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Equal Opportunity in Employment and Services

**Testimony of Sue B. Balcom
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ND Dept of Agriculture
SB 2231
Senate Political Subdivision committee
Red River Room
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Chairman Andrist and members of the Senate Political Subdivisions Committee, my name is Sue Balcom, the local foods marketing specialist for the ND Dept of Agriculture.

I am before you today on behalf of the Department of Agriculture in support of SB 2231 which would offer financial assistance to the North Dakota Department of Human Services to contract a provider for statewide charitable food distribution. The bill would also address gaps in services and other options for North Dakota's charitable emergency feeding network.

Hunger is an issue in North Dakota.

According to a report in August of 2008 analyzing the states charitable feeding network:

1 in 12 North Dakotans seek emergency food assistance each year.

Nearly half of those seeking help are children.

Statistics from the National Center for Children in Poverty state the federal poverty level for a family of four is \$21,200. In North Dakota 14 percent, or 19,879 children, live in families that make this amount or less. The national average is 18 percent. But research suggests that, on average, families need an income of about twice the federal poverty level to meet their basic needs.

As small towns continue to struggle to keep grocery stores open or to find volunteers to distribute food from local pantries staffed by an ever aging population, it has become imperative that we develop new ways to address hunger in our state.

Local food initiatives are just that – food produced locally. Rather than rely on trucking food great distances at the risk of losing more than just freshness, nutrition and fossil fuel, we need to begin using our agricultural resources and should be growing and eating more of our own food.

Local food initiatives in our communities, such as school and community garden programs, have been strongly encouraged by our department as a way to double consumption of fresh vegetables, as recommended by new dietary standards, and create the economic opportunity to encourage production on our family farms.

Bringing all counties up to a minimum service level would require a relatively small increase in food provided; meeting full service levels would require a 30 percent increase; while creating a hunger-free North Dakota would require almost doubling the current food resources to 9.1 million pounds. The goal is not just to feed people, but actually provide fresh and nutritious foods, as well as the recipes, cooking, gardening advice, canning skills and social interaction that will strengthen our communities and ultimately strengthen our state's population.

This bill could provide the key elements to reaching everyone who needs help, no matter what the distance.

Community connections must be made. In spite of the electronic communication we have through computers, cell phones and blackberries, our small towns, especially in the western portion of the state, are becoming farther and farther apart. That makes distribution of fresh food in a timely manner to these areas critical. We need to address this issue with new and innovative ideas.

There's also the issue of potential waste. Americans waste an estimated 27 percent of the food available for consumption, according to a government study – that works out to about a pound of food every day for every American.

If some of that food could be rescued before spoiling, and transported quickly to households, think of the potential to support a system of declining food pantry donations and increasing demand for groceries.

In light of ever increasing food costs America's Second Harvest, The Nation's Food Bank Network - a group of more than 200 food banks- reports that donations of food are down nine percent, but the number of people showing up for food has increased 20 percent. The group distributes more than two billion pounds of donated and recovered food and consumer products each year.

Because of these reasons, I urge you to give a "do pass" to SB 2231.

Thank you, Chairman Andrist and members of the Senate Political Subdivision Committee, for your time today. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them.