief for farmers who have already encountered losses due to COVID-19 as well as those for whom the economic damage of the pandemic will impact planting and harvesting in the coming weeks and months.

Farm Bureau has advocated for additional funding to replenish the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) which is the funding mechanism for programs such as Price Loss Coverage (PLC) and Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC). The program also supports commodity and income support programs, natural resources conservation programs, disaster assistance programs and the Market Facilitation Program (MFP).

3. Stable Food Supply: American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) sent a letter alongside livestock organizations to President Trump asking for his leadership in conveying a clear and strong message about the importance of consistently following federal health and safety guidelines to ensure consistent, responsible decision-making at the state level that allows food production to safely continue.

We are grateful to the workers ensuring America’s families continue to be fed, from packing plant staff to grocery store clerks. MFBF has worked with the Minnesota Grocers Association to make sure that consumers were confident. While at times the supply chain was strained, it was not broken.

Our friends, neighbors and communities are facing incredible financial challenges that need us to come together and support each other’s access to a stable food supply for our families. Your county Farm Bureaus stepped up to organize food bank donations and make connections between farmers willing to give and food banks in need. MFBF also supported legislation that is providing financial resources immediately necessary to ensure that children and low-income families continue to have access to healthy and affordable food.

4. Mental Health and Well-Being: We compiled specific resources for members that address the unique stress placed on farmers and trained Farm Bureau staff to be able to have caring conversations with members regarding mental health and suicide. We also provided resources for county Farm Bureaus and members to address opioid dependency in rural areas especially during these difficult times. At the legislature, we successfully advocated for legislation that provided additional funding for rural mental health resources.

The global pandemic also highlighted the importance of our rural health care system. Community Health Care Centers (CHC) provide an affordable health care option for millions of Americans living in rural America, where access to health care is low, and the need for medical attention is high. While previous relief packages have provided funding, Farm Bureau is asking for more support that is needed to keep health centers fully operational at a time when they are most needed.
5. Animal Agriculture: We went to work to make sure meat inspectors could continue to work safely. Unfortunately, when processors needed to slow down or shut down, we see major backups. Farm Bureau worked with our livestock commodity organizations and with the MDA as farmers face livestock market challenges and depopulation. These asks included logistical and financial support as farmers made difficult decisions to depopulate as well as proactive steps such as opening up CRP and DNR state lands for emergency haying and grazing.

Farm Bureau has been very concerned about the serious availability, disruptions and volatility experienced in livestock markets. We have been pushing the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), the USDA, our Congressional leaders and others to aggressively investigate why we have seen such a stark disruption in our livestock markets. Farm Bureau has also supported legislation that would support small and medium sized processors.

6. Crops: Farm Bureau took action to make sure access to equipment dealers, seed, fertilizer, crop protection products are included as essential, and farmers had full access to our national transportation networks.

Unfortunately during this time, other industries took the opportunity to attack biofuels and programs like the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS). Farm Bureau has worked to highlight the importance of renewable fuels for corn and soybean farmers across Minnesota, along with the value of byproducts like distillers’ grain and carbon dioxide. In addition, the ethanol industry took quick action to make and deliver sanitizer for their communities.

7. SBA Programs: We fought for access to SBA grant/loan programs, which historically excluded agriculture. Farm Bureau is continuing to advocate for legislation that will make these programs more workable for farmers.

On the state level, small businesses, including farmers, now have access to new Small Business Relief Grants Programs that can demonstrate financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

8. Transportation: We worked at the state and federal level to ensure waivers for hours of service and weight limits for trucks delivering critical supplies, including food and groceries, were granted. This alignment with the existing agricultural hours of service exemption and weight limit variance relieved one less barrier to the already stressed food supply system.

9. Access to Broadband: Farm Bureau is looking at every possible solution at the state and federal level to increase access, speed and affordability of rural broadband. As our society quickly pivoted to even more reliance on the internet, it became even more clear that we need to further invest in broadband infrastructure for rural Minnesota.

10. Consumer Engagement: As the way we interact with consumers changes drastically, Farm Bureau continues to think creatively and effectively on how to engage with our friends, neighbors and communities. From drive through farm tours to virtual learning experiences, Farm Bureau members have gone outside of traditional ways of sharing our stories to open the barn doors in any way we can to make sure consumers have confidence in their food supply.
Working Together

From the very beginning of this crisis, our top priority has been to protect public health. Getting Minnesotans back to work and rebuilding the state’s economy is also an important concern. As Minnesota begins to reopen, we will continue to promote a responsible approach. We have always asked for an open, transparent, science-based approach to solutions, and this is no different.

Events and information can change quickly. The best way for members to stay up to date is through email. MFBF’s weekly electronic legislative update Impact and our COVID-19 page at fbmn.org are go-to sources for the most up-to-date information. You can subscribe by emailing info@fbmn.org.

Be assured, we will continue to work closely with our partners, including Farm Bureau Financial Services, to communicate about issue updates and seek solutions for members. We’ve appreciated all the staff at MFBF for their dedication to their work and commitment to member services, as they transitioned to remote work. They found new ways of working with and for our members that proved beneficial.

We want to thank our county Farm Bureau leaders for the flexibility they have shown to ensure the work that Farm Bureau does every day continued, even if things looked a little different. Whether it was checking in on neighbors through social distancing, discussing important issues over Zoom, or thinking creatively on how to reimagine programming, Farm Bureau leaders stepped up to the plate and continued to serve their local members and communities through challenging times.

All of this work gets done because you make it happen. Thank you for being a member. Thank you for the tireless hours you put in all year long to supply healthy, affordable food to be processed and packaged so stores can restock shelves, produce bins, and meat and dairy cases. We know working together works. We will get through this together. Stay safe.

Sincerely,

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