Senators Hart, Taylor, Chelgren and Bowman:

On behalf of the Iowa Farmers Union (IFU) and our family farmer members, I want to thank you for your consideration of Senate Study Bill 3142, which would support farmer-led efforts to promote and expand local and regional food systems in Iowa.

The Iowa Farmers Union is a grassroots member organization of family farmers, ranchers, advocates and consumers that works to strengthen and promote Iowa’s independent family farms. We represent a diverse mix of farming operations, including corn, soybean and grain farmers, livestock producers, dairy producers, organic farmers, fruit, vegetable and specialty crop growers, and market farms selling directly to local consumers.

The development of local and regional food systems in Iowa has created an important economic opportunity for Iowa’s independent family farms, and we have worked extensively with our members and with partner organizations to identify and promote policies to support the expansion of local and regional food systems. SSB 3142 would provide much needed support for Iowa farmers producing for local and regional markets. Specifically, SSB 3142 would:

- Establish programs within the Economic Development Authority for certified small farm operators producing specialty crops (fruits, vegetables, nuts, horticulture, floriculture and nursery crops), livestock, or dairy for local and regional markets in Iowa
- Create a small farm operator financial assistance program to provide financial assistance to small farms to improve or expand or to engage in cooperative marketing or processing ventures with other small farms
- Create a small farm operator marketing and processing program to expand processing and promote new markets for specialty crops, livestock and dairy produced by small farms
- Establish a state government purchasing preference to encourage the purchase of specialty crops, livestock and dairy produced by small farms
We ask for your support for moving SSB 3142 forward this session and offer the following comments in support of the bill.

1. **SSB 3142 would create important economic opportunities for beginning family farmers and rural business development.** Many beginning family farmers are entering the farming profession via smaller-scale, diversified, labor-intensive operations that rely on local and regional markets to sell their products. These beginning farmers are adding value to the products grown on their farms and increasing their profitability by building personal relationships and reconnecting Iowa consumers with farms and the families who grow their food. At a time when high land prices and high input costs keep many young farmers from buying into more capital-intensive, larger-scale operations, local and regional food systems represent a vital opening for new family farm businesses. This is an especially important trend given the increasing age of Iowa farmers - the USDA estimates that the country needs to add 100,000 new farmers over the coming decade to replace the current generation of farmers who are nearing retirement. Local and regional food systems are a key component of any program to support the new farmers that Iowa and other agricultural states will need to attract in order to maintain the family farms that are at the heart of our economy and our food supply.

2. **SSB 3142 would decrease Iowa’s dependence on imported food.** The state of Iowa currently imports approximately 90 percent of the food consumed by Iowa families. In a state with abundant, fertile agricultural land, this statistic represents a huge missed opportunity to feed Iowa families healthy, fresh food produced by Iowa farmers. A 2014 report from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture estimates that direct-to-consumer food sales generate $322 million in annual revenue for Iowa farms. A more recent study by the Union of Concerned Scientists indicates that this figure is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the potential economic impact of local and regional food systems in Iowa. The UCS study estimates that if farmers were able to meet just half the potential demand for local foods from the state’s food-buying institutions, this activity alone would generate $1.67 billion in sales and support 12,000 in-state jobs.

3. **SSB 3142 would Increase the availability of fresh, healthy food and improve nutrition and health outcomes for Iowa citizens.** Iowa shares the same challenges faced by the rest of the United States with rising rates of obesity, chronic disease, and poor nutrition. Most public health and nutrition experts agree that families need to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into their diets, but Iowa has not taken advantage of our position as a leading agricultural state to provide a healthier food supply for our own citizens. On the contrary, many parts of both urban and rural Iowa face problems with so-called “food deserts” where families do not have access to stores in their local communities selling the fresh, high quality fruits and vegetables that we know are needed to improve diets and health outcomes. The easiest way to address this problem would be to increase the supply of locally-produced fruits and vegetables available to Iowa consumers.

4. **SSB 3142 would improve the economic and ecological resilience of Iowa farms by promoting investment in more diversified operations.** Beginning farmers are not alone in wanting to invest in growing Iowa’s local and regional food systems. Many established
commodity farmers are looking for ways to diversify their operations by growing a wider variety of crops and identifying new markets for those crops. Commodity farmers face a variety of risks inherent in their operations - sudden market declines, unpredictable weather patterns, new crop diseases and pests - that provide strong incentives to diversify conventional corn and soybean rotations and identify new crops that will help to mitigate risk and improve the long-term financial viability of farming operations. Multi-generation farms in particular have found that converting a portion of a corn & soybean operation to fruit and vegetable or other specialty crop production is an effective way to generate additional income and support multiple families as part of the same farming operation. Investing in more diversified farming systems has the added benefit of spreading out risk and improving the resilience of our food supply in the face of rising temperatures and more extreme weather events, such as the current drought in California. However, one of the largest barriers to establishing more diversified crop rotations is the ability to identify and access markets for the new crops being grown. Investing in the growth of local and regional food systems would greatly expand the capacity of Iowa farms to diversify their operations and improve the overall resilience of our food supply and our farm economy.

We thank you for your consideration of these comments on SSB 3142, and I hope that our family farmers can count on your support to move this bill forward. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at jlinderman@iowafarmersunion.org or (319) 651-2250.

Sincerely,

Jana M. Linderman
President
Iowa Farmers Union