

Good Afternoon.

It's great to be here this afternoon and see a sea of blue out in front of me. I want to congratulate all of you for showing dedication not only to your FFA chapter and the state organization, but to your own future.

FFA's mission is to help aid personal development, foster career success, and develop leadership among its members. From what I see looking around this room, I think that mission is being accomplished.

I'm told the theme of this convention is "*Ignite Your Potential.*" That's exactly what you are doing by participating in programs like FFA. You are the future leaders of Minnesota.

Just like the agricultural communities in other states and countries, our ag sector is going through some major changes. But keep in mind that agriculture is still one of the cornerstones of the state's economy.

Employment in agriculture and the food industry accounts for about 20 percent of all jobs in Minnesota and every agricultural production job helps create an additional three jobs in other parts of the economy.

And as you make your plans for the future, keep in mind that today more than ever, a career in agriculture does not necessarily mean becoming a farmer. Minnesota has close to 80,000 farmers, but there are many other jobs that will need to be filled in ag-related fields.

According to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, two thirds of all the state's agricultural jobs are off-farm—in processing, distribution, supply and service sectors.

That's not surprising when you stop and think about the many well-known ag-related businesses in this state such as General Mills, Cargill, Land O'Lakes and Hormel.

While there are great challenges that we face, the power of new thinking and the energy that your generation can only brighten the future.

Looking at the headlines and editorial pages of many farm publications, you read about problems.

Problems with the farm bill.

Problems with international trade disputes.

Problems among people who have different ideas of what agriculture should look like. It can get pretty upsetting at times.

You might even come away with the impression that there is little hope for the future of agriculture.

I couldn't disagree more.

Agriculture is going through a tremendous time of change because the world is shrinking and technology is advancing faster than ever. But these trends are affecting every other segment of the economy too. Change is a fact of life in the 21st century, whether we like it or not. Our responsibility is to find a way to make the most of this fact.

That's why one of the four main points of my administration's Big Plan has been to make Minnesota competitive on the world stage.

For agriculture, that has meant aggressively developing new trade relationships with promising markets such as Mexico, Japan and China. I have been to Mexico and Japan on trade development missions previously, and this June I will be going to China for a trade development mission that that country.

Our efforts have paid off already. In November 1999 we sealed a deal to export pork to Japan, and a few weeks ago, we announced a new deal to export Minnesota grown soybeans to the Mexican state of Jalisco.

The agricultural community will need strong, vibrant young leaders to help it thrive in this new world marketplace. That's where you come in.

The time and energy you give to FFA activities is an investment in your future. You, your families, and your communities will reap the benefits from that investment because you will develop new skills, experience and contacts that will help you be a leader in whatever field you choose.

You're giving yourself a head start on your career.

There's one challenge you will face that is only beginning to get attention, and that is the increasing gap between rural and urban Minnesota. In decades past, even those who'd lived in the cities all their lives often had cousins or uncles or brothers who farmed. That's no longer the case.

As the state becomes more urban, more Minnesotans will be less aware – and perhaps less interested - in farm issues and the realities of 21st century agriculture. The positive feelings people still have for farmers may not always be there in the future. In order for agriculture to remain visible and valuable to the rest of the state, it will be up to your generation to find new ways to bridge this urban/rural gap.



But I have great faith in the youth of our state. Your presence here today is proof that working together we can meet any challenge and that our state will continue to be an innovative leader in the world agricultural community.

Thank you.