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Testimony of John Bixler - Hilltop Urban Farm, Executive Director
Joint meeting of the PA. House and Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
5 Years of the PA State Farm Bill

Thank you to the leadership of the PA House and Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees, and to the individual members of these committees. It's an honor to address you here today.

My name is John Bixler, and I am the Executive Director of the Hilltop Urban Farm, which is located in the St. Clair and Mount Oliver communities in south Pittsburgh. I'm here today to thank you for your leadership in adopting the PA Farm Bill and to briefly describe the incredibly positive impact Farm Bill related grants have had on the organization.

First, I would like to provide a bit of background on the Hilltop Urban Farm. The farm is located on a former federal housing development site that was named St. Clair Village. The development was home to thousands of residents from the early 1950s through 2010.

When the last of the 70 buildings on the site were demolished in 2010, neighbors of the property organized to have influence over how this beautiful piece of property could continue to be a community asset. After years of community involvement, it was determined that an urban farm would be the highest use for this property.

Led by the Hilltop Alliance, a local community development non-profit organization, neighbors worked with the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh, who still owns the property, to work out a lease arrangement that allowed the property to be used for urban farming.

The neighbors of the property wanted to develop an urban farm for many reasons. Many in the community are food insecure and there are very few options for residents to acquire healthy food without

traveling a considerable distance. The neighbors wanted youth programming at the farm to provide positive outlets for the significant youth population. They also wanted to provide agricultural training opportunities for individuals interested in pursuing a career in farming.

In 2018, the Hilltop Urban Farm became a recognized non-profit organization and began offering programming in 2019. I was brought on as the organization's first Executive Director in 2019.

Starting the farm was a challenging and humbling experience. At 23 acres, the footprint of the farm makes it the largest contiguous urban farm in the country. We had extremely compacted and rubble laden soils and very little equipment and infrastructure to work with. That began to change when we were successful in applying for several grants created by the PA Farm Bill. Specifically, we have been awarded Agriculture and Youth Grants and Urban Agriculture Infrastructure grants.

Several acquisitions of equipment and supplies made possible by Farm Bill related grants have been absolute game-changers for the farm.

The first, was the purchase of a BCS walk-behind tractor and several important implements that can be attached to the tractor. As I previously mentioned, we have extremely compacted soils at the farm. The BCS, with the rotary plow attachment, was able to break the soil to expose the rock and rubble left behind from the demolished buildings. To date, we have removed over 700,000 pounds of rock and rubble from the site, most of which was exposed by the BCS tractor. This has allowed us to put land into production to grow healthy and nutritious crops.

Farm Bill grants also allowed us to acquire the components to construct a solar-powered walk-in cooler. As part of our lease agreement, we are not permitted to tap into the electrical grid, so all of our power is supplied through solar energy. With Farm Bill related grant funds, we purchased a non-functioning refrigerated reefer unit, equipped it with solar power and converted it to a large walk-in cooler.

We received additional funding to build wash and pack stations on the exterior of the walk-in cooler. Without this funding, we would have no place to store our crops before donating or before our farmers brought their crops to market.

A third game-changing acquisition made possible through Farm Bill grants include the purchase and construction of a 34'x96' high tunnel. The high tunnel has a solar-powered automated ridge vent and a fan system. This high tunnel will allow us to get an early start on growing seedlings to plant in our Community Farm, which is a half-acre plot grown and maintained by our staff and volunteers. All the produce from this plot is donated to Hilltop-serving food banks and food pantries. This last season, we donated approximately 5,500 pounds of produce from this plot.

Farm Bill funding has also allowed us to acquire a utility vehicle, a riding lawn mower, walk-behind string trimmers and brush mowers.

These grants assist us to provide high quality programming for hundreds of kids from the Hilltop each year. They have made it possible for individuals in our incubator program to put compacted soil into production and have allowed us to grow thousands of pounds of produce each year to donate to those in need.

The Hilltop Urban Farm highly recommends the continuation, and expansion, of these important grant programs.

Once again, thank you all for your dedication, leadership, and advocacy for agriculture in Pennsylvania.