

Hello,

Chairman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

My name is Alexander Ball, and I am proud to say that I am a South East Michigan farmer. I, along with two generations before me, were born and raised in a small factory town on the edge of Metro Detroit called Romulus. During the height of the housing crisis, I saw my local economy collapse and my friends, family, and neighbors plunged deeper into poverty and causing many local businesses to close, including our local grocery store. At that moment, the weight of the situation fell onto me, and at the age of 18, I knew that I wanted to grow food for my community and build a more resilient food system on the values of food access, mutual aid, and sustainable community focused growth.

That year I dedicated my life to growing food, and started my Peri-Urban farm Old City Acres. With no family land or money, the first (and largest) roadblock that would haunt me over the first half of my farming career was my lack of access to land and capital. Over the next half decade I would move from rented plot to plot trying to find a stable, safe, and long term location to try and build my farm business and agricultural future. All the while not being able to invest and build some resemblance of a future for myself and my family. As the years went on, I continued to save whatever scraps of income I could to go towards a piece of land of my own, but every year land prices and inflation continued to grow, slowly pushing me and many like me further away from the possibility of land ownership and building long term multi generational equity. After five years of saving for a small down-payment and finding a small piece of land to build my forever farm, I was ready to take the big push and grow my farm into a scaled up business. I was new to the world of banking, land buying, and government agencies but I had heard of the Farm Service Agency (FSA), and knew that they helped farmers.

After weeks of work trying to get an appointment, I was finally all set to meet with my FSA agent. Unfortunately, my agent (who's district represented large urban areas) was not from the community and was inconveniently located almost two counties over. I drove over an hour to be told that I couldn't be helped and that I should just turn to the private sector to fund my farming project. I was devastated because every other traditional bank I had spoken to was not interested in financially backing a produce farm or getting involved in agricultural endeavors at all. The FSA was my last shot, and I was devastated. They did however give me the information to a local Ag lending association "GreenStone Farm Credit Services" in 2017.

When I reached out to the folks at GreenStone with my business plan, tax information, and vision for my farm, I was blown away at how quickly they directly understood and supported my business with a loan to purchase my farm property and subsequent loans to improve and build my business. This direct access to capital has been the deciding factor in the overall possible success of my business. Over the last five years of owning my small 2 acres of land, I have invested over \$100,000 in infrastructure and land improvements, and all of that was on the back of affordable and accessible farm credit solutions. Our farm specializes in the year round productions of vegetables for direct to consumer sales through our community focused buying club. Utilizing unheated greenhouses, storage crops, and other season extension techniques we are able to produce local vegetables 12 months out of the year for a diverse range of consumers throughout Washtenaw and Wayne County. In 2021 we partnered with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services and joined their Fresh Food Connections program. Through this partnership we are actively accepting EBT for our CSA (community supported agriculture) programs and connecting with local institutions to direct local folks using these transfer payments directly to our farm.

My farmland is situated in the heart of Sumpter Township on the very edge of Wayne County. At the turn of the century, many folks moving North to work in the auto industry settled here and farmed these wet soils, and I'm proud to continue that tradition along with many other folks in my community. As an area with a large portion of black landowners and farmers (compared to most rural spaces), I am thankful for the opportunity to be close to my family and feed those around me.

Since purchasing my land in 2018, I have unfortunately seen the effects of urban sprawl and land prices escalating in my local community especially by the covid 19 pandemic. I see development and single occupancy homes on 100 acre lots continue to inflate the cost of usable farm land at an alarming rate and I don't see a stop in sight. As land prices, inputs, and labor continue to increase so do those barriers into farming and building long term generational wealth.

As a peri-urban farm, I spend a lot of my time on the edge between rural and urban spaces, and one of the biggest hurdles I see is the lack of direct information about state and federal programs directly aimed towards small and urban growers. When FSA and other government agencies are located so far from urban centers there is no way to prevent disparity in access and use of those programs put in place to prevent that exact issue. Thank you to Senator Stabenow, for taking the first steps to address this disparity by creating the Office of Urban Agriculture in the 2018 Farm Bill, to help farmers like me have better access to USDA programs.

This last year I had the privilege to cooperate with other local growers and institutions to start the Washtenaw County Black Farmer's fund. Our goal was to raise funds from our community and redistribute it back to black farmers in order to grow their infrastructure and production through direct interest free grants. We were able to raise and redistribute \$100,000 in 2022, and

hope to be able to beat that next year. Through this fund, we were also able to act as an informational hub connecting growers directly to additional funding or technical assistance from local farmers, non profits, and GreenStone FCS.

There is so much work to be done at every single level of the food system, and I believe that we are just at the beginning of a new era of local food production and technological interconnectedness that will increase access to food, information, and resources to more folks. The strengthening of the food supply chain is important, and we need the continued and expanded roles of Farm Service Agency, Washtenaw Black Farmer's Fund, Office of Urban Agriculture, and GreenStone Farm Credit Services. Thank you so much for your time.

-Alexander Ball