

Statement of Adam Ingraio
Before the
US Senate Agriculture Committee
Growing Jobs and Economic Opportunity: Perspectives on the 2018 Farm Bill from
Michigan
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Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow and members of the Senate Agriculture Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of beginning farmers, farmer veterans and urban farmers from the great state of Michigan. As an urban beginning farmer, Army veteran, farmer veteran advocate, and agricultural researcher, I have had the great privilege to serve my community through healthy food, my country through military service, my farmer veteran community through programming and resource connections, and the global asparagus industry through my research at Michigan State University. It is through this multifaceted lens of agricultural experience that I approach the challenges and opportunities facing America's farmers and veterans. My testimony outlines areas of success I have seen through the actions of Congress in the 2014 Farm Bill and challenges that still exist within the communities I work that can be addressed in the 2018 Farm Bill. I highlight my personal experiences and those of successful farmer veterans I have worked with and the USDA programs they have taken advantage of to illustrate the impact the 2014 Farm Bill has had on beginning and farmer veteran communities in Michigan. I hope that my testimony can serve as a point of reference and a source of novel ideas for you and your colleagues to consider as you draft the 2018 Farm Bill.

Background

American agriculture faces a looming crisis. Production and long-term industry growth is challenged by an aging farmer demographic and a lack of qualified young farmers. As demand for food increases with a growing global population, the United States is one of the few countries capable of meeting this growing demand, capturing market share that will increase domestic GDP and offer a good paying jobs that cannot be outsourced. In order to ensure the United States is prepared to meet the global rise in the demand of food and other agricultural products, we must invest into the training and success of beginning farmers and those looking to produce food and agricultural products in new and unconventional venues (urban farmers), while recognizing the importance of new farmer demographics, such as military veterans, that have unique training that compliments the work ethic, leadership and commitment necessary to be successful in the agricultural industry.

2014 Farm Bill Programs Impacting Beginning, Veteran and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers

Provisions in the 2014 Farm Bill have been critical to the work I conduct in Michigan connecting veterans, beginning and historically underserved farmers to education, resource and programmatic opportunities to increase the success of individual farmers and develop a strong and resilient Michigan farmer community. Within this section I outline the importance of programs implemented by the 2014 Farm Bill and demonstrate their use by organizations and individuals I am affiliated with to improve the personal and financial wellness of Michigan's farmers and our communities.

- **Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Program (BFRDP):** Michigan Food and Farming Systems, Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems and Michigan State University Student Organic Farmer Training Program (awarded 2014).
 - **Goal:** To create a vibrant network of beginning farmer training across Michigan that can cater to different perspectives and needs while moving everyone desiring to farm along the path of business viability.
 - **Objectives:**
 - Create training and development programs that span the necessary strategies meeting various lifestyle restrictions and demographic needs for people to enter and sustain farming.
 - Create a vibrant network of beginning, new-entry farmers and trainees to provide peer support and guidance as a statewide community of practice that also engages the knowledge of farmers operating more than 10 years.
 - Create a suite of services required to optimize the chance that new-entry farmers will still be in business and be expanding over five years.
 - Create strategies for a pathway to scaling up production and marketing so that new and beginning farmers can reach the apparent \$100,000 viability plateau in sales annually.
 - This program has been focused on the short and long term viability of beginning farmers which has included educational programs, access to resources and support services as well as tackling bigger issues like access to land, capital and equipment. Without funding to support these services through BFRDP, programs like this would not have funding that allows for the large collaborative efforts necessary to take on these issues. Additionally, BFRDP set asides for socially disadvantaged and veteran producers are critical to ensuring new farmer demographics are reached and that the unique needs of these producers are met.
- **2501 Program:** Michigan Food and Farming Systems (MIFFS) and the Veterans in Agriculture Network (VIAN) (awarded 2016):
 - **Goal:** MIFFS and VIAN experience has shown that small-scale socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers develop and enhance their farming enterprises when they are part of a rooted network that supports each other to get past the barriers, such as:

- Lack of relationships with USDA staff.
 - Discomfort with the language and paperwork expected of producers.
 - Physical or mental challenges that make entering unfamiliar buildings or being presented with paperwork overwhelming and challenging (this is very common among our farmer veterans clients).
 - The lack of the “luxury of time and experience” that most privileged populations have to plan for long-term results.
 - Our goal is to intentionally build consistent supportive working groups that aid individuals in crossing these barriers and help them see progress.
- **Objectives:**
 - Provide group transportation to the network members in order for them to connect with each other through community engagement and to expand involvement into other regions.
 - Develop USDA Program Application Guides in language appropriate for beginning, socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers that explain how to fill out USDA paperwork and forms at USDA Farm Services Agency. Many county FSA offices lack experience working with socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers that are producing nontraditional goods or specialty crops which can lead to confusion about how to offer these producers assistance. Having an unfavorable or frustrating experiences at FSA offices will often prevent these producers from attempting to work with other USDA agencies.
 - Many of our farmer veterans suffer from service related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injuries (TBI). For them, walking into unfamiliar buildings or being presented with paperwork and multiple pieces of information can be extremely challenging and trigger negative symptoms. Worrying about exacerbating PTSD or TBI symptoms can often prevent veterans from walking in the door of USDA Service Centers.
 - Four MIFFS Field Specialists (two Multicultural/SD and two Farmer Veteran) have been trained to work one-on-one with socially disadvantaged and veteran producers to be available to accompany producers to individuals to USDA Service Centers. Field Specialists help monitor application progress and provide additional support necessary to successfully submit paperwork. Many of our socially disadvantaged and veteran producer farms fall outside of the normal clientele USDA agencies typically work with which can cause confusion about program eligibility. MIFFS Field Specialists (some with past careers associated with USDA) also function as liaisons between customers and USDA staff to help minimize confusion assisting these producers in applying for programs with operations that are unfamiliar to local USDA staff.

- Support stronger relationships with USDA by having local staff participate in MIFFS network meetings, collaborating with MIFFS Field Specialists, MIFFS events and all the other MIFFS activities/workshops (both through this grant and other grants).
- Expand MIFFS website to create a USDA Resources page. This page will be linked to through our Multicultural and Veteran in Agriculture Network pages and will host USDA Program Guides and the new USDA Application Guides (created during this project). We will also provide information about various USDA Agencies and their programs that may be of interest to our producers.
- The 2501 Program has been critical to MIFFS and VIAN in addressing challenges for USDA to engage socially disadvantaged and veteran producers at USDA Service Centers. Without the funding provided by this program many of our producers would likely never engage with USDA because of the inherent challenges they face. Through 2501 funding we are facilitating interactions and connections with USDA staff and providing services needed to engage producers in positive experiences that lead to results that aid both producers and the USDA.

Federal Programs Used by Farmer Veterans (Stories and Perspectives)

- **Natural Resources Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative:**

- VIAN has worked closely with several farmer veterans to navigate USDA programs including FSA registration for a Farm Number and NRCS programs. The most extensively used program by veterans in Michigan has been the Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative which allows for season extension that increases productivity and offers new seasonal markets for products. An example of utilization of this program by one of our veteran families is outlined below:
 - Chief Warrant Officer Rick Stone and Specialist Katy Stone (US Army): Owners of Laetus Pullus Farm in Perry, Michigan, Rick and Katy run a diversified livestock and vegetable farm on 30 acres that provides their family and community with healthy food. However, their production was limited due to the short growing season in northern latitudes and MIFFS and the VIAN provided assistance to extend their production through applying for a NRCS high tunnel. Since being awarded a tunnel in 2016, the Stones have been able to grow vegetables throughout the winter which has increased their productivity and available markets.

- **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Double Up Food Bucks**

- VIAN has worked with farmer veterans that seek to protect vulnerable populations in Michigan through production of healthy and nutritious foods. An excellent example of this is outlined below:
 - Sergeant Jeremy (US Marines) and Valarie Huffman: Owners and operators of Huffman's Homestead in Swartz Creek, Michigan, Jeremy and Valarie run a

diversified livestock and vegetable farm on 10 acres. The Huffman's have taken advantage of VIAN's USDA navigation services and have received a high tunnel through NRCS to increase production, which has allowed them to create a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program for their community, and has also allowed them to reach capacity to support direct marketing at two of their local farmer's markets. One of these markets is the Flint Farmers Market where the Huffman's participate in the Double Up Food Bucks program. This program has allowed them to focus on delivering healthy food to those affected by the Flint water crisis. The Huffman's mission through the Double Up Food Bucks program is to participate directly in the healing process of Flint by offering healthy food at a price that allows all residents equal access to quality nutrition.

Cooperative Agreements

Organizations I work with have taken advantage of cooperative agreements with federal agencies to increase utilization of Natural Resource Conservation Service programs. I highlight our current agreement below and recommend actions that could be taken by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill to increase public-private relationships to increase farmer enrollment in USDA programs.

Natural Resources Conservation Service: Cooperative agreement between NRCS and Michigan Food and Farming Systems/Veterans in Agriculture Network provides funding to promote whole farm Conservation Plans to socially disadvantaged and/or underserved producers. The objectives of this agreement are outlined below:

- **Objectives:**
 - Identify and promote optimal times/seasons for farmers to request whole farm Conservation Plans from NRCS Field office staff.
 - Aid in navigating technical assistance services that are available through NRCS Field Staff.
 - Promote Conservation Plans as a precursor to exploring NRCS program participation.
 - Targeted promotion of Forest Management Plan cost share opportunities and benefits of participation in NRCS habitat programs.
 - Targeted promotion of pollinator habitat installation and expected return on investment.
 - Promotion of pollinator crops as an option for crop diversification for specialty crop producers with demonstration sites at two of MIFFS Farm Development Centers.
 - Offer technical expertise or training to NRCS field staff and technical service providers tailored to working with unfamiliar farm systems or with novel producers.

- Identify common resource concerns related to specific farm systems (small scale diversified, specialty crops, organic, aquaculture, high tunnels, urban etc.).
- Identify existing NRCS Conservation Practices to address unique resource concerns.
- Promote NRCS services through MIFFS Multicultural Farmer, Beginning Farmer, Multicultural Women and Veteran Networks.
- Identify current barriers to NRCS technical service access and program participation for socially disadvantaged farmers.
- Provide one on one NRCS program navigation and enrollment services for farmer veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries.
- **Results:** This agreement has allowed for MIFFS personnel to train with USDA staff on the specifics around farmer enrollment with USDA programs. This has resulted in the creation of simplified guides to USDA program navigation written from a farmer perspective (translated into Spanish for immigrant producers), in addition to webinar and on ground events focused on walking individuals through the paperwork required to take advantage of USDA programs. Early on we identified that farmer veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries were unlikely to visit USDA field offices and pursue USDA programs alone because of the challenges of entering unfamiliar spaces and the frustration associated with USDA terminology, forms and staff that is untrained to understand the needs of a veteran dealing with these injuries. In response to this, the Veterans in Agriculture Network provides one-on-one services to all veterans that include assistance in filling out USDA forms and accompanying veterans during visits to USDA offices to aid the veteran and the service provider, ensuring the needs of both are met.
- **2018 Farm Bill Action:** To support work outlined above, USDA needs to expand its efforts to meet the needs of beginning and veteran producers. In the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress created the Military and Veterans Agriculture Liaison (MVAL) position to focus on initiatives and create support for farmer veterans. Through my work with farmer veterans across Michigan and their utilization of USDA services and programs, MIFFS and VIAN urge Congress to support the expansion of the MVAL's office to increase staff and capacity to allow them to work directly with on-ground organizations to better ensure USDA programs meet the needs of veteran producers and encourage the growth of the farmer veteran demographic. Additionally, MIFFS urges Congress to expand efforts such as MVAL to include offices focused solely on beginning farmer initiatives. An office of Beginning Farmer Agricultural Liaison with a dedicated staff focused on developing and implementing coordinated efforts to recruit and support the next generation of farmers, would aid in ensuring the long-term stability of the US agricultural industry.

Urban Farmer Issues

As a beekeeper and urban farmer in Lansing, I personally experience the challenges and limitations of farming within an urban setting. My farm occupies nearly two acres of land leased from the Ingham County Land Bank that was once a track of eight blighted houses on the east side of Lansing. This part of the city was developed in the early 1900's as a residential zoned area but has subsequently been classified as a flood plain which makes purchasing and rebuilding homes in this area difficult. The combination of the foreclosures from the 2008 financial meltdown, aging homes and the flood plain location have resulted in the conversion of this area to urban farms. The result has been that this area of Lansing has become a desirable location for urban farmers and has developed a community supply chain for fresh produce within an urban food desert. Below I outline the challenges facing urban farmers and present potential avenues of improvement that could be addressed by the 2018 Farm Bill.

- **Access to Water:** Water is shut off at the street to all properties in Lansing that have homes that are demolished by the Ingham County Land Bank. This results in urban farmers accessing water through water storage tanks that must be purchased and are filled periodically by Land Bank staff. On several occasions, I have run out of water on our farm despite having two 250-gallon storage tanks. In 2016, this resulted in a total vegetable crop failure because of an unusually long dry spell during crop establishment which cost me thousands of dollars in lost product. Over the last year, we have worked with Land Bank staff to get reconnected to city water. Despite having Land Bank staff support, this process has taken months and currently is projected to cost over \$2,000, a cost that is prohibitive to most beginning farmers on Land Bank property.
 - **Solution:** New policies that work to ensure water delivery to urban land slated for agricultural use would increase productivity and reduce economic losses of urban farmers.
- **Consistent Policy:** Perhaps the most frustrating part of being an urban farmer is the lack of consistent policy between municipalities to guide our business planning and allow us to coordinate regional efforts to produce fresh produce within urban settings. Lack of clear guidance on areas of infrastructure, like high tunnels, has created uncertainty within urban producers which puts constraints on production and limits our ability to produce food for our communities.
 - **Solution:** A federal office to coordinate urban agriculture activities and advise counties and municipalities on urban agriculture policies to provide consistency to the urban agriculture industry and allow farmers to better plan, implement and coordinate their business models.
- **Avenue to Ownership:** Urban farmers in Lansing primarily lease land through the Ingham County Land Bank. This county-owned land is leased at a very reasonable rate but there is no long-term strategy by the county regarding the ownership of the land. Farmers spend large

amounts of capital improving urban lands which includes removal of construction debris, rehabilitating highly disturbed or polluted soils, planting cover crops or adding compost to increase soil organic matter content, maintaining lands and building infrastructure to farm the land. Currently, these farmers care for, rehabilitate and invest in these lands without any possibility for ownership.

- **Solution:** Innovative land tenure contracts and improved land ownership opportunities for urban farmers that would provide stable access to land, allowing them to invest into infrastructure and increase production capacity without the fear of losing this investment over time due to changes in policy by land holders. This uncertainty puts direct constraints of food production, development and profitability of urban farm businesses.

Additional Comments

- **Vocational Rehabilitation Services (Veterans Administration)**

- I have worked closely with several veterans interested in accessing vocational rehabilitation benefits to become farmers. Short programs that appeal to veterans and are appropriate for farmer training are not acceptable for Voc Rehab benefits because they do not meet the stringent requirements currently in place for the utilization of these benefits. Recognition of the unique educational circumstances surrounding farmer training and the legitimacy of farming as a career for disabled veterans by the VA could provide a new source of trained farmers to enter the agriculture sector with the support of the VA.

- **BFRDP and VA Educational Benefits:**

- BFRDP awardee programs focused on the education of farmer veterans to enter careers in agricultural should be eligible for VA benefit utilization by veterans following successful demonstration of educational models during the grant funding cycle. By allowing these programs to receive these education benefits, it not only provides funding for the individual veteran to allow them to participate in the program but also offers a consistent and reliable funding to ensure the long-term sustainability of the BFRDP funded program.

- **Farm Succession Incentives:**

- Many farms are being lost across America. As producers retire, often their children are not interested in taking over the farm operation. This results in farms being sold off and often developed into non-farm operations. Tax incentives to create succession plans for farmers that allow producers to work with farmer veterans would create a possible scenario in which producers can be appropriately compensated for their property while offering a pathway to land acquisition for farmer veterans. This program could be supported by changes to the VA Home Loan Program to allow for purchase of farms, or

the FSA Loan Program to give priority funding to veterans working specifically with land owners through a succession process.

- **VA Medical Center Farmers Market Initiative:**
 - To promote healthy eating and access to nutritious food, an initiative to fund VA Medical Center Farmers Markets should be included in the 2018 Farm Bill. Funding could provide subsidies to VA patients to purchase food from vendors at the market and incentives could be offered to farmer veterans sell products at the market. Building relationships between veterans and healthy food would offer a pathway to improved health outcomes for patients at VA Health Centers and develop a sense of community and support, with high visibility, that is desperately needed to rebuild trust between veterans and the VA Health System.

Conclusion:

The Farm Bill stands as a foundation of support for American farmers, our agricultural livelihood and national prosperity. As the cornerstone of every civilization, agriculture is a single factor that can lead to the rise and fall of nations. Therefore, we must recognize the importance of this sector and prioritize its growth and health. Through the 2018 Farm Bill, it is my hope, and the hope of the organizations and programs I represent, that Congress realizes the importance of the programs created in the 2014 Farm Bill. It is critical to continue funding programs focused on supporting beginning farmers, those entering farming from new demographics and those farming in both rural and urban communities, and build upon this progress to include new initiatives that continue to foster the growth and success of the next generation of American farmers. It is only by engaging and supporting these communities of farmers that we will be able to feed the world and ensure the principles and core values of the United States continue to be the guiding light for freedom and equality.