

Testimony of Stephen L. Censky
U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Nominee
before the
United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
September 19, 2017

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be Deputy Secretary of Agriculture. I want to express my appreciation to the President and to Secretary Perdue for their support and confidence. I am deeply humbled by this opportunity to make a positive difference for rural America, our farmers and ranchers, and all Americans who rely on the bounty, safety, and sustainability of our farms, ranches, and forests.

I also want to thank my former colleague from Senator Jim Abdnor's office – and now your colleague – Senator John Thune for his very kind introduction. Senator Abdnor gave both John and I our starts in public service, taught us the value such service can have to positively impact our Nation, and instilled in us the need to always treat all people with the respect and dignity they deserve. Senator Jim set a high bar through his own life and actions, and it is a code I strive to live by each day.

With me today is my wife of 25 years and best friend, Carmen, along with my daughters Abigail and Emma who both are attending college. They are my biggest champions and sources of sound advice. Often times solicited but even when not! I'd also like to call out my sister and her husband, my mother-in-law and father-in-law, and my sister-in-law and niece who always give me love and strength. Finally, I'd like to recognize family, friends, colleagues as well as current and past American Soybean Association leaders who are either in the room or watching via internet. As they might say more in Sonny Perdue's rather than my neck of the woods, I appreciate "all y'all's" support.

I'm proud to say that I was born and raised on a farm in near Jackson, Minnesota. My dad, Harry, was a farmer. He grew soybeans, corn, and alfalfa. Like many farms of the era, we also had a small diversified livestock operation that included beef cattle, hogs,

sheep, chickens, ducks, and geese. My sister, Jolene, and I grew up doing chores every day, collecting eggs, riding ponies and horses, showing all species of livestock, entering all manners of projects in both 4-H and FFA and, of course, walking soybean fields during the summer to pull weeds. My mother, Gladys, worked as a reporter for the local weekly newspaper and took the greatest joy in writing feature stories about rural life. Both my parents leaned strongly to the Democrat Farmer Labor (DFL) side of the political spectrum, but nevertheless were very proud of my work for farmers and ranchers under Republican Senator Jim Abdnor as well as in the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush Administrations. Although they both have passed, I know they are looking down and smiling today.

With this in mind, I'm glad that agricultural issues usually don't split along strictly party lines. I believe this Committee should be proud of its bipartisan approach on the farm bill, trade, conservation, forestry, global development, food safety and nutrition, and other issues important to our Nation. During the 23 years I've served as a leader of the American Soybean Association, we have also worked on a bipartisan basis. If I am confirmed as Deputy Secretary by this Committee and the Senate, you have my assurance that I will always endeavor to be open and responsive to all points of view.

When Secretary Perdue asked me to be his Deputy at USDA, he told me about a restaurant sign he had seen that he thought had particular meaning for our potential service at the "People's Department." It said, "Feed People and Do the Right Thing." I can't think of a more fitting motto for top leaders of USDA to live by. If confirmed, you have my commitment to work tirelessly with Secretary Perdue, the Administration, your Committee, the Congress, and with stakeholders to "Feed People and Do the Right Thing."

In my teens, I served as Minnesota State 4-H President, and then in college at South Dakota State University, I served as student association vice president. These experiences helped build my leadership skills and taught me the value of service to others. In college, I participated in the National Student Exchange Program and went to

school for a semester at California State University in Chico where, as a farm kid from the Midwest, I thrived on the diversity I encountered there. After graduation from college I participated in the International Four-H Youth Exchange (IFYE) program sponsored by the National 4-H Council, where I lived for nine months in the countryside and taught English to agricultural researchers in the People's Republic of China. I also studied in Australia while on a Rotary International Postgraduate scholarship and received a Postgraduate Diploma in Agricultural Science from the University of Melbourne.

I mention these experiences because I hope they give you a better understanding of my background and the outlook I would bring to the position of Deputy Secretary, if confirmed. These experiences shaped me and gave me an early appreciation of the diversity of agriculture and those who depend on it, as well as for America's leadership role in the world.

I spoke earlier about my service as Legislative Assistant to Senator Abdnor, where I handled agricultural and transportation legislation. I later served in the Reagan Administration as Assistant to Administrator Patrick Boyle at the Agricultural Marketing Service, working on marketing orders, grading programs, and research and promotion programs funded by farmers and industry. Then in the George H.W. Bush Administration, I served as Assistant to the Undersecretary of what then was called International Affairs and Commodity Programs. In that capacity, I assisted Undersecretary Dick Crowder, Deputy Undersecretary John Campbell, and then Deputy Undersecretary Ann Veneman in managing and overseeing USDA's farm, commodity, market development, export assistance, and trade programs. We also coordinated the Administration's proposals for the 1990 Farm Bill, and then worked to implement the final law that was written by Congress. As this Committee works in coming months to draft and pass a 2018 Farm Bill, Secretary Perdue has pledged to make the resources of the Department available to assist Congress, and then to move expeditiously to implement the law passed by Congress. If confirmed, I look forward to assisting Secretary Perdue and you in that important work.

I also served as Associate Administrator and then Acting Administrator of USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) in the George H. W. Bush Administration. There I managed and directed that agency's worldwide staff, export assistance and market development programs, international development activities, and involvement in trade negotiations. These experiences at FAS have deeply influenced the rest of my career as I've continued to be highly involved in trade and market development issues. I've spent the last 23 years with the American Soybean Association, the first two as Director of International Marketing, and the last 21 as CEO. With over 60% of the U.S. soybean crop destined for overseas markets, I know that soybean farmers depend on trade in order to be profitable, just as do producers of many, many other crops and livestock products. I have witnessed how trade agreements with other countries have benefited farmers and expanded U.S. exports by a larger percentage than exports to non-partners. I have seen how trade barriers, whether they be tariffs or illegitimate phytosanitary restrictions, can stifle exports, and how the removal of such barriers can spur U.S. exports. You've already seen how Secretary Perdue is a tireless advocate within the Administration for fair trade for America's farmers and ranchers. If confirmed, I, too, promise to be a fierce advocate for U.S. export interests.

As CEO of ASA, I've also had the opportunity to engage on many other issues important to agricultural producers, including crop insurance, farm programs, conservation initiatives, research, biofuels and other bio-based products, biotechnology, crop protection products, agricultural research, and many others. While I don't claim to be an expert on any issue, I believe my familiarity with the range of issues which USDA must address would allow me, if confirmed, to assist Secretary Perdue well and make a positive difference for all the people that USDA serves.

In his testimony before this Committee for his confirmation hearing, then Secretary-designate Perdue laid out his top four goals for the Department and the important constituencies it serves. My job as Deputy Secretary, if confirmed, will be to assist the Secretary in achieving those goals, but I do want to note that I, too, am deeply

passionate about those goals. In short, they are to:

1. Maximize the ability of the men and women of America's agriculture and agribusiness sector to create jobs -- remove every obstacle and give them the opportunity to prosper.
2. Prioritize customer service every day -- conduct the people's business efficiently, effectively, and with utmost integrity.
3. Ensure a safe and secure food supply.
4. Maintain good stewardship of our natural resources -- support private landowners in their conservation efforts, and manage the resources entrusted to the Department, including our National Forests, with a sharp focus on renewability, sustainability and most effective use.

I believe that focus on and achievement of these goals will allow us to serve our current generation well, while also building the foundation for a promising tomorrow for future generations.

In addition to focusing on these overarching goals, I've been asked whether there are more specific, granular goals that I would like to advance and achieve, if I am honored by the Senate to be confirmed as Deputy Secretary. While there are many pressing demands and opportunities, and at the risk of leaving off the list other worthy goals, I've identified the following three areas as immensely critical to current -- but perhaps more importantly -- future generations.

1. **Diversification of Markets.** This includes expanding foreign trade and promoting local and regional food markets for farmers and consumers alike. In addition, diversification of crops through research, extension, and crop insurance coverage.

2. **Preparation for and Adaption to Changing Weather and Climate.** Our agricultural production systems and forests truly are on the front line of impact by changes in weather and climate. I believe USDA has an inherent responsibility to help our farmers, ranchers, and forests become more resilient. USDA's research, conservation, forestry, extension, crop insurance, and other programs all have major roles to play.

3. **Expansion of Broadband to Rural America.** Broadband technology can be transformative for agricultural producers and rural communities. From precision agriculture that allows producers to farm more sustainably to promoting rural development and jobs, America's rural areas truly need broadband technology. USDA has a unique role to play within the Administration and through its own programs.

If confirmed, I look forward to working with you, the President and his team, and Secretary Perdue to achieve these and other goals. I want to deliver results for rural America.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. And thank you for your consideration of my nomination to be Deputy Secretary of Agriculture. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.