

Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery

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U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

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Again, good morning and thank you all for being here as we continue our hearings on the 2012 Farm Bill.

Today's hearing focuses on our efforts around rural development, bio-based manufacturing, and energy – all of which involve policies that help businesses create jobs in rural America and new market opportunities for farmers. As I've said many times before, the Farm Bill is a Jobs Bill, and that is why it's so critical that we pass a bill this Spring – a sentiment we heard this week from more than 80 farm groups. I couldn't agree more.

I count myself lucky to have grown up in the small town of Clare, Michigan, and preserving our rural way of life is something that's near and dear to my heart. This can mean helping small towns build a safe drinking water system or affordable broadband Internet service, or it can come in the form of streamlined programs that are more accessible for the people who use them. Cutting red tape and making programs more efficient will be a priority as we look at all titles of the Farm Bill, particularly so in the Rural Development Title.

Especially with our current budget pressures, we need to think strategically about the best way to achieve long-term economic growth in rural America. One of the most effective things we can do is to encourage leaders to work together on regional economic strategies, allowing them to create job opportunities that are more likely to stay in their towns and regions.

Bio-based manufacturing is a great example of new opportunities in rural America through innovative businesses that create good jobs. The economic benefit is twofold: new markets for the farms and new jobs and opportunities in town. According to a recent Department of Agriculture study, the bio-based plastic and chemical products industry could create over 100,000 American jobs – and many in rural America. Biomass is another critical component of the bio-economy. These companies develop new uses for wood fiber and other forestry products and clean, American-grown energy.

Farm Bill Energy Programs promote innovation by entrepreneurs and businesses small and large. Secretary Vilsack and I got a chance to see this first-hand last August at the Pure Michigan 400 NASCAR race, where all of the cars are powered using American-made biofuels. But the energy title isn't just about next generation of biofuels – the most popular program is the Rural Energy for America Program, which helps producers reduce their energy costs through renewable or efficiency measures – and we know this has created or saved more than 14,000 rural jobs.

This weekend, we remembered the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, who, 150 years ago this year created the Department of Agriculture. He called it the "People's Department." It's only fitting that today's hearing focuses on the millions of people whose livelihoods depend on the health of rural economies all across the country.

I want to thank all of our panelists for being here today, and I now turn it over to Ranking Member Roberts for his opening statement.