

Thank you leaders and members of the Senate and House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees. I'm honored to speak with you today.

[Pasa Sustainable Agriculture](http://pasafarming.org)¹ represents a network of 20,000 farms across the mid-Atlantic and Northeast US. Based in Pennsylvania, we collaborate with a wide range of farms through on-farm research, apprenticeships, and farmer-led educational events. No-till row crop farmers to pastured livestock farmers to organic vegetable farmers, and more, their nutrient-dense products are the foundation of a vibrant food system. We have farmers in their first few years, growing on a quarter acre in an urban setting and we have farmers of retirement age, growing on 1,400 acres in our most rural settings, and everyone in-between, but if you ask a Pasa farmer if they have an ongoing relationship with the US Department of Agriculture, the majority will say, "no". In addition, they tend to hold the belief that the federal Farm Bill doesn't really have relevance for them.

Data from the most recent agricultural census suggests that our farmer members are not an anomaly. 80% of Pennsylvania's farms are small to mid-size, so under 180 acres. These farms are mostly family-owned or individual proprietorships. We're talking about a group of people that employs thousands of hardworking farmworkers, stewards tens of thousands of acres, and feeds millions of people, not to mention serves as one of the largest potential assets we have in terms of climate preparedness. And yet, most do not see the USDA as a critical resource.

According to data from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Pennsylvania ranked 47th in the nation for percent of USDA NRCS EQIP awarded contracts, funding just under 20% of all applications in 2022. The influx of conservation dollars from the Inflation Reduction Act can begin to address the overwhelming demand for this program and its sister

¹ <http://pasafarming.org>

conservation programs, but only if those funds are not reallocated for other purposes which is very much under discussion right now. In a moment, I'll mention a handful of marker bills meant to ensure smallholder and diversified farms can equitably access their share.

The numbers of USDA service contracts awarded do not reflect the large subset of farmers who want to apply for contracts but don't for any number of reasons including the requirement that most farmers pay for the practice up front and get reimbursed later, the paperwork involved, or a lack of USDA technical service providers at the local level. The data is clear: small and mid-sized diversified farms are largely being left out of classic conservation programs.

The federal government, by way of the Farm Bill, has been putting its finger on the scale in support of large commodity farms for a long time. In acknowledging this, I am not trying to downplay the critical role that larger operations play in producing food, mitigating climate change, sustaining rural communities, and conserving our natural resources. But farm policy, much like farming practices, cannot be one-size-fits-all.

We have an opportunity with this Farm Bill to shift the balance and craft policies that celebrate the true diversity of farms and farmers in this country and in our Commonwealth. And, of course, we can't talk about the need for better access to USDA programs without discussing the discrimination faced by the Black and Indigenous producers and farmers of color whose innovative practices form the bedrock of sustainable agriculture. The Farm Bill has the potential to address these long-lingering inequities in government support through initiatives like the [“Supporting Urban and Innovative Farming” Act](#)² and the [“Justice for Black Farmers” Act](#)³.

²<https://www.fetterman.senate.gov/press-releases/fetterman-brown-lead-bill-investing-in-underserved-farmers-increasing-access-to-fresh-foods-in-urban-communities/>

³<https://www.booker.senate.gov/news/press/booker-leads-colleagues-in-reintroducing-the-justice-for-black-farmers-act>

Marker bills like the [“Local Farms and Food” Act](#)⁴ and the [“Small Farm Conservation” Act](#)⁵ work to increase access to EQIP funding and value-added producer grants through simplified applications, decreased cost-share requirements, and more robust technical assistance.

All six of the USDA [Value-Added Producer Grant recipients announced in 2023](#)⁶ are Pasa farmers—farmers who are growing their businesses in innovative and sustainable ways. But six farms is a tiny fraction of our farm community. Imagine the impact that dozens or even hundreds of small farms could have on our food system with increased funding for programs that fall under the Local Agriculture Market Program, or LAMP, umbrella or the Working Lands programs.

While direct loans and grants to farmers are essential, getting money into the hands of customers can also have a powerful multiplier effect. Investments in programs like SNAP, GusNIP, and the Farmers Market Nutrition Program directly benefit the farmers who depend on revenue from those sources to pay their bills.

The Pasa community is also energized by policy proposals that begin to address the two predominant threats to US agriculture: the aging farmer population and climate change. The [“Increasing Land Access, Securities, and Opportunities” Act](#)⁷ offers flexible, powerful support for community-led solutions to the land access, retention, and transition crisis. This funding would provide critical resources to a wide variety of eligible applicants, helping make innovative solutions a reality.

⁴ https://sustainableagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Local-Farms-and-Food-Act_Outline.pdf

⁵ <https://www.bennet.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2023/6/bennet-luj-n-brown-caraveo-introduce-bill-to-help-small-farms-access-federal-support>

⁶ <https://www.porh.psu.edu/usda-rural-development-announces-six-value-added-producer-grant-awards-in-pennsylvania/>

⁷ <https://farmland.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Summary-Land-Capital-Market-Access-Bill.pdf>

A whole host of Farm Bill proposals encourage soil health best practices, cover crop use, and agroforestry projects—a suite of tools that we know does double duty sequestering carbon and increasing community-wide climate resilience at the same time. And when extreme weather events overrun even the most resilient systems, small and diversified farms need better access to insurance products. Fortunately, there’s a marker bill for that, too: [“The Whole Farm Revenue Protection Program Improvement” Act](#)

⁸

Finally, I wanted to mention one last source of funding that comes out of the Inflation Reduction Act, provides a promising pathway to change these statistics, and serves as an example of what could be made possible, permanently in a future Farm Bill. As a recent recipient of a \$55M [USDA NRCS Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities grant](#)⁹, we at Pasa will be able to support our 20,000 farmers to install climate-smart practices like cover crops, transition to pasture, and agroforestry, with the parallel goal of connecting these farmers to federal services, many of which are tied to conservation goals that benefit all of us. But, once this public funding opportunity winds down, unless USDA can adapt and find ways to better connect with these often historically underserved farmers, we will find ourselves again without substantive service delivery available to the majority of small-holder and diversified farms.

These are just a sample of the marker bills and programs at stake this fall. From state soil health grant programs to organic research initiatives to farmer-to-farmer education, great ideas abound; we just need strong leaders who are willing to fight for them.

Thank you for your consideration and I welcome your questions.

⁸

<https://www.brown.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/sherrod-brown-legislation-expand-crop-insurance-small-farms#>

⁹ <https://www.usda.gov/climate-solutions/climate-smart-commodities/projects>