

February 20, 2023

Senate Agriculture, Broadband and Rural Development Committee
Chair Aric Putnam
3215 Minnesota Senate Building
St. Paul, MN 551155

Dear Chair Putnam, Ranking Member Westrom and Members of the Committee,

The undersigned organizations want to voice our support for SF 1245, a bill that proposes to expand a pilot grant program at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture that assists Minnesota farmers with financial resources to implement conservation practices to build soil health on their farms.

Last legislative session, a first of its kind grant program was authorized as a pilot at the MN Department of Agriculture to offer grants to farmers to purchase equipment to aid in soil health practice adoption. Our organizations all have programs we are working to implement with our members focused on conservation practice adoption, some with a specific emphasis on soil health. As members and farmer-leaders from our organizations have worked to implement practices on their farms using federal and state cost-share programs, they have identified and encountered barriers to increased adoption.

We believe that the approach in SF 1245 would help address those barriers. Financial assistance under this grant program would not be limited to just traditional cost-share but could also include down payments on equipment, purchases or subscriptions of equipment technology for precision agriculture, low interest loans, the purchases of seed and soil amendments or technical assistance for conservation plans. Expanding the types of financial assistance can help to de-risk new practice adoption for Minnesota farmers.

Further, our organizations also think it is important we expand the definition of the types of practices that can build soil health. A lot of attention has been given to cover crops or reduced tillage, which are important, but the use and management of manure, precision agriculture, crop rotations and grazing management should not be overlooked as beneficial practices for soil health. A broad definition of soil health and eligible practices ensures that state soil health initiatives will not be limited to a one-size fits all approach, but will instead help support farmers in different parts of the state to implement practices that work best for their individual farm operations.

Last month the MN Department of Agriculture opened a Request for Proposals (RFP) for soil health equipment grants, as authorized by the legislature last year in the supplemental agricultural finance bill. The RFP doesn't close until March 20, but applications are on pace to well exceed the amount appropriated in the supplemental finance bill. We believe this demonstrates the strong interest by Minnesota farmers to implement soil health practices and the demand that could be met with an expansion of the program this year with new resources.

Thank you for your consideration of SF 1245. We support this legislation because it is a voluntary approach to conservation practice adoption, is inclusive of a wide array of practices that allow farmers to determine the best fit for their operation, and provides financial assistance to reduce risk for new practice adoption.

Sincerely,

Minnesota AgriGrowth Council

Minnesota Corn Growers Association

Minnesota Crop Production Retailers

Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation

Minnesota Farmers Union

Minnesota Milk Producers Association

Minnesota Pork Producers Association

Minnesota State Cattlemen's Association

The Nature Conservancy