

Testimony of Julie Gemmill in Support of HB 1524

To the House Finance and Taxation Committee

February 3, 2025

Rep. Headland and members of the House Finance and Taxation Committee:

My name is Julie Gemmill and I live on a farm and ranch near Fordville, in Walsh County. I have served on the Walsh County Job Development Authority Board for approximately 10 years serving as Chairwoman for the past 8 years. I am the President of Walsh County Farmers Union and have held that position for the past four years. I have also served on the ND Farmers Union Board Policy and Action Committee for the past year. In the past, I served as board chair of First Care Health Center board of directors during a vital expansion project for the hospital. I support HB 1524 because it ensures sustained funding for regional councils – which are a vital partner in rural economic development, including Walsh County.

Living in a rural small town brings many challenges. We rely heavily on the expertise offered through our regional council to help provide guidance in programs that will benefit businesses and rural communities. This includes expertise in programs and funding resources related to ADA projects, childcare, grocery stores/food availability, and programs to help businesses start and expand.

Examples of projects that the Walsh County JDA has led or supported in partnership with the Red River Regional Council include:

- **Fordville Senior Center:** Securing and managing a federal CDBG grant of \$122,360 for the Fordville Senior Center. The project included accessibility improvements, exterior rehabilitation, and electrical updates.
- **Walsh County Childcare Center:** Securing funding to renovate an existing building on Grafton's main street into a turn-key childcare center. A private provider will rent the space to operate her/his private childcare business from to increase available childcare slots. Total project is \$1.4 million, with more than \$680,000 in grants secured. We are hopeful the provider will begin operating from the building next week.
- **Rural Access Distribution (RAD) Coop:** Providing expertise in developing a partnership between three grocery stores in Walsh County to ensure products are delivered to schools and communities in a timely manner and at a fair price. The RAD coop continues to work on a pilot food locker system that will allow patrons of Fordville and Park River to order the grocery items online through the distribution center located in Park River at Jim's Super Valu.
- **Workforce Attraction & Retention:** In a highly competitive hiring market, our employers have repeatedly shared that they need to be able share what we have to offer – beyond their