

NINA MOINI: Thanks so much, everybody, for tuning in to *Minnesota Now*, live here at the Minnesota State Fair at the MPR stage. A lot of us might think of the giant slide. Or we talked a lot about deep fried food on a stick when we think about the state fair. But the great Minnesota get together was actually created to highlight farmers and farming across the state and still very much does. Its mission my next guest thinks a lot about. Gary Wertish is president of the Minnesota Farmers Union. He's here to share more about some of the challenges facing small family farms, and how the union is working to support them with solutions. Thanks very much for being here with us, Gary.

GARY WERTISH: Thank you, Nina. Thanks for having me. Right now, the challenges on the family farm are really-- a lot of it's coming out of DC, primarily with the President Trump's love of tariffs. Tariffs have really had a dramatic effect, not only destroying our trust as a reliable trading partner, but also dramatically increasing our input costs.

Now it is war in Iran. It's elevated fuel prices again in fertilizer prices. So that's probably the largest challenge coming out of DC right now. Farmers have always dealt with uncertainty. You got uncertainty with the weather. But now we're having uncertainty, well, primarily with the president's policies. And we have enough chaos in the coming-- we need certainty back.

And right now, we're sitting at-- we keep comparing it to the farm crisis of the '80s. We look at the farm in the '80s. We passed the state law, the Farmer-Lender Mediation law before a farmer can-- I mean, before a lender can foreclose on a farm, he has to offer mediation. And that's run through the Minnesota Extension Department and also the Department of Ag. And in 2026, we already have more families that have filed for mediation than we have in the last three years combined. So you can definitely see there is a crisis out there.

NINA MOINI: Gary, thank you for that. I hear so much passion in what you're saying, getting the word out to the public about some of the challenges that people are facing, that you're hearing about in your role. Tell us a little bit about your background in farming and why it means so much to you that you go ahead and represent others who are in this industry.

GARY WERTISH: Well, I farmed all my life, and we rent to one of our sons. My wife and I rent to one of our sons now. And it's in your blood. And farming has always been a struggle. There's no doubt. It's never been an easy life. But it's a rewarding life. We provide food for the population or the people.

And I guess what I like working at Farmers Union, I really try and pass, help work on policies that will help young people get into farming, and there's many that want to try and increase the opportunity for them to get into farming. Because that's our future. We need more farms, not less farms. And that's what I worry with the current crisis out there. We're probably going to lose some more farmers. And again, it'll probably be the young ones. Or the ones that don't have a lot of equity, they're going to have a hard time hanging on.

NINA MOINI: What do you wish people knew about just farmers and the idea that people perhaps about where their food comes from once it gets in front of them on the table? How can we all do a better job of that?

GARY WERTISH: Well, I think one thing is the more we can buy local, the more it helps everybody out. Farmers, we definitely support buying local and policies. It's been referred to a number of times, that the dollar spent in a local community turns six or seven times, so the more we can buy local direct from a family or from a farm. And right now, we've had some of the disease, outbreaks of viruses and stuff in our food supply system. So we really need to rebuild a more regional, local food system. It would be more resilient than what we have right now.

Right now, we're in a prime garden season, so we have a lot of vegetables that are definitely available. In the wintertime, we don't necessarily have that. But anytime you can buy local, it's going to be more favorable, too, and no different you pick a tomato out of your garden. It's got a lot of flavor than when you buy one in the wintertime on the grocery store. But that's the way it is. So the more we can support local, we're all better off.

We've been advocating for our country of origin labeling on our beef. And it's very important now, especially with the president and opening up, allowing to bring in cheap, depressed price of beef from Argentina and other countries. And in the end, it's not going to lower the price and the average consumer. It's a big boom to the four big meat packers. They'll be able to bring the source beef, blend it in with the American-made beef, and they're going to sell it at the same price. So it's a boom to them, and it's detrimental to the farmer.

The farmers are cattle herders at 75-year lows. And that's primarily due to the number of years of drought. Farmers had to cut back on the herds, because they didn't have the feed. And we're still dealing with some of that. So it takes time to rebuild that herd. So it's basically a cut back because of drought. And there's still some parts of the country that are still dealing with drought.

NINA MOINI: There are issues on the local, state, federal, international level that all pertain to farmers and make that food possible so that everybody else can be part of it. And I bet it's nice here at the state fair to be able to have some more of those conversations directly face to face with people and raise maybe the level of awareness around certain things. And I think one way that can happen is through the coffee shop that the union now has here at the fairgrounds, has for a while. Tell us a little bit about that, where it is, and what the purpose is.

GARY WERTISH: Well, we're located right inside the Snelling gate on 1635 Dan Patch. We've been in the building since 1953, evolved into a coffee shop in 2003, and then a full-venue food shop plus coffee shop in 2017. And really, the primary reason was we talked about buying local. We do source as much as we can local.

But also, people, we're so many generations removed from the farm. The average consumer has no idea where their food comes from, and they have no idea where the struggles of a family farmer. So it's really trying to reconnect the people to their farmer through their food. And that's huge the more we can do that. We have a new-- our Apple Ham Grinder sandwich.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, tell us your new items.

GARY WERTISH: Yeah, our newest sandwiches are Apple Ham Donut Grinder. And the apples are sourced from a Pleasant Valley Orchard out of Shafer, Minnesota. It's a couple slices of First Kiss apples rolled in a donut batter and deep fried a little bit. And the ham is a sliced uncured ham from Hidden Stream Farm out of Elgin, Minnesota. And then it's mixed with a little hot honey from Craig's Hot Honey. I don't have the name quite right there, but anyway, mixed in a ricotta herb cheese. So it makes a good sandwich. But really, it's about buying local and supporting family farms.

NINA MOINI: What's your message when you talk to younger farmers who are taking over from family farms from generations? You mentioned, I think you rent to your son. How do you talk to this latest generation of farmers just about keeping hopeful? I'm assuming you have to be eternally hopeful to be in something like farming, that is weather dependent, and there's so many other risks and factors. What kinds of conversations are you having with those younger farmers?

GARY WERTISH: Well, it's really a challenge. As a farmer, you have to be optimistic, because there's a lot of years on a crop farming or livestock. Either way, as you work with your lender and get your loans, there's a lot of times it doesn't cash flow on the paper. But you're always optimistic things will work out. And I guess that's the main thing, is we keep referring to, well, you got to cut back and cut back, cut your debt. But there's only a certain amount you can do.

Obviously, you got to control your costs. But there's only a certain amount that you can cut back on that before it starts affecting both your yield on a crop or livestock. You have to take care of them. And it is a challenge. And I guess we have a lot of support programs that are available now, and mental health is a top issue for a number of people. And luckily, we are getting more of those programs funded.

I mean, our whole society needs more help on the mental health and more funding for that health care. Health care is obviously one of the toughest-- one of the biggest issues, the high cost of health care that's affecting farmers. Anybody that's buying insurance on the individual marketplace, and that's where the farmers are or small business owners, they're the ones that are getting hit the hardest on the health care cost.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Gary, what-- and this is a big one. I hope you're prepped for this one. What is your favorite thing to eat at the fair, not from your vendor?

GARY WERTISH: Well, that's not fair. I guess, while we're sitting here--

NINA MOINI: Well, you can say your own, too.

GARY WERTISH: Well, I could say-- we talked about our new sandwich, Apple Ham Donut Grinder. But we still have our pork schnitzel. And our Maple Cream Nitro Cold Press is very good. But sitting here, looking over at the Dairy Building, the malts from the Dairy Building, they are top. And I found out the other day, talking to-- why they taste so good here. They have a secret recipe that's only available for them at the fair. So when you see all these other malt shops, they don't have the same recipe. And the secret of it's got a little higher content of butterfat, which, as a farmer, butter is always better. And more butter, it's good.

NINA MOINI: Butter is better. I think we'll leave it there. No better thing note to end on. Thank you very much for your time, Gary. We appreciate you.

GARY WERTISH: Thank you, Nina. Good to be with you.

NINA MOINI: Yay. Give it up for Gary. Gary Wertish, president of the Minnesota Farmers Union.