

May/June 2013

Recent Board Action

At its April 19th MFU Board meeting, several items were officially approved by unanimous vote. In response to recently expressed concerns raised by the enactment of new by-laws at last year's convention, President Thompson asked board members Nordmark, Hammond and Wiescholek to be an ad hoc committee to compare the language of the old versus the new documents and to make recommendations for changes, if any, to the board at its next meeting. For example, the former by-laws required the board to appoint a Legislative Chair to keep track of state legislation of importance to Michigan farmers and rural communities (the President is responsible for the same effort at the national level.). The new language eliminated this requirement so consequently MFU has had no one taking responsibility for that endeavor. Should we? And how?

In another circumstance, the new by-laws also changed the calendar with respect to the seating of officers following a regular election from the historic "within 90 days of said election" to immediately following the conclusion of that year's convention during which elections were held. This leaves a big disconnect between the duties and deadlines which occur each year by December 31, the end of our business year, when the Secretary/Treasurer is closing the books and filing certain state and federal non-profit reporting forms. New officers taking over with ¼ of the business year remaining now have no time to become familiar with these processes as they used to do when meeting with the old board during a January transition.

You, our members, need to go back over YOUR copies of these documents and let us know of any concerns you have regarding the current language of the by-laws so that the board will have time to prepare recommended changes—if any—for your approval at the 2013 fall convention.

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CONSERVATION COMPLIANCE AND THE 2013 FARM BILL

On May 1, 2013, the Michigan Farmers Union participated in an event called "Conservation and the 2013 Farm Bill" moderated by the Izaak Walton League of America and sponsored by a number of Michigan Conservation groups. This event had three components – a Conservation Summit in the afternoon; a reception featuring Michigan agricultural products; and a Citizen's Conservation Forum. MFU President Bob Thompson spoke as a panelist during the Forum.

The general focus of the presentations and discussions was how to ensure a strong Conservation Title in the 2013 Farm Bill despite funding challenges. Also very much in the minds of the assembly was building support for Conservation Compliance being tied to the purchase of Crop Insurance. With the expected termination of the Direct Payment Program and the near certainty that Title I commodity programs may be weak, it is anticipated that farmers will turn to crop insurance, which will play a greater role as a safety net rather than other commodity programs. Concern was expressed that the Direct Payment "carrot" for compliance with such principles as sod buster or swamp buster rules would be gone

MFU: THE EARLY YEARS, PART III (CONCLUSION)

In his book, "The Eighty-Year Experiences of a Grass Roots Citizen", MFU co-founder Chester A. Graham writes that MFU almost did not survive its formative years in the 1930's. In this last installment of our three-part series, he tells us why.

Prior to its formal organization in late 1933, Graham and others had been busy creating local chapters all over Michigan. On Labor Day of that year, a weekend gathering of "key concerned farmers" was held, though he doesn't say where. They had a guest speaker, identified as one E.E. Kennedy, the NFU Secretary, who Graham states "consumed a lot of time giving us a list of 'Bad Guys' in the FU and in the Midwest in general." He went on to say that "Four of us from Michigan attended our first NFU Convention in November, 1934. There I discovered that Secretary Kennedy's list of Bad Guys were [sic] what

and that there is no existing legislative language requiring Conservation Compliance when obtaining Crop Insurance.

MFU President Thompson shared NFU's recent 2013 policy decision that supports "requiring conservation compliance to be eligible for federal crop insurance subsidies." Nearly 62% of the premium cost of multi-peril crop insurance is government tax payer subsidy. The question becomes, particularly at a point of historically high commodity prices, if conservation compliance is not required for eligibility for crop insurance subsidies, will farmers opt out of Title I Programs to bypass environmental standards? Or, if conservation compliance is linked to Crop Insurance subsidies, will farmers forego purchasing crop insurance and put themselves at greater risk of loss? Serious questions without immediate answers.

All attendees agreed that material presented was thought provoking and that each entity and individual needed to stay as informed as possible in order to effectively present positions to legislators as the Farm Bill debate progresses.

I considered the Good Guys. Kennedy's goon squad, from the United Farmers of Illinois at Kankakee, would not permit the delegates from the Illinois Farmers Union to enter the Convention Hall. On the second day, the Illinois Farmers Union delegates got into the basement through a window, but Kennedy's men threw them out."

Graham had remarked earlier that at the first MFU State Convention in October, 1934, Assistant NFU Secretary Mary Punke had attended and took "complete charge of the youth program at the Convention." At the November, 1934, NFU Convention, he learned that the Farmers Union Junior Program was an integral part of the Union,—"not a separate political organization which Mary Punke had organized at the Michigan Convention. (He) arranged for the National Junior Leader, Elsie Olson, of South Dakota, to come to Michigan to try to get us on the right

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Board (continued)

A similar concern for the woefully outdated MFU policy manual was also noted, with recognition that an ad hoc committee could best address this issue. No decisions were made with respect to seating a committee from the board, but we are asking you, our members, to step forward and volunteer to help with the policy review and recommendations for revisions and additions. We would like to have these proposals in place by the 2013 MFU convention this fall. Anyone can weigh in on suggesting changes, and we hope you will, but we really need at least 3 MFU member-leaders to come forward to organize and carry out this task. The board can't and shouldn't try to do everything! In these days of electronic options, everything should be able to be completed via email without having to travel to meetings. Of course President Thompson will be available to oversee and assist in the ongoing process.

Board members have often expressed concern for the lack of an administrative procedures or policy manual with which to conduct MFU business. President Thompson agreed to start things rolling toward the creation of one for MFU by contacting other state chapters to see what they cover. Ours could be short and simple, as we have no paid staff and no formal permanent office to support. But other than recently approved rates for mileage reimbursement, nothing has been set down as official written and approved guidelines.

Last year, as part of our new farm insurance program partnership with Hastings Mutual Insurance Company, MFU board members participated in several events with Hastings. During Ag Expo at MSU in July, Hastings Mutual agents graciously allowed us to share their booth, at no cost, for part of one day, to distribute MFU/NFU literature and to talk to visitors about the opportunities available to them by becoming a member of MFU, which, among other things, would entitle them to substantial savings on farm insurance if they also insure with Hastings Mutual. This year the board agreed to let President Thompson proceed with the possibility of having our own booth, or again sharing with Hastings Mutual agents but this time also sharing the booth rental cost. Ag Expo is July 16 to 18, so if all the pieces fall into place, we will be looking for members to help staff the booth. This is not a full time assignment--ideally, enough people will volunteer so that we would need you for only ½ of a day at the most, leaving plenty of time to enjoy the exhibits and programs on the rest of the grounds. Contact Bob Thompson if you would be willing to help out!!

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IN THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Thomson's Tidbits



How many times have we each heard that Farmers Union is a grassroots organization? That each member, regardless of any other consideration, has a voice in what our Union stands for? That concept of grassroots involvement could not have been more visibly displayed than at the recently concluded National Convention held in Springfield, Mass. Director John Schlicht and I had the privilege of representing Michigan at that event and witnessing firsthand the power of each individual member. Take for example the process of developing NFU Policy. For those who may not be aware, the NFU Policy Handbook runs into 186 pages of printed material and covers every aspect of rural life. And, even though prior to the convention an appointed committee had already spent four full days reviewing and updating this document, it was laid bare on the floor of the convention. Each and every word and phrase was subject to dissection by not only the Delegates, which you would expect, but by any member in attendance who wished to voice an opinion. THAT is grassroots involvement! Once each subject was thoroughly discussed, the Delegates would vote to adopt. Few of these votes were unanimous, several were very close, but each person in the room could feel assured that their position had been given a fair hearing and democracy ruled. This Policy Handbook is what then sets the tone and guides the National Board of Directors and their staff during the year. If there is any question as to how NFU stands on a particular issue it is likely in this document that can be found at www.nfu.org under the Policy tab.

In that same vein, each of you, as members in the Michigan Farmers Union, are the grassroots that are vitally important to our state organization. Your leadership needs your active involvement on a whole host of issues. We need people to help monitor and form responses to state and national legislative issues; we need people to help with recruitment of new members; we need people to help understand and communicate the multitude of benefits available to all members; we need people to help research and update our own Michigan Policy statement to guide the State Board of Directors throughout the year; and, most importantly, we need to have people willing to seriously consider becoming leaders (Directors or Officers) in the future. Will any

one of these tasks take some effort? Of course they will. Can any one person do any of these tasks alone? Of course they can't. The idea is to spread the workload around. It is no mistake that I have emphasized help in each case. Many hands make the work light. What does it mean to be a "union"? I believe it means to come together and work for the common good as a single unit. This is your organization and it needs your help. If you are available to help on any of these tasks, please contact me at bthompsonfarm@gmail.com or call (989) 644-3907.

Speaking of time considerations, as your president I am a member of the National Board of Directors and therefore a member of the National Legislative Committee. Over the past two weeks, as versions of Farm Bills have been presented in the Senate and the House, complete with hundreds of amendments, multiple conference calls have taken place each running to more than hour. My personal impression is that you can be very proud of the tireless work being performed by your national staff to research and comment on each proposal offered. Staff comments are based off from the aforementioned NFU Policy, which are then discussed by the Legislative Committee and either accepted, modified or rejected. These compiled comments, expressing our pleasure or displeasure, are then transmitted back to legislative leaders. In these times of almost instantaneous communication, split second decisions of yea or nay need to be made. For that reason, it is a critical for Michigan Farmers Union to maintain an up-to-date policy document to offer guidance to those of us in leadership positions. And as I said earlier, help is needed to do so.

In other news, in place of a formal picnic this year, plans are being made to hold a joint meeting with our Hastings Mutual Insurance Company partners and the Michigan Farmers Union membership. The subject of this meeting will be "Passing Down the Farm or Family Business" more commonly known as estate planning. It is our intent to provide general information and strategies that you can then shape to fit your personal situation. This meeting will be held on Saturday, July 27, 2013, and will feature Dave Velde, who is NFU's general counsel, as our guest speaker. Please mark this date on your calendar and plan to attend. Mr. Velde is a great, down to earth style, speaker with over 30 years of experience. More information will be mailed as soon as a suitable lo-

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Youth Scholarship Opportunities

There are now two excellent leadership opportunities for either youth members of MFU (there is a separate category for those who prefer their own membership) or youth from families

whose parents or grandparents are MFU members. In noting that no organization can grow and prosper without new member talent and energy, the MFU board agreed to invite eligible youth to become involved in activities qualifying them

for potential participation in NFU's summer leadership camp and/or the NFU Fall Legislative Fly-ins, both activities state chapters such as ours have endorsed and/or been involved with.

The NFU Leadership Camp is held in Colorado for youth ages 17 to 20 who have demonstrated an active commitment to family farm agriculture or sustainable communities and who are interested in developing leadership skills to continue and enhance that support. This will require interested young folks to work with the MFU board over a year or two on preplanned activities they choose together, that will allow them to be engaged in some effort to benefit family farm agriculture. They can be younger than 17 to start this process, as long as they are 17 by the time they apply for the Camp session they wish to attend.

Fly-ins are intense 3 to 4 day citizen "lobbying" events held in Washington, D.C. each September. Tightly organized and well orchestrated by NFU's D.C. staff, Fly-ins are fast-paced "meet 'n greet" sessions where participants from NFU's state chartered chapters attend many back-to-back meetings with their and other states' Senators and Representatives and their key staffers to present our positions on pending legislation that will impact agriculture, such as the recent and ongoing focus on a new federal Farm Bill. Exhausting but exhilarating, is how our latest youth member described his first Fly-in!

While both activities have a serious side, with planned outcomes, there is still plenty of "down

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THOMPSON'S TIDBITS (CONTINUED)

cation is found.

Speaking of meetings, also mark your calendar and plan to attend the 2013 Michigan Farmers Union State Convention which will be held at the Doherty Hotel in Clare, Michigan on November 8 and 9, 2013. Group room rates starting at \$79 plus tax have been arranged and a formal luncheon is being planned on Saturday. Other tentative plans include holding forums discussing policy development and membership benefits as well as reports from National Farmers Union representatives. Watch for more information about this event in your mail.



Pictured: MFU Board Member John Schlicht and MFU President Bob Thompson take a break between policy sessions at the 2013 NFU Convention in Springfield, Mass.

Finally, arrangements are being made to have a booth at Ag Expo July 16, 17 and 18, 2013 to promote Michigan Farmers Union. All members are welcome to stop in and visit and perhaps even sit for a spell and help us ensure farmers know Michigan Farmers Union is alive and well.

In closing, I will simply say what I always say, this is YOUR organization and those of us entrusted with leadership positions can only do so much and need YOUR help.

– Bob Thompson, President

NEW RESOURCE FOR FARMERS NOW ONLINE

In 2012, MFU joined a coalition of livestock farmers, food policy and consumer advocates, environmental action groups and others in creating a coordinated approach to helping level the playing field for sustainable livestock producers in Michigan. The "Less = More" partnership was launched to address the inequity of Farm Bill subsidy distributions through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) which favors polluting factory farms over safe, sustainable livestock farms at the expense of the environment (e.g., water, soil, air) and public health.

The coalition found that the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), the USDA agency that distributes taxpayer-funded subsidies through the office of the State Conservationist in Lansing, disburses 60 percent of EQIP funds to livestock operations. Currently, most of the money goes to support Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) also popularly known as factory farms. The largest EQIP subsidies go to support practices dealing with animal waste that are specific to large scale operations with thousands of animals that generate millions of gallons of

manure. For example, a factory farm can apply for and receive more than \$43,000 for a solid/liquid waste separation facility; anaerobic digesters fetch anywhere from about \$300 to \$600 per animal unit, which translates into a substantial sum for an operation of thousands of animals.

In addition, this taxpayer money doesn't always solve an operation's underlying environmental problem. A recent report by "Less = More" found that 37 of Michigan's factory farms cited for environmental violations and unpermitted discharges were awarded nearly \$27 million in various Farm Bill subsidies from 1995 to 2011. Of these operations, 26 jointly racked up fines and penalties of more than \$1.3 million for their share of these violations.

Also, CAFO-sized animal operations are required to have an approved, certified Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) to be eligible for EQIP funds. Yet one CAFO, lacking an approved CNMP, was able to receive requested EQIP funds—and then was cited for an illegal discharge!

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Scholarships (continued)

time" where new friendships can be forged (Camp) or seeing the many sights in our nation's Capitol is readily available. MFU will cover all costs associated with each event. Our investment will, hopefully, be returned in the form of more experienced, confident and dedicated youth members who will continue to grow MFU while they grow into agriculture's future leaders. Contact President Thompson or Vice President Nordmark if you are interested.

CAFO (continued)

Of the 104 different practices with EQIP subsidies available for 2013, 53 are practices applicable to all livestock operations including those having organic certification, such as filter strips, brush management, grassed waterways, and fencing. A new "Less = More" web link lets all farmers connect to basic information about the subsidies within the EQIP program in Michigan. The website lists each EQIP funded practice, the amount of money available for each, as well as the most current EQIP application.

MFU livestock farmers are encouraged to go to <http://tinyurl.com/EQIPsubsidies> to review the available material if you have an interest in applying for a funded practice under EQIP. This is a quick and easy way to gather up the necessary information before heading to your local NRCS office to apply.

To read a copy of the "Less = More" report, "Restoring the Balance to Michigan's Farming Landscape", and other information about "Less = More", go to www.MoreforMichigan.org.

HISTORY (CONTINUED)

track in the Farmers Union Junior Program."

Graham had actively recruited members of the Berrien County Fruit Growers (BCFG) organization, with whom he had worked previously, to become MFU members once MFU was chartered. His plan was to set up a special Action Committee on Fruit. Their members would pay the regular MFU dues. However, "Seeking political clout in the Union [NFU], Secretary Kennedy approached the Berrien group with an offer to let their members come into the Union on payment of 25 cents national dues. They (BCFG) distrusted Kennedy and did not offer, but they also [then] distrusted the Michigan Farmers Union", and the memberships were lost.

Meanwhile, Elsie Olson was resigning as National Junior Leader and Gladys Talbott of North Dakota was presumed to be her logical successor. But her husband and others said warring factions in the NFU would not accept her and planned to appoint a Kennedy person to the position, which they felt would mean the end to the traditional Junior Program and would result in a new separate political organization of youth. Consensus was that Graham was the only person with sufficient prestige to stop the Kennedy plan, so he accepted the position of National Junior Leader.

Early in 1936, the head of the D. L. Lee Company in Illinois, which printed the National Union Farmer newsletter, came to Michigan to see Graham and ask if he would agree to edit the publication, "-because he [Lee] was having too much trouble with E.E. Kennedy, the editor." Graham declined, because, he said, "the National office would not allow important material to come to me."

In another instance, Graham reported that the

NFU had been and continued to be a non-partisan organization, which did not directly support political candidates. However, Kennedy tried to have NFU support a candidate he felt would bestow personal favors on him if elected President of the United States. Graham remarked that "Kennedy was hostile toward Franklin Roosevelt and Henry Wallace [Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture] because he felt that he, Kennedy, should have been named Secretary of Agriculture."

At one time, the then-MFU State President Ira Wilmouth told Graham that a committee from Detroit, an area known for its large number of Kennedy supporters (Ed. note: But apparently not farmers!), had come to his home with a check drawn in four figures in compensation if he would destroy MFU. He did not accept the check, but someone did. Graham never found out whom. He concludes, "With the political attack on the Michigan Farmers Union and the character attack on me, they [Kennedy faction] literally tore the MFU to shreds. We had organized too well. We had become too much of a threat to the power structure of Michigan."

There are many more example of the outrageous and blatant actions by the Kennedy forces to take over MFU, or failing that, to destroy it. They nearly succeeded. Finally, NFU had to intervene in Michigan. "The Michigan Farmers Union survived, but with a greatly reduced membership and strength," Graham sadly remarked.

So here we are, 80 years later, with new challenges and new opportunities. With full member engagement and dedicated board leadership, we could regain both member numbers and organizational strength before the next 80 years. What will be OUR legacy?

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