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**Testimony of
Matt Perdue
North Dakota Farmers Union
Before the
Senate Appropriations Committee
February 9, 2023**

Chairman Bekkedahl and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill No. 2273. My name is Matt Perdue, and I am testifying on behalf of North Dakota Farmers Union's (NDFU) members.

NDFU supports SB 2273, which would establish a Rural Grocery Store Sustainability and Food Access Expansion pilot program. NDFU is deeply concerned by the loss of rural grocery stores and decline of food access in our state's farming communities. We believe SB 2273 will provide critical support to innovative projects that are currently underway. The bill also offers an important learning opportunity for future initiatives.

Rural communities rely on successful farms and ranches, and farmers and ranchers rely on thriving rural businesses. While our policy discussions often focus on the economics of agriculture, rural quality of life is an equally important discussion. Rural food access is foundational to that quality of life.

According to research by the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives, North Dakota lost nearly 30% of its rural grocery stores from 2014 to 2019.¹ In the years since, those numbers have continued to decline. Decline in rural grocery stores is perhaps the strongest signal of declining rural quality of life. Without a grocery store, the viability of other Main Street businesses drops significantly.

As others have noted, there is no single best approach to reinvigorating rural grocery stores. But there is innovative work underway, like the Rural Access Distribution Co-op in Walsh County. The pilot program in SB 2273 will support projects like that. The program also creates important learning opportunities for other communities.

We respectfully request a "Do Pass" recommendation on SB 2273. I will stand for any questions.

¹ Capouch, L. (2019, August 12). *Rural Food Access in North Dakota* [Testimony]. North Dakota Legislature, Interim Commerce Committee Meeting. Retrieved from https://www.ndlegis.gov/files/committees/66-2019/21_5018_03000appendixb.pdf.