

Opening Statement of Jennifer Lester Moffitt Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry

June 15, 2021

Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. As someone who grew up on my family's organic walnut farm, this opportunity is something I've only dreamed of. It is an honor and I am humbled.

I want to thank President Biden for his confidence in me to serve as Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs at the United States Department of Agriculture and for his leadership in rebuilding an America that serves all Americans. I also want to thank Secretary Vilsack for his leadership and his vision to further strengthen our food systems and make them even more resilient and inclusive. Finally, I'd like to thank the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, for its leadership and advocacy on behalf of farmers, ranchers, consumers, and the food supply chain.

My roots are in agriculture. As a kid, I would walk the orchard with my dad after dinner to change the irrigation system. I grew up spending spring breaks painting the trunks of our young walnut trees to prevent sunburn. I grew up raising market lambs in 4-H and FFA and planting buffer strips in our orchard to attract beneficial insects. And as someone who ran the family farm and processing operation for 10 years, I know first-hand the worry farmers face about losing a crop to disease or a weather event - or losing an important market. I also know how deeply farmers care about their communities and passing on their knowledge to the next generation.

After college, I was fortunate to work for American Farmland Trust and learn first-hand from farmers across the country about the passion they had for the land and challenges they faced. I worked with farmers in California on voluntary land conservation, helped with farm transition planning in Minnesota, and researched and wrote about the importance of special micro-climates for red tart cherries in Michigan.

Through these experiences, I gained an appreciation for the diversity of American agriculture: diversity in geography, crop, size, scale, and more. And I learned the importance of considering that diversity and the complexity it brings in the policy-making process.

When my dad asked me to return to the farm to help with sales and marketing, I did so because I believed in what we were doing: producing healthy food, growing new markets for local producers, developing sustainable farming practices, and helping to bolster the economic livelihood of my hometown. I helped shepherd our farming operation through the recession, building valuable partnerships with other producers and with USDA to address trade restrictions, expand new markets, and persevere.

One of the hardest decisions I made was leaving the farm to work for the California Department of Food and Agriculture, but I viewed it as an important opportunity to serve rural communities, the public, and the agricultural industry.

My work at CDFA has given me the opportunity to understand and shape the role that government can play in supporting agriculture, ensuring that farmers and ranchers have a seat at the table, and ensuring that we take an inclusive approach to solving problems.

At CDFA, I've been able to partner with other government agencies and lawmakers, with the agricultural industry, nonprofits and community organizations to address some of the biggest challenges facing our state, the nation, and the world: drought and the effects of climate change, healthy soils and conservation agriculture, animal and plant health issues, and more. And each day I carry with me my experience of running the farm to ensure that this perspective is reflected in the policies that are developed.

During the COVID-19 public health crisis, our work has been focused on healthy food access, fostering a resilient food system, and ensuring the safety of farm workers. It has taken partnership, it has taken working together, and it has taken adopting a whole systems approach because no one strategy could tackle the complexity of the challenges farmers were facing.

And that's a lesson I first learned from my dad on the farm: that when you are facing a problem - a pest or a disease, for example - it's important to understand why that problem came about in the first place and to find solutions using experience, science, and data.

I've also learned lessons from my mom, a public school teacher, about the importance of lifelong learning. In fact, education runs in the family and my husband, an elementary school principal, has shown me the value of learning from those around us. It's important to me to seek out new ideas and approaches, and to push ourselves to think differently and creatively.

If confirmed, these are the lessons I bring with me: I will listen and learn from people in agriculture and the food system around the country, and I will take a whole systems approach.

Before closing, I also want to share something I've learned from my 12-year old daughter. She has taught me a great deal about tenacity and caring for others. Her determination and big heart inspire me daily. Should I have the honor of being confirmed, I'll bring that same determination and heart to the job at USDA.

I care deeply about American agriculture. I know first-hand the struggles that farmers and ranchers face, and I know how important farmers, ranchers and processors are to the communities they serve. I know the importance of a resilient, equitable food system for consumers and producers. If confirmed, I will work tirelessly to serve them, to listen, to champion their hard work and resilience, and to ensure that USDA does all that it can to support them. I will do whatever I can to bring people together to solve tough issues because we do our best work when we work together.

Thank you for your time and I welcome the chance to answer your questions.