

Testimony Regarding Impact of the PA Farm Bill  
Joint Hearing of the House Senate Agricultural and Rural Affairs  
Committees  
January 10, 2023



Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to share about the impact of the Pennsylvania Farm Bill to our farm and organization - and thank each of you for all the work you are currently doing to support agriculture in Pennsylvania now and in the future. My name is Heidi Witmer, and I am a proud Pennsylvanian and a vegetable farmer in Perry County. I am also the Founder and Executive Director of the LEAF Project, a nonprofit organization which employs youth, ages 14-18 from Cumberland, Dauphin, Perry, and Adams Counties, in positions of responsibility while feeding our community.

Our organization has benefited from the PA Farm Bill in three different ways - and to explain that I first need to share a little bit about what we do. Along with a network of farmers and educators, I founded LEAF in 2013 to address two needs in my community: the urgent need for more farmers and the need for meaningful youth employment opportunities. As a farmer, I had experienced both the fulfillment farming can bring as well as the profound need for more skilled vegetable growers in our region. As an educator, I was frustrated by the common back to school assessment of what youth have lost versus how they have grown. LEAF created an opportunity for youth to experience their impact at first during the summer season, and then grew into a year round program with farming, culinary, and outreach components. As LEAF has grown, we have also realized another impact of this model is its ability to bring youth together from diverse backgrounds to work toward the common goal of building a food system that works for us all and how that work can spur civic engagement.

No one forgets their first job or the first time they knew that their work mattered. Employment at LEAF is highly competitive and purposefully so. Annually, we receive more than 4x the applications we can employ, demonstrating the attractiveness of this program. Like any farm business, we do have a maximum capacity of youth we can hire, which ensures we have the workforce needed to run the farm, that our youth benefit from the direct training opportunities, and that we preserve the quality of our programming. Our model is intensive and focuses on investing in each young person so that they can make a big impact in their own life and communities right now as well as invest in their future. Each year we employ 25-30 teenagers, beginning as an 8 week summer job with opportunity to advance into year round employment on the farm, in the kitchen, and in the community during the school year on evenings and weekends, and eventually being promoted into positions of increased responsibility and compensation managing LEAF's farming and food ventures over the course of 3-4 years. LEAF

is also proud to host the Diversified Vegetable Pre-Apprenticeship Program, a farmer training program in all aspects of specialty crop production from planning to implementation to analysis. Youth complete their time with LEAF much more aware of their unique passions and talents, opportunities for them in the food system, and much more connected to the food they eat, the land on which it grows, and to each other. Since 2013, LEAF has employed more than 150 youth, who have completed more than 72,000 hours preparing the soil, planting, cultivating, harvesting, marketing, distributing, cooking, preserving specialty crops, and who have impacted more than 26,000 community members through access to local food, backyard gardening support programs, and hands-on engagement at our farm and local markets. LEAF invests in youth so they can invest both in their future and our community.

Now I'd like to focus on how the Pennsylvania Farm Bill has impacted LEAF. LEAF has received funding for three years through the Agriculture and Youth Grant Program. This funding has for 30 youth per year to learn how to farm, as well as transition our farm to a no-till management system. Through the Farm to School funding, and in partnership with West Perry School District, Newport School District, Carlisle Area School District, and East Pennsboro Area School District, LEAF has also developed an innovative curriculum involving classroom resources, on-farm workshops, and ongoing relationships that have brought more than 600 school students to the farm. Finally, LEAF is in the final stages of completing a profitability and venture analysis grant through the Farm Vitality Grant Program that allows us to customize and tailor our work to most effectively meet the needs of our community. If I had to define a theme of the impact of the PA Farm Bill to our organization, I would say that theme is about access. We are accustomed to thinking about access in the food system as the immediate need for people to secure their next meal. I would argue that there is an equally important issue with access in our food system: and that is who sees themselves as belonging in agriculture and as future leaders in our food system.

I would like to share the story of one of our alumni, Dailah Mial. When I first met Dailah in her interview, it was clear that she could light up a room. At 14, she had already distinguished herself as a skilled dancer and singer, but was feeling unmotivated by a future in those pursuits. One of the gifts of my job is that I get to see young people discover their talents and catch themselves being good at skills - and this was true with Dailah. Over her four years with LEAF, she excelled in the technical skills of vegetable production, and brought the literal fruits of her labor to her home, where they transformed the food choices she and her family made. She applied for a leadership position on our farm team and eventually was promoted to the Farm Lead role. As the Farm Lead, Dailah was responsible for managing the youth crew to harvest, wash, and pack farm share boxes going to more than 100 families each week, as well as the most technical skills on the farm such as greenhouse and pest management. In talking with Dailah before she went on to pursue a degree in agriculture at Warren Wilson College and eventually her ambition to start her own farm, this is what she had to share,

“LEAF does something uncommon in other businesses and organizations by believing in, and relying on, the power of youth. Kids have unbelievable strength in both mind and body, but many young people are unaware because we never have a reason to

access these parts of ourselves . . . I look at my personal growth as the development from being a farm worker to becoming a farmer. The transition from farmworker to farmer involves gaining an awareness of how the farm works and what it needs, being able to partner the youths' abilities with different tasks in a way that encourages the growth of them both, and then leading them efficiently to get that task completed."

LEAF is profoundly grateful for the investments made in our organization through the PA Farm Bill because it has enabled us to recruit youth from all backgrounds to become a meaningful part of our local food system. And this work is more important than ever. According to the 2021 Economic Impact of Agriculture in Pennsylvania Report, commissioned by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, "workforce development in agriculture must be a priority." The report also notes that apprenticeship programs are one of the most impactful ways to do this essential work.

In our experience, agricultural apprenticeship training requires three expensive requirements: an existing and well run operation, educators skilled both in the craft they teach as well as the craft of education itself, and a significant investment in each person trained. The Youth and Agricultural Grant Program is an important step toward investing in our future agricultural workforce. With the support of this grant program over the past three years, LEAF has trained 40 youth in the Diversified Vegetable Pre-Apprenticeship Program. We estimate the programmatic costs of implementing the pre-apprenticeship to be \$3000-\$4000 per pre-apprentice per year, beyond the ongoing costs of running our vegetable operation.

If there was one way the Youth and Agriculture Grant program could be improved it would be to increase award amounts and allowable uses that could be used in training young farmers. One of the biggest challenges we face in running a high impact program is retaining the talented staff and meeting competitive wages for youth employees. So one way to responsibly maximize the investment of taxpayer dollars is to increase the maximum award per organization and include youth compensation as an allowable cost in the grant program.

Thank you so much for your time, your thoughtful consideration, and your ongoing work. I am happy to answer any questions you may have now or in the future. Thank you again.

Growing Together,



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Executive Director & Founder  
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