

House Bill 1572 Testimony

January 29, 2025

Lynette Flage, Associate Director, NDSU Extension

Chairman Headland and members of the House Finance and Taxation Committee,

For the record, my name is Lynette Flage, and I serve as the Associate Director for NDSU Extension. I am here today to provide neutral testimony on HB1572, offering additional context and information for your consideration specifically related to the portion of the bill related to the county extension mill levy.

First, I want to thank you for your ongoing support of NDSU Extension throughout North Dakota. NDSU Extension plays a critical role bringing the land grant university to the people and serving all 53 counties with research-based education in areas including agriculture and natural resources, family and community wellness and 4-H youth development. In the past year alone, NDSU Extension, along with our county partners, held 7,500 educational sessions totaling over 16,290 hours of educational programming, and reached over 40,000 youth—one in five youth in the state – with our programs.

The success of our work and network depends on the strong support we receive from both the legislature and our county partners. We collaborate closely with county commissioners, who recognize the value of NDSU Extension's local presence. The local citizens in these counties value the work NDSU Extension does as evidenced by 15 votes to support additional mills levied for extension funding passing at the local level over the past four years. This overwhelming local commitment reflects the support of Extension programs in our communities.

NDSU Extension addresses many vital issues affecting our state, such as:

- Promoting environmental sustainability and healthy crops, including pesticide safety training that reached 7,208 people statewide, reducing environmental risks and supporting food security.
- Enhancing childcare quality across the state which contributes to a more vibrant workforce. This past year, 692 childcare providers and school personnel received continuing education from extension personnel.
- Reaching over 40,000 youth annually through 4-H programs, helping them grow into healthy, productive, and engaged individuals. With the help of 1,540 volunteers, this commitment translates into a significant investment in North Dakota's youth.

Through these efforts and many, many more, we reach every corner of the state, from urban areas to rural communities. Our Extension programs are driven by local needs assessments. Some programs may cover the entire state, while other programs are designed and delivered to specific counties based on their needs and requests.

HB1572 proposes shifting funding for NDSU Extension from county-levied mills to state-appropriated general funds. This shift would relieve counties from levying mills for Extension services, with the state stepping in to cover a portion of the funding gap. The bill proposes allocating \$10.3 million in state funds for the 2025-27 biennium to reduce reliance on county funding and, potentially, lower local property taxes.

Currently, counties contribute \$8.43 million to the Extension budget annually, including \$5.34 million from mill levies and \$3.10 million from other county funding sources. While the state allocation would cover a significant portion of this funding, additional county funds would still be needed to maintain the same level of service. We currently work with each county individually and recognize that each county has unique funding needs and ways of utilizing their local funds for Extension programs. Should this bill pass, we will work closely with our county partners to ensure the best possible service given the available budget.

Another highlight of the collaborative partnership NDSU Extension maintains with the counties is reflected in what we refer to as our Base Policy. This policy/guidance was initially developed in partnership with the Association of Counties and ND County Commissioners Association in 1998 and reviewed biennially. It was recently reviewed with the ND County Commissioners Association and shared with all county commissions for their input and feedback in 2024. With no significant concerns raised, we continue to rely on this guidance as we work with county leadership when filling vacant extension positions. Under this guidance, NDSU provides half of the salary and benefits for county-based Extension positions, along with multiple support services such as human resource and IT support, access to NDSU specialists, access to the 4-H Clover, and multiple professional development opportunities. Counties have been responsible for providing the other half of the salary, as well as covering operating costs, including travel, administrative support, office space, and supplies, all of which we greatly appreciate.

In closing, we are grateful for your continued support of NDSU Extension and for considering the use of additional state funding to reduce the reliance on local funding. We understand the complexities of balancing state and local funding sources, and we appreciate your thoughtful approach to this issue.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Lynette Flage
Associate Director, NDSU Extension