North Dakota Stockmen’s Association  
Testimony to the State Board of Agricultural Research and Education  
December 2017

Good morning, Chairman Peltier and State Board of Agricultural Research and Education members. My name is Julie Ellingson, and I represent the 88-year-old North Dakota Stockmen’s Association, which is comprised of more than 3,000 cattle ranching families in the state.

The beef industry – and agriculture as a whole – continues to be an economic pillar of our state. In order for that to continue, we need to continue to invest in ag research and education, which has a significant return on investment, both to our industry and to our state.

We are grateful for SBARE’s longtime support of beef-related projects. One of the most significant recent investments, of course, was the new Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, which was completed this fall and will serve our industry for many, many years to come. Thank you for your support of this critical facility, as well as this opportunity to give you a few of the beef’s industry annual highlights and to share a few ideas to help it thrive in the future.

The weather was certainly the headliner of 2017. Mother Nature, as you know, dealt a difficult hand to many cattle producers over the last year. 2017 debuted with an incredibly cold and snowy winter, but, by spring, the pendulum had swung and most of the state’s primary cattle-producing regions were in serious to extreme drought. This, of course, impacted hay and feed crops and pasture and forced many unseasonal weather-related cattle marketings. Our organization’s livestock inspection data indicate a more than 14 percent increase in livestock sales through third quarter 2017. Fortunately, the market remained solid during that period and most of those animals were not discounted. Additionally, much of the worst of the drought-stricken area received some late-season moisture, which improved conditions and has put less pressure on feed resources.

There have been other bright spots this year for the cattle industry. Among them has been the rollback of several onerous federal regulations, such as the WOTUS rule, as well as the reopening of China to U.S. beef after a 14-year hiatus. China is home to 1.4 billion people and a growing middle class with a taste for U.S. beef, including specialty cuts that are less popular domestically, but command a premium abroad. Therefore, China holds much promise for those throughout the U.S. beef production chain.

In North Dakota, we are fortunate to have a team of world-renowned meat scientists working at North Dakota State University, helping keep our industry on the cutting edge and improving our product so we can continue to attract and keep customers
in China and around the world. Their work has been significant to both North Dakota's and the nation's cattle industry. Unfortunately, the meat laboratory in Shepperd Arena, where these first-rate scientists work, is far from first-rate. Besides being tight and antiquated, the lab has had an increasingly difficult time meeting U.S. Department of Agriculture inspection requirements; faces ventilation and dust challenges being co-located with the arena; and struggles with skyrocketing maintenance costs as a rapidly aging facility. The lab has served the university and our industry since the 1950s, and it is time for a more efficient, modern-day replication of meat processing for students, stakeholders and those first-class scientists whom we rely upon.

You will remember that the meats laboratory was a high-ranking SBARE capital improvement priority the last two cycles, but fell out of reach given the budget situation. The Stockmen's Association resubmits it for your consideration, as the need has not went away and, in fact, grows greater with each passing day.

Included with my testimony is a copy of the NDSA's policy resolutions. As you peruse the policy book, you will notice a host of resolutions testifying to the value of ag research and Extension to our industry and calling for continued investment in each.

Everyone here recognizes the tough decisions that we all face given the budget situation. We appreciate the work that has already been done to analyze options to streamline systems and increase efficiencies. That is something that we can all support. However, we urge SBARE and others to be very strategic and thoughtful in their decision-making as to not damage the framework of our Extension Service, which has supported our industry, created the fabric of our 4-H programs that prepare our next-generation agriculturists for work in this field and, frankly, been the envy of other states that operate under a different structure. We are fortunate to have a strong network in place in North Dakota, and we ask that you work closely with communities and stakeholders to achieve the necessary refinements while preserving the integrity of our Extension system.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you. We appreciate your consideration of them and your support of North Dakota agriculture.