

**Testimony of Governor Sonny Perdue
U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Nominee
before the
United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
March 23, 2017**

Good Morning Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, and distinguished Members of the Committee. It is an honor to be with you today as the President's nominee to serve as our nation's 31st Secretary of Agriculture. I know from visiting with you in your offices, there was some anxiety over whether there would be a Secretary of Agriculture nominee, but I must say with all humility I can muster, I think the president saved the best for last.

I'd like to thank each of you for making time to meet individually with me over the last few weeks to discuss the current state of our agricultural community and the issues we will face in the future. I hope and trust that these meetings will not just be introductory episodes, but ongoing opportunities to listen and learn from one another. And, I'd also like to thank each of you for the opportunity to be here today to answer all your questions as you consider my nomination and carry out the Senate's very important constitutional role in this confirmation process.

I think it is altogether fitting and proper that this Committee convenes this hearing

during the same week we celebrate National Agriculture Week. I hope that, by working together, we can continue our nation's agricultural preeminence, building the innovative progress of years gone by and growing to meet the needs and demands of customers and consumers here in America and around the world.

However, before I continue and address my priorities, I would like to take a moment and introduce my family members who are here with me today. I'm accompanied by my lovely wife, Mary. I had no idea, when we married 44 years ago, I was marrying such a prolific grandmother. As you can see, seated with Mary are our four children, their spouses, and 12 of our 14 grandchildren, all of whom are more familiar with my being called Big buddy, rather than any other titles I've had. I'm also pleased and frankly humbled, after seven years, to have over 40 of my former staff present, who labored side-by-side with me in serving the state and the people of Georgia.

You've all read my bio and poured over my personal and professional history, but if you'll indulge me, I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself.

As a youngster growing up on a dairy and diversified row crop farm in a rural area

of Georgia I never fully realized that the blessings of purposeful, meaningful work would serve me as well as they have in life. When I was a young boy feeding the calves and plowing the fields, I was an integral part of the workforce there on my father's farm.

My mother was an English teacher for 42 years, so I benefitted from her teachings as well ... not just by her raising me with the beliefs I hold so dear to my heart, but being an English teacher, she even made sure I knew all about dangling participles.

It was a great life. I had a blessed upbringing with wonderful memories. My favorite hobbies as a youngster were training bird dogs, riding my horse Trigger, and playing Little League baseball. Even as a youngster, I was determined and goal-oriented. Early on, I set my heart on becoming a veterinarian, so, after high school, I enrolled at the University of Georgia, where I also walked on to play football for the UGA Bulldogs. Play is probably not the operative word, but I was on the team! Realizing that my future was not on the football field, I decided to apply myself to my studies.

As I entered Veterinary school in 1967, Viet Nam was roiling, so I signed up for an

early commissioning program in the U.S. Air Force. As I finished my veterinary education in 1971, I began to fulfil the active duty service to which I had agreed. I was assigned to Columbus, Ohio as a base veterinarian, whose primary responsibilities were food safety, public health, and sanitation.

Following completion of my active duty commitment, I joined a small veterinary practice in Raleigh, North Carolina. I soon realized, even though our practice was thriving, that I missed the farm and my former agricultural way of life. So, in 1976, Mary and I and our two small girls moved back home where I partnered with my brother-in-law to build a grain elevator in my home county, which didn't yet have one. Sadly, he passed away in January of 1980 at the age of 43.

I've been in agribusiness since 1977. I am the founder and operator of three agribusiness and transportation firms serving farmers across the Southeastern United States.

Farming and farmers have been my life ever since. I have lived and breathed the exhilaration of a great crop and the despair and devastation of a drought. I learned by experience what my father had told me as a child, "If you take care of the land,

the land will take care of you”.

Let's fast forward to what you're probably more interested in, my years as a public servant. I want to be clear. Growing up, I wasn't one of those 16-year-olds who shook the hand of a president and was inspired to run for office. I was always tuned into current events, but I had no early interest in elected politics. I did understand we all have civic rent, so I agreed to chair our local planning and zoning commission.

After 10 years, a State Senate seat became open and I was asked to run for the seat. I initially declined but a pre-planned family trip to Williamsburg, Virginia changed my mind after observing the founder's goals of citizen engagement.

In 1990, the people of District 18 elected me to serve as a member of the Georgia State Senate. I served for 11 years and during my tenure, was elected by my colleagues to be Senate President pro Tem, the pinnacle of leadership in that body, from 1996 until 1998. You've probably heard, and it's interesting to note, that I served both as a Democrat and as a Republican while in the Georgia State Senate.

In 2002, I was elected the first Republican Governor of Georgia in more than 130 years. I assumed that office, believing that it was a big job, not a position. Our team worked diligently for eight years, striving to make Georgia the best managed state in the nation. As you remember, the period from 2003 to 2011, were not the best economic times for our nation. But, we learned, with the help of a joyful state workforce, we could continue to provide value to the citizens of Georgia, even in times of extreme budget pressures.

Even though Georgia may not compare to some of your states in some agricultural sectors, I am still proud to come from a state whose number one economic driver is agriculture. In Georgia, agriculture is one area where Democrats and Republicans consistently reached across the aisle and work together.

It's important to note that the makeup of this Committee speaks directly to the size, reach and diversity of America's agricultural sector and that reaching across the aisle is common practice within this Committee, where partisanship doesn't get in the way of good solutions for American farmers, ranchers, and consumers. And to that end, if confirmed as the Secretary of Agriculture, I look forward to working with you ... each of you ... to find solutions to the challenges confronting

American Agriculture.

Though I have a lifetime of experience with farming and agribusiness, I appreciate that the Department of Agriculture touches the lives of all Americans in many ways that go beyond farming itself, including, in a small way, improving the lives of the “least of these”.

As I answer your questions today, know that I approach this opportunity as I did when I was Governor. This is a big job with enormous responsibility, not just a position. Whether it’s communicating a vision for USDA, managing competing policy priorities within the Department and Agencies, or influencing the Farm Bill or budget discussions, I will dedicate my time as I said to each of you in our personal meetings ... through open, honest, and efficient communication.

If I am honored with Senate confirmation, I will work tirelessly to advance four primary goals. And each of those goals is focused on an important constituency, the stakeholders of American agriculture.

First, I will maximize the ability of the men and women of America’s agriculture

and agribusiness sector to create jobs ... to produce and sell the foods and fiber that feed and clothe the world ... and to reap the earned reward of their labor. We want to remove every obstacle, and give them every opportunity to prosper.

Second, for the American taxpayers – our customers – I will prioritize customer service every day. They expect, and have every right to demand, that we conduct the people's business efficiently, effectively, and with the utmost integrity.

Third, as our taxpayers are also consumers, they expect a safe and secure food supply and USDA will continue to serve in the critical role of ensuring the food we put on the table to feed our families meets the strict safety standards we've established.

I will never forget that we're the fortunate beneficiaries of past generations, who put a premium on smart stewardship, protecting, preserving, and entrusting us with those valuable resources.

And fourth ... American agricultural bounty comes directly from the land. And today, those land resources sustain more than 320 million Americans and countless

millions more around the globe. My father's words still ring in my ears, "Son, if you take care of the land, it will take care of you. Owned or rented, we're all stewards, and our responsibility is to leave it better than we found it".

Should I be confirmed as Secretary of Agriculture, we will safeguard that trust, maintaining always our responsibility as good stewards. That means supporting private landowners in their conservation efforts ... and managing the natural resources entrusted directly to the Department – including our National Forests – with sharp focus on renewability, sustainability, and most effective use. We will face the greatest challenges facing the agricultural industry and rural America while collaborating to make opportunities for the future.

Thank you for your time this morning. Rest assured that, if confirmed, I look forward to working with you and the dedicated men and women of the USDA who are committed to serving The People's Department.

I look forward to answering your questions.