

**Testimony of
Russell Redding, Secretary
Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
House and Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees
Joint Informational Meeting
Federal Farm Bill 2023
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Good morning Chairman Vogel, Chairwoman Schwank, Chairman Pashinski and Chairman Moul and members of both the House and Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees.

We appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Federal Farm Bill and what it means for Pennsylvania and its citizens. I think it's important to note this bill impacts all Pennsylvanians, not just those who are involved in production agriculture. This comprehensive legislation is our nation's largest statement on the critical importance of food and agriculture. The Federal Farm Bill covers 12 different titles and touches on every aspect of the industry and the support for our charitable food system. While these titles are distinct, the overall Farm Bill creates an interconnected roadmap for the nation's agriculture and food industries. The research supported by the Farm Bill drives innovation in the industry and protects our crops and livestock from emerging threats. It drives on-farm conservation, which improves overall farm productivity but has the co-equal benefit of protecting our environment. The charitable food programs created by the Farm Bill helps our most vulnerable, while equally creating market opportunities for our nations' farmers and food companies. Lastly, the Farm Bill shines a light on the needs of our rural communities, addressing critical investments in broadband, water and sewer infrastructure and health care.

The Farm Bill is a complicated document, and one that must balance the needs of agricultural interests from across the country. The Department's approach in its policy positions and advocacy work has been to make recommendations that reflect the diversity of Pennsylvania agriculture. We are grateful for the level of engagement that we have seen from our federal delegation and are especially thankful to have Sen. John Fetterman serving in the Senate on the Agriculture Committee. And we have a phenomenal champion for Pennsylvania agriculture in Congressman "GT" Thompson. He kicked off his tenure as chair of the House Agriculture Committee with a listening session at the Farm Show and has routinely reached out to seek our input and suggestions in the months that followed. We look forward to working with him, Senator Fetterman and the rest of our delegation on a Farm Bill that looks and feels like Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania has worked to put together our list of policy priorities for each area of the Farm Bill. These recommendations have been influenced by our staff who work routinely with programs and services created and funded through the Farm Bill. In addition, we sought a wide variety of opinions from stakeholders, including all of those who are speaking here today, to create a policy document that reflects the broad and diverse needs of Pennsylvania agriculture. We have presented these recommendations to our Congressional delegation and federal partners. I would like to focus my time on two areas our state government has a direct hand in either administering services or further directing producers to resources: conservation and nutrition.

CONSERVATION

Conservation funding in the Farm Bill is one of those areas that has the most direct, and often longest lasting, impacts on farms. Numerous conservation provisions are created, and allocated, in the Farm Bill, including the Environmental Quality Incentive Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program. These working lands programs are administered by USDA's National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). During the most recent Farm Bill, enacted in 2018, Pennsylvania was allocated more than \$167 million for the EQIP and CSP programs, resulting in a significant number of conservation practices being implemented on farms.

We are hypersensitive to the needs and challenges in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed as we work towards the goals laid out in the latest state-developed Watershed Implementation Plan. Pennsylvania farmers will be asked to do more to prevent nutrients from reaching local waterways. Several federal program target conservation and preservation work specifically in the Bay Watershed, resulting in \$109.6 million in federal funding to Pennsylvania during the most recent five-year Farm Bill. Our hope is this next Farm Bill will build on that investment by continuing to fund the Chesapeake Bay State's Partnership Initiative. An additional \$73.7 million per year would fully fund the federal share of conservation work recommended in the most recent Watershed Implementation Plan. Those types of federal investment will provide opportunities to leverage additional state and local matches that will result in more practices being placed on the ground throughout the watershed.

Many of the conservation practices that result in the long-term sustainability of agriculture rests on overall soil health. After all, agriculture relies on fertile topsoil to grow our crops and sustain livestock, so practices like no-till planting and cover crops have gone a long way to promote overall soil health in Pennsylvania. While those practices have widespread acceptance among Pennsylvania farmers there is still work for us to do. We support dedicated assistance to help states create soil health programs that provide for locally tailored solutions. We have seen the early success of the Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program (ACAP) due in part to its regional flexibility that recognizes the unique nature of our diverse agriculture and topography. There is value in providing states with funding for soil health programs, and assistance to train public and private sector staff to help with technical assistance

Right now, agriculture needs additional technical service providers that can take time to visit farms and help producers identify solutions to their conservation needs. Pennsylvania is supportive of bipartisan legislation introduced in the U.S. House and Senate that would establish a clear direction for private sector employees to serve as certified entities to approve conservation work. Further, we support the recreation of the Civilian Conservation Corps as Sen. Bob Casey and Congressman Dwight Evans have proposed. A reinvigorated program could be deployed on farms to help implement best management practices, like the construction of riparian buffers, and address other environmental challenges our state is facing such as acid mine drainage or plugging abandoned oil and gas wells. We hope that such an approach will inspire a new generation of conservationists who want to work to protect the environment and focus on helping farmers improve their stewardship.

NUTRITION

Nutrition funding makes up most of the Farm Bill spending – roughly 75-percent goes to help those who are facing difficult circumstances have adequate access to healthy and nutritious supplies of food. Programs like the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, (known in PA as the Senior Food Box Program), Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, (SFMNP) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) are authorized by the Farm Bill, and either receive dedicated Farm Bill funding or are funded through annual appropriations bills.

These programs are designed to aid families and individuals who are struggling with food access. In doing so, it also creates a market for U.S. food products to be directed into the charitable food system. Perhaps one of the best examples of that direct connection of farm product to the charitable food system is the TEFAP Farm to Food Bank Program. This program, authorized and funded in the last Farm Bill and modeled after the successful Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS), provides an avenue for farmers, producers, and processors to be reimbursed for surplus foods which are then channeled into the charitable food system for distribution to individuals in need.

Access to an adequate, consistent supply of food continues to be a significant concern for Pennsylvanians across the state. As many of you are aware, previous COVID programs provided additional emergency allotments for SNAP. Once that emergency allotment ended earlier this year, our partners in the charitable food system throughout the Commonwealth reported an average 10-percent increase in food distribution. In Pennsylvania, nearly 250,000 households with at least one senior living in the home saw a loss of an average of \$40 in SNAP benefits due to the end of the emergency allotment, and an estimated 5,000 to 20,000 households were disenrolled from SNAP altogether. Many continue to struggle with food security in this post-COVID economy.

You cannot have a charitable food system without a food system that is charitable. And indeed, the Commonwealth and its food and agricultural industry have been pioneers in supporting the state's charitable feeding system. Pennsylvania is one of a small number of states across the nation to provide state revenues for an emergency assistance food program – the Pennsylvania State Food Purchase Program (PASS) – reflecting the Commonwealth's determination to address problems related to nutrition and hunger. Further, state spending also supports the charitable nature of our agricultural industry by supporting the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System, providing reimbursement for the costs incurred by farmers in harvesting and delivering excess products to the charitable food system.

While Pennsylvania has made a decades-long commitment to supporting the food needs of our most vulnerable residents, the bulk of that assistance comes through the federal Farm Bill in the form of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

SNAP is the nation's first line of defense against hunger, and as such, should be strengthened and protected to ensure that it can continue providing needed benefits to the most vulnerable. Increased retail food prices have been driving demand at food banks over the past year, even before the end of SNAP Emergency Allotments. Pennsylvania is advocating for a federal Farm Bill that maintains existing SNAP funding, with no cuts, and provides affordable access to food. We are particularly sensitive to the needs of older adults currently living on a fixed income, and those who do not currently qualify for SNAP due to eligibility and enrollment barriers.

Currently, individuals enrolled in apprenticeship or subsidized employment programs have to make difficult choices of being involved in those workforce trainings or continuing to receive SNAP benefits. Those who are working to get back on their feet and taking advantage of new opportunities to better their circumstances through employment should not have to make those difficult choices between an opportunity for upward mobility or feeding their families. Pennsylvania believes SNAP should be adjusted so that participation in these types of workforce programs do not cause a loss of program eligibility.

Like other states, Pennsylvania relies on The Emergency Food Assistance Program, commonly known as TEFAP, to supply nutritious, high-quality USDA Foods to state charitable food networks, and makes those foods available to state distributing agencies, which in turn distribute the food to local organizations, such as soup kitchens and food pantries that directly serve the public. Pennsylvania also relies on TEFAP to provide administrative funding that helps to pay for the storage, transportation and distribution of USDA Foods to end users. There has been a marked increase in need for TEFAP foods since the pandemic and related economic issues started in 2020. Pennsylvania believes that mandatory food funding for TEFAP should be authorized at least at \$450 million per year in the next Farm Bill to respond to those actual demands, and to offset the increase in overall food costs. We are also asking Congress to allow states to prioritize projects for donated food or food purchased at low cost from local growers and producers. Lastly, we are hopeful that Congress will correct an administrative funding issue, allowing states to carry those funds for a two-year period, commensurate with the allocation for TEFAP food.

It's also important to note that programs like TEFAP and other food security programs run by USDA results in market opportunities for Pennsylvania farmers and food manufacturers. The value of USDA foods purchased for all federal nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch, TEFAP and others resulted in the purchase of 94.1 million pounds of food in Pennsylvania at the cost of \$99.3 million in fiscal year 2021. That included raw products like vegetables and meats, and other shelf-stable products. Our state ranks within the top five of states for the procurement of USDA foods. These charitable food purchases result in a real dollar value for our agriculture community.

We continue to see tremendous value in the Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Program which provides older adults with vouchers to purchase fresh, local, fruits and vegetables from farmers markets. In turn, this creates market opportunities for local growers who operate seasonal markets. Voucher amounts currently range from \$20 to \$50 a year. Our position is that increasing that funding to a minimum of \$35 and a maximum of \$85 will further encourage participation in the program and grow market opportunities.

WORKFORCE

We are also aware of the numerous concerns that our industry has over the workforce challenges currently impacting every facet of agriculture. Immigration reform for both seasonal and full-time agriculture needs are not likely going to be part of the Farm Bill process, but we still believe there are items that Congress can do to address agriculture's workforce needs.

First, we recommend the creation of an Agricultural Workforce Training and Apprenticeship program that would require the agriculture industry to partner with land grant colleges to develop an overall workforce pipeline. That pipeline must focus on technical and credential programs to solve agriculture's workforce challenges.

We also hope Congress looks at opportunities to address the shortage in livestock veterinarians. We see value in creating a mid-level licensed professional, similar to current health care delivery models that created a bridge between nurses and medical doctors. A similar mid-tier profession could be created between certified veterinary technicians and a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. In addition, we also believe that Pennsylvania could serve as a potential host for a pilot program to create a summer fellowship program where third and fourth-year students could apply through a federally funded program while working with a large animal veterinarian in the field. Along with paying a stipend for students, veterinarians could receive funding for their time in training students.

CONCLUSION

The conversations around the federal Farm Bill also help us drive our work as we look at needs the Department of Agriculture can fill through our Pennsylvania Farm Bill. We are proud of the fact that we are the only state in the country that has its own state-level Farm Bill. We look forward to working with our partners in the General Assembly on our existing Farm Bill programs and new ideas that may come to light as we look at a nation that has changed significantly since the last time Congress created a federal Farm Bill in 2018, and our Pennsylvania Farm Bill a year later. We look forward to continued dialogue with our federal, state, and stakeholder partners to ensure that everyone has a seat at the table of agriculture.