The Regional Agriculture and Rural issues Seminar proved to be a jam packed week. The goals for the week – learn and understand the cooperative business model, healthy community, food systems, and identify the sources of financial resources available to agriculture and communities.

Day one began at Concordia College’s Offutt School of Business. RDO Equipment and Farms presented on the future of farming, construction utilizing technology. We ventured down I94 to Shakopee, MN where we toured Rahr Malting Co., the largest single site malting facility in the county. They are the largest supplier of malt to Coors Miller, they provide malt to 3400 of the 3800 craft brewers. In addition, Rahr has one of the most advanced test labs in the nation. This allows them to produce an exceptional quality of product while providing high tech services to brewers all over the Midwest. Rahr uses North Dakota barley in their malting process.

Two of the goals for the seminar was to learn about cooperatives and food systems. On day two we toured two large scale coops focused on food systems. Land O Lakes in Arden Hills 3825 member owners which include 2079 dairy producers, 964 agriculture producer, 782 coop producers and is ranked #215 on Forbes 500. The visit of their new corporate headquarters and company overview was nothing less than exceptional.

The group continued to another familiar coop, CHS located in Inver Grove Heights. CHS has 140,000 customers in 450 communities. A highlight for the group was time with CHS President & CEO Jay Debertin. Jay led Class VIII participants in a in a discussion about leadership. Jay started with a value question by asking the group “What is it that
grabs you about what you do?” He lives by the virtue “Do the right thing even when no one is looking,” and instructs his staff to do the same.

Our final visit for the day was to Burns and McDonnell, a full service engineering, architecture, construction, environmental, and consulting firm. They literally build healthy communities. Their staff of 5700 works with organizations and communities all over the Midwest. As we enjoyed the meal they hosted, we also had the great opportunity to learn about The Minnesota AgriGrowth Council.

Minnesota AgriGrowth is a nonprofit, nonpartisan member organization representing the agriculture and food industries. This umbrella trade organization membership includes 500 companies spanning in size from individual farmers to Fortune 500 companies, including several of the businesses included in our Minneapolis Seminar visit. Their mission and global focus was unique and unlike any organization in North Dakota.

Thursday morning took Class VIII to downtown St. Paul and the Bush Foundation. Established in 1933 by 3M executive Archibald Bush, its mission is to invest in people and empower them. Their target area includes Minnesota, North and South Dakota and the 23 Native nations that share the same geographic area. The class learned about the resources, both human and financial, that work to build healthy communities by investing in great people and their ideas.

A short walk in downtown St. Paul took us to another coop model. At AgriBank we learned about the financial systems of agriculture. Their network of farm credit associations supports rural communities and agriculture with reliable, consistent credit and financial services.

As a final part of our exploration of cooperatives, the group met with Evan Sallee, President and CEO of Fair State Brewing Cooperative. A group of three persons didn’t have the capital to start a brewery, but believed that people can come together and do great things.

They started the third cooperative brewery in the nation. In their short history, they have expanded from their tap house location to building an additional 60,000 square foot brew house facility.

As an evening activity, the group attended a St. Paul Saints baseball game at CHS stadium. The crowd was enthusiastic, but the home team fell to the Winnipeg Goldeyes.

Our final day in the Twin Cities was spent exploring a unique food system. We traveled northeast of the Twin Cities to the Big River Farm and met with Minnesota Food Association. This incubator farm program helps to develop small production farmers through their first generation farm programs. The first gen farmers work with experienced farmers to learn best practices for production. Growers start with a ¼ acre plot, and with time and experience, they can expand their operations. Produce is harvested, contracted or sold at farmers market, and it was estimated that each acre creates enough food to support a $10,000 annual income.

A thank you to the seminar management team; Matt Dahlke, Doug Naze, Suhail Kanwar, Chris Smaaladen, and Searle Swedlund; for lining up visits, speakers and sponsors. Sincere appreciation to Program Director Marie Hvidsten for keeping the group organized and on schedule.