

Written Statement of Mr. Christian Good, Owner

Christian Good Farms

Macon, Mississippi

**To the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Subcommittee on
Commodities, Risk Management, & Trade of the
United States Senate**

**U.S. Senator Tina Smith, Chair
U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith, Ranking Member**

Pathways to Farming: Helping the Next Generation of Farmers

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Madam Chair, Ranking Member Hyde-Smith, and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for calling this hearing today to discuss this important topic and for allowing me to testify. My name is Christian Good, and I am the owner and operator of Christian Good Farms in Macon, Mississippi.

Since my childhood, I have always been involved in our family farm in Noxubee County, MS, raising corn, soybeans, cotton, beef cattle, and catfish. After graduating high school, I went to Mississippi State University to get my Bachelor of Science in Agribusiness, with minors in Business Administration and Economics to better learn how to steward our land and manage our operation. Although I grew up in agriculture, I established my own operation shortly after graduating college. In 2020, my wife Laura and I had the opportunity to purchase our first farmland tract of around 125 acres with financing through the Farm Credit System. We have expanded to over 300 acres of corn and soybean production through long-term land leases.

My passion for agriculture extends beyond my farm, and I have been honored to be an advocate for our industry on the Mississippi Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Ranchers Leadership Committee, American Soybean Association Young Leader Program, the Thad Cochran Agricultural Leadership Program, and recently, a trade delegate to Panama & Colombia with the United Soybean Board.

General Economic Challenges in Agriculture:

As much as farming is in my heritage, farming in today's overall economic environment poses some real challenges for all farmers, both beginning and experienced. My fellow Mississippi farmers are facing one of the most difficult years in quite some time.

- First and foremost, our operating costs are at an all-time high. Inflated costs for seed, fertilizer, fuel, technology, equipment, and parts/repair costs continue to erode the profit headwinds for producers both young and old. Most farmers in our community made one of the best crops they have ever produced in 2023 and due to these record input costs, many still lost money.
- Second, the markets for the commodities that my farm produces (corn and soybeans) are currently in a significant price downturn, yet are above the statutory reference prices established in the 2018 Farm Bill. In just two years, we have seen the market price for corn drop more than \$2.40 per bushel, or roughly 35%. The same can be said for the soybean market, which has seen a \$2.75 per bushel decline, or roughly an 18% decline.
- A third economic challenge that all of us are facing is the rising level of interest rates on our farm operating loans. Just 4 years ago, interest rates on farmland real estate loans and farm production loans were between 3 to 4 percent. Now, the same interest rates stand between 8 and 9 percent, more than doubling the cost of borrowing for agricultural producers. The current interest rate environment is a substantial roadblock to many producers to expand their operation as needed and is certainly a challenge to many young and beginning farmers and ranchers like myself.

- And finally, as we kick off the 2024 crop season, the lack of meaningful safety net that our current farm bill provides is a real concern for farmers in my community. Our farm generally participates in the Price Loss Coverage (PLC) program provided by the USDA Farm Service Agency, designed to provide a price floor that we receive. The statutory reference prices in the 2018 farm bill are so outdated that I can confidently say that if we were to receive those prices for corn (at \$3.70 per bushel) and soybeans (at \$8.40 per bushel), my farm and my family's farm would be out of business.

I highlight these challenges to provide some context into the importance of Congress passing a strong farm bill in 2024 for the future of all farmers, especially those beginning young farmers.

Challenges & Recommendations Specific to Young & Beginning Farmer Program:

I'd now like to give you my perspective of some of the numerous challenges that young and beginning farmers face in my state with farm bill programs and provide you with some recommendations to address some of these concerns.

- Base Acres & Price Loss Coverage (PLC): One challenge on my farm is having an adequate amount of base acres to allow me to enroll in the FSA Price Loss Coverage Option program or other Title I risk management programs. My farm is roughly two-thirds under based. My recommendation would be to devise some way for young producers to build base without adopting policy for a mandatory base update. The House Agriculture Committee just recently marked up a farm bill provision that will allow producers a one-time option of building base on their current farming operation. For young farmers, this change would be monumental. Additionally, the House bill makes significant adjustments to the statutory reference prices for most commodities, bringing them more in line with today's market situation.
- Farm Service Agency Loan Programs: Many young and beginning farmers in my state utilize the Farm Service Agency loan programs. These programs are designed to assist young producers with limited resources and assets to get started farming. My experience and that of others in my community has been that these programs are overly cumbersome, complicated, and require too much time to complete an application. My recommendation would be to simplify and streamline the application process. Additionally, the direct and guaranteed loan limits should certainly be raised. The bipartisan PACE act, introduced by Senators Klobuchar and Hoeven, makes sweeping adjustments to these USDA direct and guaranteed loan programs to make them more effective and responsive to farmers and ranchers.
- Strengthening Risk Management Programs: Crop insurance is a vital tool used by young farmers and ranchers, but the premium cost for adequate coverage is a real challenge for young farmers. The bipartisan Crop Insurance for Future Farmers Act of 2023, introduced by Senators Klobuchar and Thune, extends the eligibility period from 5 years to 10 years for beginning young farmers and ranchers, thus lowering their costs for crop insurance coverage.

- Access to Natural Resources Conservation Service Programs: Another major concern of mine is access to conservation programs. Passed in 2022, the Inflation Reduction Act added some \$18 billion of funding for USDA conservation programs. However, despite this monumental boost in funding, farmers in my hometown are still having issues gaining access to these important programs. Farmers support voluntary and incentive-based conservation funding, but many are concerned that these programs will come with too many strings attached that will make them harder to operate. To support both young and experienced farmers and conserve our land, a new farm bill needs to ensure continued access to voluntary conservation programs and streamline the enrollment processes.
- Precision Agriculture: The last concern that I'd like to bring before you today is the need for broadband in rural agricultural lands. Many times the equipment that we purchase is loaded with a tremendous amount of technology that will make us more efficient and better stewards of the land, but without connectivity covering rural lands, this technology is deemed useless. The bipartisan Last Acre Act, introduced by Senators Deb Fischer and Ben Lujan, would create a new Last Acre Program at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Office of Rural Development aiming to expand network connectivity across farmland and rangeland. This legislation would bring about some common sense policy to make sure that farm and ranch lands are not left out as we connect America.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. In my view, the most important thing Congress can do to help the next generation of farmers is to pass a robust farm bill that strengthens the farm safety net and improves access to credit, risk management tools, and voluntary conservation programs. I look forward to working with you to create a strong farm bill that provides sound policy for young and beginning farmers like me and I stand ready to answer any questions that you may have.