

**Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 2237
to the House Committee on Appropriations
by Secretary of Agriculture Mike Beam
Kansas Department of Agriculture
February 27, 2025**

Chairman Waymaster and members of the committee: My name is Mike Beam, and I serve as the Secretary for the Kansas Department of Agriculture. I appreciate the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of House Bill 2237.

The Kansas Department of Agriculture supports HB 2237 as it gives state agencies an additional tool to help with employee retention and recruitment efforts and recognize those who go above and beyond to serve Kansas taxpayers and the agriculture industry.

KDA has struggled in filling vacant but funded staff positions over the past few years. In positions that are competitive in the marketplace, we have seen that the private sector or even a federal or local government entity typically can provide a higher base salary than the state agency. HB 2237 allows for KDA to become a more competitive employer for those who have an interest in public service but are presented with significantly different salary options when an offer is made.

For the sake of recruiting and retaining employees who could receive significantly higher wages by working for a non-state employer, we would like to highlight our challenges with hiring licensed professionals, primarily engineers, veterinarians, and lawyers. As an agency, we want to make sure that we can hire qualified professionals in our field offices throughout the state. Having these professionals on the ground is crucial to working on services such as interstate water issues, overseeing the safety of the state's inventory of water structures, and preventing outbreaks of disease in the animal agriculture industry. Similarly, as a regulatory agency, the agency is required to work on complex legal issues, and we try to do as much of that in-house as possible to limit costs for taxpayers.

When the agency is unable to hire for these roles, often the only option is to hire private firms to perform the same services. This requires the agency to pay a higher rate to complete our statutory functions than if we were to do the same work with state employees. Retention and recruiting bonuses will allow for these positions to be filled more quickly and for the agency to uphold its support to agriculture at a lower cost. Even with an increased recruiting and retention bonus, state employees are a more cost-efficient solution than it would be to hire private firms to do state work, which comes at a premium for taxpayer dollars.

The agency would also support increasing the cap on bonuses allowed to ensure that we can adequately recognize the sacrifices our staff has to make when responding to emergencies. Our employees are required to work outside of business hours, on holidays, and in severe weather

conditions. Over the past few months, for example, the agency's staff have been called on to respond to 10 outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza. Because these incidents were isolated to backyard flocks and smaller commercial gamebird producers, the agency has been able to respond to many of these incidents during regular working hours. However, if a larger outbreak were to occur with significant death loss across multiple premises, the response could last weeks if not months.

Other extraordinary situations that our staff may be called to respond to would be if there were significant flooding or wildland fire events requiring work by our water structures team. There could also be significant food safety outbreaks requiring our food safety and lodging team to respond outside of normal hours. By offering expanded authority to provide bonuses as proposed in HB 2237, the agency will have the ability to acknowledge and reward employees for the unique challenges involved in their work. After taxes are withdrawn from the current limit of \$3,500, this can significantly limit the ability to recognize our employees who go above and beyond to serve the food and agriculture industries.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2237. Please contact me if you have any questions.