

United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Full Committee Hearing: 2023 Farm Bill: Perspective from the Natural State

June 17, 2022

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I'd like to thank Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and the members of the Senate Agriculture Committee for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Mark Morgan and I am proud to be a 5th generation farmer who was taught the farming way of life by my father and grandfather. My wife and I are raising our three children on the farm near Clarksville, AR in Johnson County – where we hope they will become the 6th generation to farm this land. We are specialty crop farmers who grow peaches and nectarines, and we also raise cattle and turkeys. I'm honored to be here today to share with you some of my thoughts, experiences, and perspective on the horticulture industry in Arkansas and across the southern region of the country.

Our peach operation, Peach Pickin' Paradise, has around 5,000 trees on 28 acres. We are primarily a "pick your own" operation, allowing customers to walk through the orchard and select the produce they want straight from the tree. We also pick peaches for resale at our on-site stand, and we supply some local markets, breweries, and the Farm-to-School program. We do not operate a packing shed, and all of our fruit is sold locally, which has greatly benefited our business, as well as our local community.

My family has grown peaches since the late 1890s. The early orchards in our area were harvested and shipped to urban markets on railcars. My grandfather George started Peach Pickin' Paradise with the first "pick your own" orchard in 1977. My father Steve has continued the business, and when I came home from school in 2010, I began running the operation with him. It is very important to us that our local customers can see where their food comes from and make family memories during the picking process. It is how we share our view of the farm and our family with our customers. While providing local food is a popular concept, it can be challenging to smaller family operations like ours due to labor shortages, rising input costs, and larger farms setting price points. My family has built our customer base for decades through hard work and providing a quality product. I have done my best to continue that the past decade, but there is always work to be done.

Specialty crops like peaches face many challenges. Our biggest challenge every year is the threat of a freeze after our trees have bloomed, which usually occurs in mid-March to mid-April. If the temperatures get too low, the crop for that year will be lost. Peaches set buds in the fall, so there is not another opportunity to make a new crop if a freeze destroys the buds. Crop insurance premiums for peaches are very high compared to the value of coverage and tend to be cost prohibitive. Most lenders require growers to carry insurance, but most the growers in our area are only able to afford a catastrophic loss policy. With peaches, I have a significant amount of money invested in labor and spray costs from January to April when a freeze event can occur. This is when we prune our trees, so if a freeze occurs, an insurance payment does not always cover the inputs that have gone into the

crop at that point. The insurance buy-ups available to growers for better coverage are cost prohibitive, due to high premiums. The Non-Insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (or NAP) is a program often referenced for specialty crop producers; however the program requirements and qualifications are often unworkable. This leaves many specialty crop producers with no risk protection at all. A more economical insurance program or improvements made to the NAP program (or both), would greatly benefit peach growers in Arkansas.

Another problem facing horticulture producers is how specialized our operations can be. Even within fruit crops, a strawberry grower and a peach grower require significantly different equipment. We tend to know what works on our operations without input from the non-agricultural sector. Some of the ideas regarding climate control would be damaging to agriculture but would be especially detrimental to horticulture.

As farmers, caring for the land is our top priority. In 2019, we entered the Arkansas Discovery Farms program to learn how to maximize irrigation efficiency. We are constantly seeking ways to become more sustainable and a wiser user of our land and water resources. We seek the best technology and best practices to preserve our environment and natural resources. Potential broad-stroke or one-size-fits all environmental regulations are a real concern for me, my farm, and all specialty crop producers. We hope as discussions occur during the farm bill reauthorization process, that any regulatory adjustments will be evaluated carefully and with farmers and food security for our country at the forefront of consideration.

Growing peaches is rewarding but extremely challenging due to weather. Labor shortages, input costs, and supply chain issues have been daunting thus far in 2022. The specialized chemicals for peach growers can be hard to acquire in a normal season. This year, even with ordering chemicals 2 or 3 months in advance, we still have them arrive late or not show up at all. All inputs have increased price, and that includes labor. We have never had to use H2A before, but we may be forced to consider that option. The availability of willing workers confronts us on the farm as well. I hope relief on the issues of labor costs and availability and the spike in input costs can come soon.

I believe specialty crops like peaches have a place in Arkansas. I understand the number of acres dedicated to these crops doesn't seem large when compared to cattle, rice, or soybeans. However, the opportunity to have a family come to your farm, to see where their food comes from, and to then see them post a picture of their adventure on Instagram or Facebook is a special thing to us. I'd sure like my job as a peach grower to stay economically viable because I love what I get to do every day.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my view of our farm and our family with you today.