



Testimony of Hannah Smith-Brubaker, Executive Director of PASA, before the House Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee

Wednesday, January 8, 2020

Our thanks to the Committee for this opportunity. Many of you know me from my time serving as Agriculture Deputy Secretary. My name is Hannah Smith-Brubaker and, together with my family, I farm in Juniata Co. As with many farms, one of us works off-farm and that's me. I serve as the executive director of PASA Sustainable Agriculture. PASA was established in 1992, and currently represents 7,300 members, the great majority of whom are actively farming in Pennsylvania, inside of a network of close to 40,000 farmers and supporters in the mid-Atlantic region. We focus on sustainable agriculture education, research and apprenticeships. Our Dairy Grazing apprenticeship is the only federally registered farm apprenticeship in the nation and our Vegetable Farm Manager apprenticeship is the only state registered farm apprenticeship in the Commonwealth. Together, with our partners, we need to change entry points and options for the next generation to value, not only agriculture, but farming specifically, as a viable adult enterprise.

Our primary mission is not legislative – it's educational. We work directly with farmers and farm supporters to do whatever we can to strengthen and preserve farming in Pennsylvania. We do this through peer to peer learning, technical assistance, collaboration and anything else we can do to support farmers and working farmland which often presents as a complex web of production acres, forestland and flowing water. Our farmers, who span the breadth of rural and urban, seasoned and entry, conventional no-till and organic, vegetable and livestock, growers and processors, embrace their role in stewardship, at the nexus of agriculture and the environment. We welcome anyone into the conversation who is interested in sustainably managed farms and food production throughout the mid-atlantic region and beyond.

Since you asked, we are happy to share our legislative wish-list, which is less specific about individual bills and more general about the kinds of changes and support we'd like to see to help farmers. I'll start with a few state-level ideas and then finish with a few at the national level.

The PA Farm Bill passed last year is a fantastic start to addressing a number of things we care about – support for new and beginning farmers, bridging the perceived gap between rural and urban production, promotion of innovative crops like hemp and hops, workforce development, support for our veterans, the integrity of the PA Preferred label, dairy investment, farm to school, and support for enterprise development.

We'd like the momentum to continue with a second-phase PA Farm Bill. Having access to funding is critical for on-farm research, farmer-led education and especially where these functions intersect with the conservation-related goals farmers have and are being expected to meet. Expanding the REAP tax credit to \$30M would help farmers pay for the conservation measures we know they'd like to do, but sometimes can't afford. Additional state funding to help farmers and farming communities comply with Chesapeake Bay requirements is critical. Plans are only as effective as the funding they get to implement them. One important piece of the last PA Farm Bill that didn't get passed is the PA Preferred Organic Program. That program, like none other, could serve to accomplish important work like incentivizing large retailers in the state to source their store brand organic milk and dairy products from Pennsylvania farmers - and it deserves another chance to pass. There's no reason why distressed dairy farmers here should be passed over while retailers who carry organic milk products truck milk in from the western United States.

On a related note, we believe most Pennsylvania farmers would support a soil health bill. Several other states already have adopted these measures to fund and support practices that save and build soils that are essential to the future of food production and farms' economic viability. Funding is needed to help farmers cost-share these practices and for the specialized equipment and technical know-how needed. According to researchers, every additional inch of organic soil added to current farm fields and pastures helps retain an additional 20,000 gallons of water per acre, so these richer soils are also a safeguard against flood damage - a growing concern of many Pennsylvanians and communities across the state. Please call my office if you have interest!

Pennsylvania is a mosaic of farmland and forestland, and protection of both can help ensure the long-term preservation of our working lands. Additional funding for the popular Farmland Preservation Program is a high priority for PASA, (and, living in Juniata County where there is little Farmland Preservation funding available, this is a high priority for me) and finding ways to protect the many woodlots and forests our farmers also own can provide an additional source of farm income as well as biodiversity for soil health, water quality protection

for our rivers and streams, and places where pheasants and other wildlife can flourish. Diversity is the best policy for farm ecology and economics.

A few of the bills we've been interested in most recently are Rep. Lawrence's Dairy Opportunity Zones bill and Rep. Ecker's workers comp bill (which stands to benefit so many of our southcentral orchards). A bill that hasn't been introduced yet, but we hope it will be, would help encourage and support loggers who currently can't afford to enroll in workers comp to cost-share their expenses and provide additional safety training. Because of the high cost of public workers comp insurance, and the lack of private options, most loggers opt to work alone, making this already dangerous occupation even more dangerous. Over time, the costs of the public program would come down as more loggers join and safety records improve, making it affordable and safer for all.

Of course, regardless of your position on immigration, making it harder for farmers to employ experienced labor can never be the solution and, at this time, it seems to be the status quo. We know most of the decision-making on this issue happens at the federal level, but as state lawmakers, it's important to know that migrant workers play a very important role in farm production here in PA, often returning year after year to the same farms as steady and essential labor. Any decisions at the state or federal level to make this less reliable or more difficult end up hurting our Pennsylvania farmers.

Finally, reinvesting in our farm infrastructure is essential to support farmers and reach a larger market share. Investing in cooperatives, processing outlets, and other infrastructure will help our farmers compete better and give more consumers access to fresh foods.

At the federal level, PASA continues to advocate for more funding and program improvements for federal Farm Bill programs popular in the state, including CSP, ACEP, CREP and EQIP; and expanding IRS tax credits to promote better soil health practices, particularly where they are outcomes driven. We also support federal efforts to encourage and incentivize farmers to slow the loss of carbon and to sequester additional carbon in soils in an effort to combat the devastation many are facing a result of a rapidly changing climate and the very real implications for mitigating flooding, something we are certain to see more of.

Thank you again for providing the opportunity to share our views and priorities. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.