

Good morning to Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding, members of the Pennsylvania House and Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees, and other distinguished guests. It is my honor to provide testimony to this assembled group regarding the benefits to Pennsylvania agriculture from “5 Years of the PA State Farm Bill”.

My name is Beau Ramsburg, and I own and operate Rettland Farm LLC, a small livestock and poultry farm located in Gettysburg, PA.

Rettland Farm is also home to an on-farm, very small USDA inspected meat and poultry processing establishment. Since 2016, The Farm has processed livestock and poultry species raised on the farm; livestock and poultry purchased from other small farms in the Commonwealth for sale under our retail brand; and custom processes animals for other farms in the Commonwealth and mid-Atlantic region.

Our services include USDA inspected poultry slaughter and processing; fabrication and further processing of red meat species; and curing and smoking of meat and poultry products, helping to create additional value for our customers.

Rettland Farm LLC has been very fortunate to have been awarded 3 grants through the Very Small Meat and Poultry Processors Grant Program funded through the Pennsylvania Farm Bill since 2019.

These awarded grant funds, totaling nearly \$165,000 since 2019, have been a critical building block in helping us to expand our meat and poultry processing capacity. The funds, along with about \$80,000 of our own capital invested, have made it possible for us to serve a greater number of Pennsylvania farmers and improve worker safety in our meat processing establishment.

These funds were used in our establishment to:

- Install equipment and implement a smoked meat program
- Add equipment to expand poultry processing capacity
- Automate the labor intensive processes of sausage making, poultry slaughter, and poultry processing to increase throughput while reducing fatigue and risk of repetitive motion injury to workers;
- Increase our refrigerated storage and refrigerated transport capacity to allow us to store, chill, transport, and quickly freeze meats and poultry

### **Outcomes:**

Since installing our smokehouse in early 2021, we have met or exceeded our projected goal for pounds of meat processed with this equipment. For example, in 2023 we processed 13,352 lbs of raw meat into bacon products sourced from our own farmer suppliers, as well as our custom processing clients. This equates to approximately

\$67,500 in additional gross revenue for these farmers, because of this value-added processing. We expect these numbers to expand significantly in the coming years with the addition of new curing equipment purchased just last week, made possible through our most recent grant award in late 2023.

The addition of poultry slaughter and processing equipment in mid-2023 played an important role in increasing the number of birds processed compared to the prior year, while reducing worker fatigue and repetitive motion. We were able to harvest and process 5600 additional birds over 2022, even with only having the new equipment operational for the last 6 months of the year. These numbers will increase even more in 2024, with the equipment now being operational for the whole year.

Other equipment additions that have proven to be even more productive than predicted are those used for making meat and poultry sausages. As we wrote the grant proposal in 2019, we estimated that new equipment purchased through that grant would help us to produce 5000 lbs of sausage per year. In 2023, using equipment purchased through that grant and subsequent PA Farm Bill grants, we are producing about 1200 lbs of fresh and smoked sausage per week! The sausage program, implemented largely with VSMPP grant funds, has been our greatest success story to date.

Finally, the ability to add refrigeration space with grant funds has been critical to helping our business to expand. Commercial refrigeration equipment and installation isn't very flashy, or easily credited with dollars of revenue directly generated. However, it is a must-have in a meat processing establishment. It is also quite expensive, and the cost for its implementation isn't easily budgeted for nor recovered quickly through pounds of meat sold or processed. Through the assistance of grant funds, we have been able to add approximately 6000 cubic feet of this critical infrastructure to our establishment.

### **Other Beneficiaries:**

While our meat processing establishment has been the first beneficiary as the direct recipients of these grant funds since 2019, other individuals and businesses in the Commonwealth have also seen benefits as well.

One of the greatest additional beneficiaries are other small farmers in the Commonwealth that we purchase animals from, or provide processing services to. In 2023, we purchased livestock and poultry from 11 small independent Pennsylvania farmers, and custom processed meat and poultry for approximately 60 other farms in the state and region.

We are currently providing living wage jobs to 10 full-time meat processing employees, adding to our community's economy, up from about 4 full time employees in 2019. Some employees also directly benefit from lower risk of injury resulting from the use of the automated tools.

We have also prioritized Pennsylvania companies when purchasing equipment using grant funds, when feasible. For example, with our most recent grant award in 2023, a majority of the costs (61%) proposed in the project will be paid to Pennsylvania based vendors or will use Pennsylvania contractors to install equipment, benefiting these businesses and their local communities as well.

**In Conclusion:**

As I hope my testimony has demonstrated, the Very Small Meat and Poultry Processors grant program has been crucial to expanding our meat processing business, and helping us to serve greater numbers of small, independent farmers in the Commonwealth. We have shown that this grant program reaches beyond the direct recipients of the funds, benefitting other farms, businesses, and individuals working in the agricultural sector in Pennsylvania. For these reasons, I encourage you to continue to adequately support this worthwhile program.

Thank you for your time, and for your past and future support of the Pennsylvania Farm Bill, and the Very Small Meat and Poultry Processors Grant Program.

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