



Kevin Paap

Pandemic, new farm technology underscore need for rural broadband access

A Minnesota-in-the-post-pandemic-world interview

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Biography

Kevin Paap is president of the Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation, a position he's held since 2005, having served on the board of the organization since 1997. He and his wife, Julie, own and operate a fourth-generation family farm in Blue Earth County, Minnesota, where they raise corn and soybeans. One of their two sons is also involved in the farm's operation.

Paap serves on the board of directors of Farm Bureau Life, Farm Bureau Property & Casualty and Western Ag. He also serves on the board of trustees of the Minnesota FFA Foundation and on the board of directors of the [Center for Rural Policy and Development](#), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that provides research to examine and advance policy and decision-making, rural advocacy and civic engagement for Greater Minnesota's development. He's currently running for county board in Blue Earth County.

Paap is an active member and past state president of the Minnesota Soybean Growers Association and an active member of the Minnesota Corn Growers Association. He served for 28 years on the Vernon Center Volunteer Fire Department as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). He is a graduate of the first Minnesota Agriculture and Rural Leadership

Program and a 2002 policy fellow through the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. He also served on the Alumni Board of the University of Minnesota-Waseca, where he earned a degree in crop production.

Background. 01:34

The **Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation**, which is 101 years old, is the largest farm organization in Minnesota and the **American Farm Bureau Federation** is the largest farm organization in the country. The Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation has nearly 30,000 member families through its Farm Bureau affiliates in 78 counties and regions. It is an advocate for agriculture, driven by the beliefs and policies of its members. It works on a number of priority issues at the state level: buffers along public drainage ditches and public waters, ditch mowing, health insurance and transportation.

Minnesota Farm Bureau President Kevin Paap said generational sustainability, the ability of the next generation to farm if it wants to, is a very important issue in agriculture.

Discussion

08:42 - Are East African and Latino immigrants and other people of color who work in agriculture in southern Minnesota entering the farming industry and owning their own farms? (John Cairns) **Minnesota Farm Bureau President Kevin Paap:**

Agriculture depends a lot on a very diverse, hardworking workforce. We have an immigrant workforce that has a big role in the safety and preparation of food. We're lagging in agriculture in terms of diversifying ownership. Continual improvement is key in agriculture.

11:44 - Could you speak to the market disarray and supply chain disruptions in agriculture and livestock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular addressing the difficulties experienced by suppliers in adapting their products to fit rapidly changing markets? (Janis Clay) **Paap:** Even during the pandemic, we always had a safe food supply, although there was some disruption in food transportation, logistics and processing. Lots of industries were overwhelmed. There was a shifting of demand without restaurants and food service. We lost all of that demand right away. For example, three-quarters of all bacon is sold to restaurants.

When outbreaks of COVID-19 caused the closure of processing plants, the worst thing is there was nowhere for healthy pigs, lambs and cattle to be processed. Euthanasia was a last resort, as barns became overcrowded. The farmers ran out of space. We're still working on improving safety in processing plants. Local meat lockers are inspected by the state. They couldn't help out with food banks because they weren't federally inspected.

18:03 - We see many small businesses going under, while large businesses are exploding. Can you speak to a similar trend in farming, where we see corporate

agriculture overwhelming the small family farm? How do you address the conflicting interests that the two might have, while representing the interests of both at the Minnesota Farm Bureau? (Paul Ostrow) **Paap:** There are lots of corporate farms nearby, but many corporate farms are family corporations. There are several reasons people decide to make their farms corporate: (1) Originally, individual farmers couldn't deduct the cost of health insurance, but corporations can; (2) When a farmer wants to move the farm to the next generation, it's easier to transfer the farm if it's done with corporate shares, rather than a total buyout; and (3) Many times family members not engaged in the actual farming want to continue be part of the family farm. A corporation makes that easier. The Farm Bureau represents all sizes and types of farms.

26:30 - Is there any legislative action you believe should be taken to address decreasing numbers of family farms and the impact of that on small towns? (Paul Gilje) **Paap:** We've been losing farmers every year since 1900. The easiest way to have people interested in farming is to have farms make a profit. There are programs out there to help farmers. It's a fact of life that there are fewer local pharmacies, gas stations and other businesses. We haven't been able to change that trend in 100 years. Technology allows us to do more with less, including people.

28:40 - What kinds of issues do you bring to the Minnesota Legislature and how does legislative action or inaction affect your members? (John Adams) **Paap:** Farmers learn to work and they learn to work together. With so few involved in agriculture, elected leaders on both the state and national levels manage to leave partisanship aside. Others in state government could benefit from looking at agriculture. The Ag Committee got its chores done. The Ag bill passed right out of the gate and was one of the first bills signed by the governor. Inaction in other areas remains a concern, particularly the failure to address state conformity with recent federal tax changes. Tying the state tax bill to the bonding bill contributed to the inaction and is frustrating.

31:58 - How do you handle full silos for crops like corn and a storage shortage for crop production? (Pat Davies) **Paap:** Not all the silos are full, but there is currently more supply of corn than demand for it. Over one-third of the corn crop goes into ethanol, but there is less demand for it, since people aren't driving as much during the pandemic. Another third of the corn crop goes to feeding animals. But farmers slowed down their use of feed to slow down the growth of their animals, because of closures of processing plants due to COVID-19. The final third of the corn crop goes to international trade, but there is lower demand there because of the pandemic. Sixty percent of Minnesota's soybeans go to international trade.

35:30 - Does the Minnesota Farm Bureau look into how to improve conditions and opportunities for immigrant workers and help integrate them as farmers? (T Williams) **Paap:** A year ago, before COVID-19 and the George Floyd and other tragedies,

ag labor was already on the top of our list at the Farm Bureau. We need immigration reform. Do we import our labor or import our food? Immigrant farm laborers play a large role in the food supply. Farmers hire 1.6 million workers per year and some people say 60 percent to 70 percent are unauthorized. If we lost our immigrant workforce in Minnesota, half our cows wouldn't be milked tonight. We need stability on individual farms and ranches and in the community schools, child care and health care.

43:01 - How much a priority is broadband internet access for farmers? Are there shortages that need to be addressed by the state and federal government?

(Clarence Shallbetter) **Paap:** High-speed internet is no longer a luxury. We need broadband for agriculture, education, health care, jobs and leisure. It's extending internet for the last mile that's important. One thing that's made the biggest difference in farming is precision agriculture—we can test the soil's nutrient levels in the fields, and then use global positioning to return to that specific area to add the needed nutrients and auto-steer our tractors. It helps us to be more efficient. Technology on farms has changed over the last five to 10 years for both animals and crops. When we put nutrients back in the soil—fertilizer or manure—it's precision-figured. And there are some places in Minnesota without decent cell phone coverage. We extended electricity to rural areas in the past and need to do that with internet and cell phone access. It's going to have to be government-driven, like the federal Rural Electrification Act (REA) program in the 1930s.

48:42 - Considering the trend to bring business back into the U.S, what is the impact on international trade and how does that affect farmers in Minnesota? (Tom Abeles)

Paap: Trade and agriculture are linked, because 96 percent of the world's population lives outside the United States. We grow more than we can use here. Sixty percent of soybeans are exported out of Minnesota. Trade relationships make our world a safer, more stable place. We must have access to open, global markets. Without international trade, there won't be the demand we need in agriculture.

53:51 - Can you discuss the transportation shift towards trucking and away from rail and comment more generally on the role of transportation in agriculture? (Lee Munnich)

Paap: We need investment in infrastructure—roads and bridges, water, pipelines. We need it all. We should put ethanol plants where the crops are to reduce the need for transportation.

55:59 - Can you address the effect of tariffs on agriculture? And are small vegetable farms, often run by immigrants, members of the Minnesota Farm Bureau and how do they fit in? (Dana Schroeder)

Paap: All tariffs do is make us less competitive. They pass on the costs to consumers, which results in higher prices and reduced consumption. They don't do anybody any good. Small vegetable farms fit into the

Minnesota Farm Bureau through our 78 county or regional Farm Bureaus. We do some things with direct marketers from smaller farms, but we don't have as many small-farm members as we'd like.

58:34 - How do you address evolving public dietary preferences such as veganism? How do these trends impact your members over the long-term and how does the agricultural community plan for these changes? (Paul Ostrow) **Paap:** The greatest thing about America is choice. We want food to be safe, nutritious and affordable. We need choice for both farmers and consumers. We must play by the same rules.

1:02:32 - What lasting impacts of COVID-19 do you see going forward in agriculture? (Janis Clay) **Paap:** With COVID, we've realized that we have just-in-time inventory-meat that was walking 70 or so hours ago. We have to keep our processing plants open safely, because live animals don't store well. We continue to communicate through Zoom calls with Minnesota Department of Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen and with Farm Bureaus in every state. We must work with government at all levels. Agriculture has gotten a little less disconnected from consumers during the pandemic and we need to keep breaking down that disconnect. There's nothing worse than farmers dumping their milk and then consumers finding a limited supply in grocery stores. And we've learned with COVID the importance of broadband. There will be challenges and opportunities out there if we pull together in times of crisis.

1:06:55 - Do you have any thoughts about how to restructure local government? (Paul Gilje) **Paap:** I don't think I'd like to restructure it, based on the results of state or federal government. Local governments must balance their checkbooks and are pretty responsive to their constituency. There are days I'd like state and federal governments to spend time at the Vernon Center Town Board meetings to see what the function of government is and is not. I have lots of respect for local government and its responsibilities and responsiveness.

Present on Zoom interview

Tom Abeles, John Adams, Helen Baer, John Cairns (vice chair), Janis Clay (chair), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Lee Munnich, Paul Ostrow, Kevin Paap, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams.