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January 21, 2023

Chair Aric Putnam
Senate Agriculture Committee
95 University Avenue W.
Minnesota Senate Bldg., Room 3215
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Putnam and members of the committee:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), I write to share our enthusiastic support for confirming Thom Petersen as Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Commissioner Petersen is a model for service and a tireless advocate for farm families in every corner of our state. Our members—and all those in agriculture—will continue to benefit from his leadership at the Department.

Our members' relationship with Commissioner Petersen begins not with his appointment, but more than two decades ago when he was hired as MFU's Director of Government Relations—and even before that when he served our organization as an active and engaged farmer member. In his tenure with MFU, he embodied the highest ideals of our organization: bringing together diverse coalitions to solve problems, educating the broader public about agriculture's important role in Minnesota's economy, geography, and culture, and advancing policies that made life better for families in greater Minnesota.

Through all this work, he centered the voices of farmers and acted as a generous mentor to staff, interns, colleagues, and others—many of whom are following his example in service to our state.

During this administration's first term, the Commissioner brought his signature brand of accessible and accountable servant leadership to the Department of Agriculture. Our members and all farmers know that they can reach him not only via phone on his drive from his farm in Pine City, but also through Facebook, Instagram, at the hay auction, or at agriculture events across the state. More than that, our members know that he will follow a conversation with action, helping them solve problems at the Department of Agriculture and across state government.

In his first year as Commissioner, Petersen began framing his work around 'challenges and opportunities.' And there were more challenges than anyone could have anticipated. A record-setting late harvest, a trade war, a global pandemic that endangered workers and shut down packing plants, a once-in-a-generation drought, the return of high path avian influenza, and now skyrocketing input costs. Petersen could have easily led the department reactively, responding to each in kind. But while facing these challenges, the Commissioner did not lose sight of the opportunities, starting the Emerging Farmers Office, developing markets for new crops, building out local meat processing capacity, investing in soil health, and championing the next generation of farmers.

In this way, the Commissioner channels the hopes of the farmers he talks to every day. He's humble, curious, and carries the stories of Minnesota's farm families in his heart every day. I can't think of anyone better prepared to lead us through these challenges and help us take advantage of new opportunities.

For these reasons and so many more, I urge you to approve Commissioner Petersen's confirmation. If you have any questions, please contact our Government Relations Director, Stu Lourey, at stu@mfu.org or (320) 232-3047. Thank you for considering the needs and perspectives of Minnesota's farm families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Wertish". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "G" and "W".

Gary Wertish
President, Minnesota Farmers Union