

COMMENTARIES

## *Counterpoint | Debate over Riverview expansion should center farmers' lived experiences*

Out here, agriculture is not an abstract policy debate. It is our livelihood, our community and our future.

**By Nate Hultgren**

Guest contributor(s) to the Minnesota Star Tribune

APRIL 7, 2026 AT 1:39PM



Farms like Riverview "create a reliable market for crops like corn silage and alfalfa. They support local jobs. They help sustain the businesses, schools and churches that make rural communities work. That is not theory. It is what I see in my own community," Nate Hultgren writes. (David Joles/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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Drive through much of rural Minnesota today and you will see both pride and pressure.

You will see well-kept farms, churches that have stood for generations and schools that still anchor small towns. You will also see communities working hard to hold on to the next generation and create opportunities for families to stay and build a life here.

That is why the recent commentary opposing the proposed West River Dairy expansion ("Minnesota must say no to this mega factory farm proposal," April 2) is frustrating to see. Written by a Minneapolis-based activist, it paints a picture of agriculture in our region that does not reflect my experience or the reality of how farming works here.

I am a farmer in western Minnesota. I grow crops, sell silage to Riverview LLP and use manure from their dairy as part of my nutrient management plan. My family lives here. We drink the water here. My kids go to school here.

Out here, agriculture is not an abstract policy debate. It is our livelihood, our community and our future.

Farms like Riverview are part of what is helping keep that future viable. They create a reliable market for crops like corn silage and alfalfa. They support local jobs. They help sustain the businesses, schools and churches that make rural communities work. That is not theory. It is what I see in my own community.

There is also a tendency to assume that larger agricultural operations must be harmful simply because of their size. That assumption overlooks how farming actually works today.

On my farm, manure from Riverview is a carefully managed nutrient resource. Before application, fields are soil tested, application rates are calculated, and timing and methods are guided by state requirements. These plans must meet Minnesota standards and are subject to review. Done correctly, this improves soil health, builds organic matter and reduces reliance on commercial fertilizer.

The same level of rigor applies to the proposed expansion itself. The West River Dairy project is not only undergoing environmental review, it will operate under an individual feedlot permit. That is more stringent than baseline rules and includes detailed, site-

specific requirements for how the dairy manages water, manure and environmental protections. It will be one of the most highly regulated dairy operations in the state.

That is an important fact that often gets lost in the broader debate.

None of this means questions should not be asked. They should. But those conversations should be grounded in facts and in an understanding of modern agriculture, not in oversimplified labels that distort how farming actually works.

It is also worth remembering that rural communities are not passive in this process. No one cares more about the future of these communities than the people who live here. We are the ones who live with the outcomes. We are the ones raising families here, building businesses here and working the land year after year.

From my perspective as a farmer, a neighbor and someone whose livelihood depends on this land, Riverview has been a professional partner and a good neighbor. The kind of agricultural partnerships this project represents are part of what keeps communities like ours strong.

The future of Minnesota agriculture will be shaped by the people who live and work on this land and are committed to sustaining it for the next generation.

From where I sit, that future includes partnerships like the one I have with Riverview, and projects like the proposed West River Dairy expansion that invest in our communities and help them grow.

*Nate Hultgren is a farmer from Raymond, Minn.*



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