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Good morning, Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the committee. My name is Jeremy Hinton and I would like to begin my testimony today with a quote. “No other human occupation opens so wide a field for the profitable and agreeable combination of labor with cultivated thought, as agriculture”. These are the words of a man born only a few miles from our family’s farm near Hodgenville, Kentucky, who later became our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln. As part of the eighth generation of my family to farm in LaRue County, my connection to the agriculture began at the time that Lincoln wandered the fields around Sinking Springs and Knob Creek and continues today: first, as a farmer, but with an operation that looks different from my ancestors; and second, as a crop insurance agent helping other farmers manage their market and production risks.

I currently serve as Chair of the Kentucky Horticulture Council representing producers of all segments of Kentucky’s diverse and growing horticulture industry. I am also president of the LaRue County Farm Bureau Federation, a member of the Kentucky Farm Bureau Federation’s Resolutions Committee and Horticulture Advisory Committee and serve as chairman of the board for Feeding America, Kentucky’s Heartland, helping deliver agriculture’s bounty to our neighbors in need across central and western Kentucky.

While our operation does include more traditional crops for our area like soybeans and burley tobacco, the focus of our farm is our nearly 30 different edible crops and our greenhouse flowers, herbs, and vegetable plants. Most of our sales are direct to consumers through our two owned market locations and local farmer’s markets. My wife, Joanna, and I

began our business in 2002 and are both involved daily with production and marketing of our crops along with our three children ages 20, 17, & 11.

While my farm may look different from my grandfather's registered Hereford cattle farm, it also looks different than hundreds of other farms across the country that would be classified as "specialty crop" growers. Specialty crops come in many shapes and sizes, and while individually smaller in acreage when compared to other commodities like corn or cotton, the collective impact of these high value crops cannot be overlooked as part of the greater agriculture industry. Farmers of all kinds share many of the same challenges and concerns, but others are unique to operations like mine.

Loss of farmland to development is a key issue in the state of Kentucky as well as across the nation. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, Kentucky lost more than 546,000 acres of farmland from 2017 to 2022, meaning we are losing more than 290 acres per day in the Commonwealth. For context, the average farm size in Kentucky is 179 acres. As we in agriculture look to the future and a growing population, this issue is one that must be addressed. Kentucky Farm Bureau is taking the lead in our state to combat farmland loss with the creation of the Kentucky Farmland Transition Initiative. They are working with stakeholders at both the state and federal levels to address this key issue through education, providing resources and networking, and through policy recommendations. I look forward to your involvement in helping with solutions to this important issue. While on one hand, new neighbors mean new customers for our retail markets, we must find a balance between well planned development and farmland preservation to ensure the future of our farms and rural communities.

As I mentioned in my introduction, I am also a crop insurance agent. While most traditional row crop acres are covered under federal crop insurance programs, participation for specialty crop growers continues to be much lower. In my opinion, multiple factors contribute to this. First, in many areas there is a lack of available coverage. While availability of policies for specialty crops is increasing, the geographic disbursement of specialty crop acres often makes it difficult for actuaries to rate products for limited acres meaning agents and growers must meet additional requirements to ensure crops under written agreements approved by RMA. Second, there is a lack of education. While efforts are being made by organizations like our Kentucky Horticulture Council to increase awareness and understanding of the options available for specialty crops, growers in large part still do not understand how they can work for their operation. It is my hope that in a new farm bill and as negotiations open for changes in the crop insurance program, we can address issues that will strengthen insurance options for specialty crop growers. Whole Farm Revenue and its companion, Micro Farm policies, are good products in some situations but can be burdensome for both farmers and agents and so have not been widely adapted. Despite a rapidly growing base of specialty crop producers, in Kentucky in 2024 for example, there were only six Whole Farm policies and four Micro Farm Policies written in the entire state as compared with nearly 7,000 policies for soybeans.

For many specialty crop growers, our operation included, availability and cost of labor continues to be among our greatest challenges. Lack of available local labor led us to the H-2A program nearly 10 years ago. We are blessed with returning workers who are critical to the survival of our business, but as the cost of that labor continues to increase, we must either find additional efficiencies to reduce costs, respond with increases in our prices

to our customers, or reduce already slim profit margins. I encourage members of the committee to continue dialogue with those of us on the farm for meaningful reform to the H-2A and other temporary worker visa programs to support all segments of agriculture. It is critical to the stability of our food supply.

Growers of specialty crops are especially dependent on the resources of extension and our land grant universities. Local input suppliers rarely have staff that are trained to make recommendations for fertility or disease and pest control and so we depend on the expertise housed in our colleges of agriculture. For specialty crop growers to continue to grow and adapt to ever changing market demands and production pressures, we must have a well-funded, robust network of land grant universities and extension.

In contrast to the current outlook of many other commodities there are many positives to discuss in the specialty crop segment of agriculture. For those of us engaging in direct-to-consumer sales, we continue to see increased demand for locally grown products and in building relationships with customers who want to know who is growing the food they are feeding their families. I firmly believe that there is considerable potential for growth in this segment of the food system and look forward to opportunities in a new farm bill to further enhance those. In addition, because of the lower requirement of land and equipment, specialty crops offer opportunities for young farmers looking to start operations of their own or to diversify existing operations to make room for additional family members.

Kentucky is uniquely positioned, in my opinion, to be successful in growing specialty crops for several reasons: (1) as tobacco acres continue to decrease, growers who are accustomed to managing hand harvested crops and the labor force needed to accomplish

that are looking for alternatives and specialty crops are a good fit; (2) Kentucky is blessed with the abundant water needed to irrigate and successfully grow fruits and vegetables as well as ornamentals; and (3) Kentucky is a day's drive from 65% of the U.S. population, meaning that it is easy to transport crops from our fields and greenhouses to a majority of U.S. consumers. Because of these unique conditions, Kentucky has seen rapid growth in horticulture crops grown both in field systems and in protected environments. From 2017 to 2022, Kentucky's acres of production under glass and plastic grew by 832% from 1.48M square feet to 13.8M square feet, placing us second only to California in protected agriculture. As residential and commercial development takes away acres available for production, opportunities to grow specialty crops in protected systems allows us to grow more food in less space and continue to meet the needs of a growing population.

In closing, I want to thank each of the members of the committee for your willingness to serve your respective communities and our country. In a day when it is so easy to criticize rather than act, I have tremendous respect for the work that you are doing to help insure a healthy agriculture industry and a safe, stable food supply. It has been an honor for me to address this distinguished group today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.