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Testimony on SB 2161
Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee
Thursday, January 16, 2025

Chairman Luick, members of the Senate Agriculture and Veteran Affairs Committee, I'm Aaron Kjelland from Walsh County which is in Janne's district and I'm proud to be here today as a farmer representing my fellow wheat growers in my role as a Board Member on the North Dakota Wheat Commission. I rise in support of Senate Bill 2161.

I have been a Walsh county representative since 2006, and was elected to serve on the North Dakota Wheat Commission in 2018. One of our main roles is to support research and innovations that benefit the farmers of our state. Much of this work is accomplished through our support of NDSU and the NDSU extension. In fact, over 35 percent of last year's budget went directly to grants that allowed wheat research progress.

The Wheat Commission believes strongly that investments like breeding new and better wheat varieties, diagnosing and testing plant diseases, surveying and studying pests and addressing timely production related issues have dramatic payback to our growers and subsequently, to our state's economy.

The NDSU hard red spring and durum wheat breeding programs are some of the largest public breeding programs in the U.S., and it is critical that they remain vibrant and robust, and industry impactful in their efforts. As the leading state in the U.S. for hard red spring and durum wheat production, our producers need to have the best varieties, and research investment to address pest, disease and agronomic challenges to maintain our position in the U.S. and world wheat industries.

I know first-hand the benefit of NDSU produced varieties on my farm. They have the built-in quality to help me achieve the highest price at the elevator and also compete for the highest price in the world market. Private wheat breeding companies also have great varieties that have helped drive our average wheat yields in the state higher, but I personally believe that the public program sets the base or the standard for quality and built-in disease and pest resistance. With this 5 mill increase in the wheat check-off we can ensure that the Commission, and wheat producers in the state, have the resources needed to maintain vibrant public wheat breeding programs, which provides the needed synergy with private investment to deliver top-notch varieties into the future.

There are tremendous opportunities in the future to meld new breeding technologies into our breeding programs, but that takes resources. New equipment needs, technicians and scientists to conduct the research and the needed test trials across the state. Both equipment and labor costs continue to escalate.

The Commission and producers are very appreciative of the support many of you and the Legislature have provided for the investment in the new facilities at NDSU, the Peltier Complex and the Bolley Lab. Tremendous new facilities that take NDSU research to competitive levels with other Universities, as they compete for students and scientists. Wheat needs to be a competitive player in that future, and this increase in the wheat check-off will position us to assist in that future.

Our average wheat yield in ND has increased almost 30% over the last 20 years, and the wheat we produce in this state still competes at the highest level in the world quality spectrum. With your help, we can continue to partner with farmers and scientists to support our industry and state.

Another key effort the Commission takes on is domestic promotion. Half of our wheat is consumed domestically, but that is not something to take for granted. Fad diets that eliminate or limit wheat food consumption, misinformation on wheat breeding and production practices, and consumer perceptions about chemical use in farming, perceptions of GMO's and food ingredients are issues we are constantly battling and have affected wheat consumption over the years. Commission efforts to educate consumers is done on a collaborative basis with national organizations such as National Pasta Association and Wheat Foods Council. I currently sit on the board of Wheat Foods Council and have seen first-hand the positive effects of supporting domestic promotion efforts. In fact, this is one of the areas the Commission and our producer constituents feel could use more focus and an increased check off would help amplify these efforts and promote our wheat and production practices in a positive light with consumers, especially those removed from farming.

Thank you for your time, and I urge your full support for SB 2161, as drafted. I am open to take any questions you might have.