

September/October 2013

## Help Wanted!

Volunteers are urgently needed to serve on several key committees and for occasional short-term assignments. The MFU Executive Board has principally carried out what is becoming an overwhelming burden of regular board duties on top of what SHOULD be member-based volunteer activities. All non-profits like MFU need the helping hands that members can provide from their store of talents and abilities. Current needs are at least the following:

1. One-time only staffing of our booth on Dec. 10 to 12 at the Great Lakes Horticultural Show in Grand Rapids would be a welcome relief for the President and Vice President, who so far are the only members who have signed up for first-time ever participation in this HUGE and important show. Our booth will be next to our new partner, Hastings Mutual Insurance Company, which will assist us in doubling up on our outreach and education efforts toward attracting new members. Preference is for 2 or 3 members with some working knowledge of Michigan's fruit and vegetable industries and who are outgoing and engaging. Only one day would be expected of you, ½ day if enough people come forward, which would also leave you time to tour the extensive exhibit hall and/or sit in on some of the timely topics at sessions important to fruit and vegetable growers, farm markets, trade and export, agri-tourism, etc. Contact President Thompson to sign up for a fun day. Mileage will be reimbursed.

2. We need 3 or 4 people to form a Policy Committee. Our policy manual is woefully outdated. This is the most important document behind MFU's actions as a grass roots family farmer organization. Experienced

... continued on page 2

## COME ONE, COME ALL ...

... to the 2013 Annual Meeting of the Michigan Farmers Union. This event will be held Friday, November 8 and Saturday, November 9 at the Doherty Hotel and Conference Center in Clare, Mich.

Guest room reservations can be made by calling toll-free: 1-877-2-Doherty and identifying yourself as being with Michigan Farmers Union for the special group rate starting at \$79 plus tax, which is available until Oct. 25. There will be no charge for reservations cancelled within 48 hours of arrival. For more information on the Doherty Hotel please visit [www.DohertyHotel.com](http://www.DohertyHotel.com).

While attendance at our convention is free a formal luncheon costing \$15 per plate is planned for Saturday. As the hotel needs a reasonable headcount in advance of the event, please email [MIFarmersUnion@gmail.com](mailto:MIFarmersUnion@gmail.com) or call 989-644-3907 by Nov. 1 and indicate how many will be eating. Don't be surprised if the answering machine says "Leave a message for Bob and Shirley," my home serves as our "state office!"

Our agenda starts on Friday with a State Board of Directors meeting at 2:00 p.m. (open to the public) and a feature presentation at 7:00 p.m. by Bob Shumaker, president of the Alaska Farmers Union, who will be speaking on not only farming in Alaska, but his experiences traveling to the African nation of Zambia and the work he and others have done regarding enhancing agriculture and rural life in Zambia through Farmers Union's partnership with the National Cooperative Business Association's Farmer-to-Farmer program. We hope to have a nice sized audience to hear Bob's fascinating and colorful presentation. Please invite your friends and neighbors, of all ages, to come and see this program.

Our agenda continues on Saturday, Nov. 9, with our Call to Order at 9:30 a.m. and remarks from Michigan's own Senator Debbie Stabenow, chairwoman of the Senate agriculture committee, who has been invited to speak. Chandler Goule, NFU vice president of government relations, will also give a report regarding current NFU legislative initiatives. The balance of the morning session is intended to be a discussion of our current state policy manual, which was last adopted in 2008. This manual is critical to our operation as it establishes what YOU, the membership, believes to be important and what you expect from your leadership in the coming year.

After our luncheon we will hear presentations from Hasting Mutual Insurance Company, and have a discussion about other benefits available to members. We will also hear presentations from AARP regarding their "You've Earned a Say" campaign and also from representatives of Health and Human Services regarding individuals signing up for various components of the Affordable Care Act "ObamaCare" beginning as early as Oct. 1, 2013.

We will conclude with a discussion regarding potential revision of our current Michigan Farmers Union Bylaws document. Adjournment is targeted for 3:30 p.m. Copies of the current state policy manual and state bylaws, along with a more complete agenda will be forwarded all members under separate cover.

As you can see, this is an ambitious agenda full of information and ripe for discussion. Come and learn about and participate in YOUR organization!

For more information please email [MI-FarmersUnion@gmail.com](mailto:MI-FarmersUnion@gmail.com) or call 989-644-3907.

# IN THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

## Thompson's Tidbits



As I begin this article I am sitting at Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C., anticipating a flight home from the 2013 Fall National Farmers Union Fly-In. Alas, I ultimately sat through a three hour delay at the gate and another

one hour delay on the tarmac after boarding! Was questionable, but I did manage to catch the last flight out of Detroit to Lansing by five minutes and arrived home safely.

For those who have never experienced a Fly-In, it is an outstanding event that each member should make an attempt to participate in at least once. The professionalism and enthusiasm of our NFU staff, particularly the government relations team, is unparalleled. And this attitude was contagious, rubbing off on the entire 300 plus members from around the country who were in attendance. And the diversity of members participating was startling, not only were there the full-time traditional grain, livestock, dairy farmers and ranchers – you had a probate judge from Oregon, an architect and his wife from Colorado, and an individual involved with horse rescue operations and civil war reenactments from Indiana. What brought all these people together? It was their unshakable belief that only by united effort could a comprehensive program for family farms and rural America can be created and implemented that benefits everyone. Please refer to your National Farmers Union newsletter that will arrive soon for more detailed information regarding the 2013 Fall Fly-In.



*Pictured: President Thompson and NFU President Roger Johnson presenting Rep. Peters his Golden Triangle Award.*

As many of you know, Golden Triangle Awards are presented annually to members of Congress who follow NFU Policy in their votes and decision-making process and also make themselves available to Farmers Union members and staff. It was my pleasure to participate in the awards ceremony honoring the two recipients from Michigan, Senator Debbie Stabenow and Representative Gary Peters.



*Pictured: President Thompson met with Illinois President Norbert Brauer and Indiana President Jim Benham at the Fly-In prior to meetings on Capitol Hill.*

If you have not already done so, make plans to attend the 2013 Michigan Farmers Union Annual Meeting at the Doherty Hotel in Clare on Nov. 8-9, 2013. Details are elsewhere in this newsletter. While this event is designed to conduct member business, friends, neighbors and the general public are all welcome. The wealth of information to be presented and issues to be discussed are vitally important to our organizations success. It cannot be stressed enough, the Michigan Farmers Union is an organization established and controlled by YOU the membership. It is YOU the membership that need to come together in a united effort to lay the foundation of solid State Policy for your elected leadership to implement in the weeks and months to come. It is CRITICAL for the wellbeing of YOUR organization for each member possible to attend YOUR annual meeting and actively participate.

I look forward to meeting and visiting with each of you in Clare! – Bob Thompson, President

## Help (continued)

farmers and/or rural advocates would undertake the modernization of our policies, a short-term assignment to conclude with presentations for member adoption at the 2014 annual convention. Much of this work can be accomplished via conference calls and email contact. Please let the MFU President hear from you if you can help out!

3. As most members know, "Ye Editor" of this newsletter, Vice President Nordmark, does not intend to seek re-election at the end of her 2-year term in 2014. This not only means that an interested family farmer will be needed to seek a ballot position for the fall 2014 annual convention and member meeting, but a newsletter writer/editor must come on board at least by that time. There are 4 to 6 newsletters per year and you would work closely with the MFU President and NFU, which publishes and mails or emails our newsletters for us. At this time, our newsletter is the only consistent means of staying in touch with our members on a timely basis. Please consider this as an opportunity to express your creative writing skills! Also, these could be two separate positions if desired. Contact the VP if you have questions or wish to volunteer for either or both.

4. A Legislative Coordinator or Director is needed ASAP. The Board approved a new chair this past summer who then decided against serving. Vice President Nordmark has held this responsibility in one form or another for many, many years and stepped down to pursue other interests. Contact any Board member if you would like to take on this important task.

5. It is not too late to begin forming a Nominating Committee for the 2014 elections of President and Vice President. This is another short-term assignment easily carried out via phone and email. Two or three members will identify potential eligible candidates and solicit their willingness to serve a two-year term. The nominees will be submitted to the Board at their summer 2014 meeting for approval and so that ballots may be prepared before the convention. Contact the President if you would consider volunteering.

# Milking the System

In a new report released this September by the Less = More Coalition, of which MFU is a founding member, Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) in Gratiot and Midland counties alone received tax-payer funded federal subsidies totaling over \$11 million from 1995 to 2012. Fourteen of these facilities have been cited by EPA and the MDEQ for environmental violations, with one of those being fined and penalized in excess of \$45,000. Yet owners and operators of these mega dairies were awarded nearly \$5 million in Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funds from the state office of USDA-NRCS.

During a public presentation and road tour ("Tour de Manure") of five of the factory farms on Sept. 12, 2013, Less = More leaders pointed out the unfair advantage these massive animal factories have over Michigan's sustainable livestock producers which are not similarly favored with EQIP grants. Citing discharges of animal waste into county drains, improper storage of waste, stockpiling of animal waste near public roadways and many other threats to the public's air, water and soil resources, Less = More has called repeatedly for over a year for USDA-NRCS to stop funding polluters and shift EQIP funds to sustainable, responsible livestock operators. So far, the State Conservationist has failed to use his authority to change EQIP funding priorities or explain his failure to act.

An update to the recent L= M report as well as the original report can be downloaded by going to <http://tinyurl.com/L-Mreport>.

## ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE IN MICHIGAN

A few examples of non-traditional agricultural enterprises you might not be aware of are worth sharing. One of the more unique examples is reindeer farming – In Michigan, you ask? Yep!! West of Kalamazoo is a family-run operation that raises these relatives of elk (not deer) for meat, hides, antler byproducts, and entertainment, the latter their best-known feature. The family brings some of their tame, hand-raised reindeer to children's birthday parties, educational workshops, public exhibits, etc. They also sell breeding stock to other herders around the country, even as far away as Alaska.

Also on the livestock scene, American bison, commonly but mistakenly called buffalo, have been raised in Michigan for quite some time. No longer a novelty, several herds are now found throughout the state and some crossbreeding enterprises produce a product called beefalo. Bison meat is highly prized for its low cholesterol content due to limited fatty deposits yet is exceedingly tender and, some say, as good or better tasting than beef. A hearty critter, bison ignore the nasty winter weather and are generally healthy and good producers. Gourmet restaurants, health food stores, and farmers markets that have refrigeration now commonly carry bison meat. The hides, when tanned, bring premium prices and are much sought after.

In the plant kingdom, "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire ..." is becoming a much more common event. Despite the devastating blight that wiped out the massive

chestnut forests of the eastern United States in the 1900s, remnant populations have afforded plant geneticists the opportunity to develop a resistant strain by numerous crossings and back-crossings that have created a modern version of the old chestnut (yeah, pun intended!) that is, as the old saying goes, "99 and 44/100 percent pure." Well, not exactly that but close enough that there has been a steady growth in the production of edible chestnuts so that they are not as much a rarity on the fresh market as they once were. The United States produces only about one percent of the world's chestnuts (all varieties included) with Michigan leading the way in our country. And by the way, chestnuts are technically not a nut, like a walnut, but a fruit! Who knew?

Speaking of fruit, there are currently twenty-plus new Michigan growers of a little known blue-colored berry called the Saskatoon that originated in Canada. Although resembling our blueberries in size and color, Saskatoon plants are members of the rose family and therefore related to apples. They have seeds that are eaten with the berry, providing a nice "crunchy" texture and unique flavor some say is almond-like. The increasing interest in Saskatoon production by growers in the Midwest is due to the Saskatoon's nutritional merits, such as having higher antioxidant properties than blueberries, and greater levels of iron and protein than other berries, while at the same time being lower in fats. Increasing consumer interest in healthier di-

... continued on page 4

### MICHIGAN FARMERS UNION

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## ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE (CONTINUED)

ets suggests that the Saskatoon, if it can be economically produced in commercial quantities, will quickly gain popularity, creating a new market for those who decide to grow it.

Whether you are a beer drinker or not, you likely are aware of at least one Michigan microbrewery near you. One of the fastest growing enterprises in the U.S., new microbreweries and production expansion of existing ones has been a phenomenon in Michigan as well. In keeping with new-found opportunities to provide product or service support to the industry, at least one hops grower has taken on the serious challenge of producing the right kinds of hops sought by Michigan brewmasters. While a tiny segment of the current market supported by local breweries, it is expected that other growers may enter this niche market as

well, targeting those specific hop varieties that do well under Michigan growing conditions.

Then there is industrial hemp. No, not the infamous marijuana variety, but the species within the same plant family that farmers were encouraged to grow for rope-making and other uses during the war years in the early 1900s. There has been a recent revival of this often-maligned plant in the production of fiber for uses such as clothing (think “Banana Republic” outlets). Canada is leading the way in supporting their farmers who can see the market worth of this plant that is easily adapted to modern agricultural practices. The U.S. is still stuck in the stubborn hemp plants as “pot” myth, but some states ARE moving, cautiously, into the market opening (Michigan isn’t one of them). One to watch.



*Pictured: President Thompson and NFU President Roger Johnson presenting Senate Ag Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow with her Golden Triangle Award.*