

October 6, 2026

Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

Good morning Chair Miller and other Democratic Senators. My name is Noah Erwin and I am the Associate Director for Policy at Pasa Sustainable Agriculture. I also raise pastured pigs and sheep in Perry County. Thank you for this opportunity to share what challenges farmers face and share what the legislature can do to help.

For 35 years, Pasa has worked with our network of over 20,000 farmers and food systems professionals to advance sustainable agriculture with programs grounded in farmer-driven training, education, research, and community.

To best meet the farmers we work with, I invite all of you to attend our annual conference. This year, it'll be February 10-12 in Lancaster and will bring together over 1,500 attendees. We were privileged enough to have Secretary Redding and Senator Malone participate in a townhall with staff from the US House Ag Committee last year and are looking forward to hosting former FSA Administrator Zach Ducheneaux at this year's conference.

As the title of this hearing suggests, farmers are facing a wide variety of challenges these days. From a rapidly changing climate and rising input costs to increasingly-wide swings in consumer preferences and understaffed federal agencies, farmers face difficulties on their farm, with their customers, and in their communities.

Among this chaos, the state government of Pennsylvania might lead the nation in its ability to respond to what farmers actually need.

We were recently asked by a consultant from a national farm organization what has worked well from Pennsylvania's state Farm Bill and how it came together. We said that our divided government and how that forces bipartisanship and creative solutions, coupled with the leadership of Secretary Redding and his ability to effectively advocate for all of ag, led to a state farm bill that has something for practically every farmer at any point in their career.

In my opinion, part of the success of Pennsylvania comes from our ability to control what we can control, so I'm going to focus my remarks on topics within the purview of our Commonwealth's government.



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First, making important changes to our farmland preservation program would go a long way in helping to keep farmers farming.

USDA's 2022 Census of Agriculture showed that Pennsylvania leads the nation in the percentage of farmers under 35. We should be proud of that and continue to invest in programs that encourage young folks to farm.

If we want to *keep* these folks in farming, however, we must do more to help make long-term land access and security a reality. Buying, or even leasing, land has become all but impossible in some places. An off-farm job for at least one, if not both, adults in the household is necessary to have the cash flow for affording land.

Fortunately, Pennsylvania leads the nation in the number of preserved farms and acres of preserved farmland. Like our young farming population, this should be a point of pride, but we should also reflect on how we can maximize the value of the program.

That means allowing agrivoltaics, which is the careful integration of agriculture and solar panels (most often being sheep grazing in our Commonwealth). Right now, you can have a natural gas well on your preserved farm but you can't put in a small solar array. That needs to change.

Next, we need to prioritize land that is valuable to the community and food system, even if it's smaller parcels of land. We've heard from farmers on the outskirts of Allegheny County that the 10 acre minimum threshold to qualify for farmland preservation just isn't realistic in their area anymore, and if we change nothing, all of these small farms will disappear in the next generation.

Moving to the other side of the state, even if they wanted to, Philadelphia County cannot create a farmland preservation program because of the minimum acre requirement set by the state. We ask urban farmers to produce food, we ask them to make their operations "for-profit" and "production size", we ask them to train the next generation of farmers—yet, we don't give them the same tools we give our rural farmers.

Let's remember that the USDA now does not set a minimum acreage number for land to be considered a farm. However, to access resources from the USDA, secure land tenure is required. Our cities, big and small, are missing out on millions of dollars in federal funding because farmers and growers lack the stability that preserved farmland can bring to an operation.

We also need to look at making better use out of farmland that is already preserved. This past spring, Pasa assumed operations of The Seed Farm, which is an incubator farm program in Lehigh County. The Seed Farm is on county-owned preserved farmland, and for around \$5,000



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a year, new farmers can access the land, equipment, infrastructure, and technical assistance they need to launch and grow their agricultural ventures. Farmers can sign leases for up to 5 years, and the program has capacity for 8 farmers at a time.

Let's say every county had a program like this - and in more rural counties with more space, their program might focus on pastured livestock or agroforestry. 67 counties times 8 farmers at a time equals 536 farmers. And a fifth of those folks would "graduate" from the program every year - that's over 100 new and solidly-built farm operations emerging in our Commonwealth every year, from this incubator program alone. That's the kind of scale that makes a difference in our food system.

Farmers need help in maintaining viable businesses and work environments given the challenges previously mentioned.

Farmer wellbeing is often overlooked, so here are some ways the state could prioritize the physical safety of farmers on the job.

Many of the farmers we work with have all-but accepted that contracting Lyme disease will be part of the job - it's a matter of when, not if. There is a great opportunity for PDA to be the public face for a tick mitigation campaign in Pennsylvania. This could be as simple as coming up with punny, simple steps farmers can take everyday to limit tick bites and also how to recognize the symptoms of Lyme disease and alpha-gal (which is the disease that makes you allergic to eating red meat). A component of that campaign would also be expanding access to free prevention supplies and at-home testing kits.

Pennsylvania should also make alpha-gal a reportable disease so that we can begin to collect data on its spread and prevalence.

Next, the General Assembly should pass a heat protection standard that applies to all sizes of farm operations. Heat deaths are preventable tragedies, and the solution isn't complicated: training, shade, cool water, and paid rest breaks. House Bill 1580 is one of the proposals out there, though it has not received a vote.

Pennsylvania should also join the 16 other states who allow all workers to apply for a driver's license. Currently, half of workers hired in agriculture do not have immigration status or work permits. Providing driver's license access to all workers in agriculture and food sectors supports farm businesses and our food system and also makes our roads safer. House Bill 1518 is one of the proposals out there, though it has also not received a vote.

The last point about farm viability - the Farm Vitality Planning Grant can be used to help a farm pass from one generation to the next or help an operation diversify its products, to name a few



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its uses. Its broad eligible uses and high reimbursement rate make it accessible and useful to nearly every farm operation.

A few tweaks would help take the program to new heights. First, doubling the per farm cap from \$15,000 to \$30,000 would help keep up with the cost of services and also allow farms to go a little deeper with their project. Second, expanding the program to allow for resilience planning would help farmers get ahead of the next disaster. As farmers continue to deal with the impacts of climate change, we need to give them the tools to plan for the future (while also not creating another, stand-alone grant program). Third, farmers should be able to spend some of the money on-farm to implement the plans they develop. Sometimes \$10,000, even \$5,000, makes the difference between plans becoming reality and plans remaining plans.

The Commonwealth can be a pivotal partner in helping farmers reach new markets and expanding existing markets.

There has recently and rightfully been a focus on the amount of chemicals used in our food system. Unfortunately, the farmer is often left out of this conversation. When we talk to farmers in our network that use herbicides like paraquat or neonicotinoid-treated seeds, we hear about the difficult decisions that farmers face based on the tools they have. Helping farms transition to organic, and capturing the price premium of organic grains, is perhaps the most effective way to *actually* decrease chemical inputs.

To complement federal programs, the Commonwealth could implement an organic procurement policy for state government purchasing to help increase the demand for organic products. We could also expand the types of equipment and practices funded by conservation programs to encourage reduced chemical usage. And the Commonwealth could financially support regional farmer learning circles that allow exchange of integrated weed management (IWM) practices. Farmers learn best from other farmers.

Next, more and more Pennsylvania farmers are creating value-added products to capture more of the food dollar. We are also conveniently located near big markets like DC, Baltimore and New York. We have the supply and demand to make Pennsylvania a leader in value-added products. To help catalyze this, the legislature should give PDA the resources to create a Value-Added Coordinator position to tie together all of the resources provided by PDA and make it easier for producers to navigate food safety regulations. Maryland created a similar position in 2023, which has been well-received by farmers.

Finally, the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS) could be reimaged and expanded so that farmers receive a better rate for the food they contribute to the charitable food system. With only \$1 million in annual funding, PASS is not providing the majority of food to any one food bank, so a refocusing on quality over quantity would not significantly disrupt the



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charitable food system. Farmers in Pasa's network enthusiastically participated in the short-lived, Biden-era Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LPFA) program, mostly due to its competitive compensation rate.

In conclusion, if there's one take away from my remarks, please limit new, stand-alone grant programs or services to only responding to disasters. Farmers are already overwhelmed and confused by the number of opportunities out there. Instead, broaden or tweak existing programs to allow for better access and applicability.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide solutions to agriculture's biggest challenges of the day.

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