

**Testimony of
Russell Redding, Secretary
Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
Informational Meeting
Urban Agriculture in Pennsylvania
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Good morning, Chairman Pashinski, Chairman Moul, and members of the committee. On behalf of the Department of Agriculture, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to talk about the state of urban agriculture in the Commonwealth.

Although this is the sixth year of the gubernatorially proclaimed Urban Ag Week in Pennsylvania, the roots of these urban gardens, and the dutiful and dedicated farmers who manage them, are much deeper. These urban farmers have worked tirelessly to grow the vibrant systems we have come to celebrate.

The robust network of farms and gardens here in Philadelphia, and similarly in urban centers across the Commonwealth, are driven by the strong vision, dedication, and hard work of community leaders honoring traditions and starting new ones, and I would be remiss not to acknowledge that work here today. These traditions are built largely by Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), immigrant, and refugee growers and communities who have nurtured city grounds for generations, and their work has paved the way for innovation, sustainability, and growth.

At the heart of urban agriculture is the devotion to strengthen the food system, building connections, and removing barriers so every Pennsylvanian — regardless of ZIP code or socioeconomic factors — has access to nutritious, culturally appropriate, affordable food grown and produced locally by members of their community or by their own hands. This work extends beyond the bountiful yields that help to feed and nourish the community. It includes initiatives like workforce and training, economic development and business management, conservation and stewardship — many of the same principles and goals we have for “traditional” agriculture.

Our urban agriculturalists — a term used broadly to include growers, gardeners, and farmers, but not to exclude the rest of the supply chain and system — are growing numerous varieties of food and flowers, caring for animals, and stewarding land to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of urban communities.

Originally, our participation in urban agriculture and communities focused on increasing food security through the charitable food system. It is undeniable that food insecurity is persistent throughout this Commonwealth and is especially prevalent among children. According to Feeding America’s latest Map the Meal gap data for 2021, more than 1.2 million people — 9.2% of all Pennsylvanians — do not always know where their next meals are coming from. Here in Philadelphia, those figures are even more striking, with more than 216,000 city residents — 13.6% — being at risk of hunger. Of that number, nearly 89,000 are children under the age of 18 — an astounding quarter of the City’s children.

These staggering figures have informed our work with food access and security through initiatives including summer feeding, Farmers Market Nutrition Program, and universal school breakfast, and partnerships with the charitable food system. This also contributed to the creation of the Pennsylvania Food Policy Council (Council), in direct response to calls from food systems leaders across the state to deepen collaboration and impact on critical food systems challenges impacting PA residents, communities, and businesses. As a key policy initiative of the Shapiro Administration, this Council is tasked with evaluating and advancing solutions to issues facing Pennsylvania's food system, and it will develop and implement strategies to improve food and nutrition security, public health, environmental sustainability and stewardship, local food economies, and reduced food waste.

The Council will coordinate interagency and stakeholder group leaders around communication and action needed to support healthy, equitable, sustainable, and fair food systems for all Pennsylvanians. Together, these efforts aim to support food sovereignty, which is defined as the right of Pennsylvania residents to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural system. There is undoubtedly more to do to improve food security, and urban agriculture is a critical component of this effort.

As a Commonwealth, we made an intentional investment in urban agriculture through the PA Farm Bill via a dedicated program, the Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grant program. In fact, I was just with the Governor in York yesterday celebrating this very grant program where we announced \$200,000 from The GIANT Company to continue funding a vital urban community farm. Since the program's inception in 2019, we have invested more than \$2 million into 113 projects in 19 counties. This effort has also leveraged private match dollars, as well as generous donations from partners like Horizon Farm Credit and The GIANT Company, to further the reach and impact of this effort.

These projects have been as small as a few hundred dollars for shovels, rakes, and tools for volunteers; and as large as city governments working with many partners to invest broadly in collaborative efforts. Regardless of the cost or scale, each project has built and expanded the infrastructure of urban agriculture by investing in the system, filling gaps, encouraging entities to work together, finding ways to bring operations to a greater scale, overcoming food deserts, and opening opportunities for people to become social entrepreneurs.

Under the General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2023-2024 currently awaiting signature in the Senate for delivery to the Governor's desk, Governor Shapiro and the legislature ensured that the PA Farm Bill was fully funded for a fifth time, and just yesterday the Administration announced the opening of the 2023-24 urban ag grant program. Each year this program is allocated \$500,000, however, the Department receives requests for funding equivalent to two to three times that amount, which is a testament to the need and demand for agriculture infrastructure, programming, and services in urban places.

However, our commitment to supporting and enhancing this work is not limited to this singular program or effort. The 2023-24 state budget would also include \$2 million to re-imagine the Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) which will increase access to affordable, high quality, healthy foods in underserved areas of the state. The program provides critical grants for the development, expansion or renovation of fresh food retail establishments, such as supermarkets or grocery stores, bodegas, farmers markets, and other retail outlets. The FFFI also creates steady jobs for community members living in economically distressed areas.

Throughout the PA Farm Bill, in programs such as Ag and Youth or Farm to School, urban-centric projects have received funding and support. From school gardens in Erie, to training for youth with disabilities in Montgomery, to a youth-led market in Berks, these programs and funds are providing essential links to grow the impact in urban communities.

Through each of these efforts, the Department seeks to support not only the tremendous work of the organizations, businesses, and government partnerships, but the people who are doing the work— particularly the next generation of leaders. Agriculture’s future workforce, including farmers, scientists, mechanics, veterinarians, and critical staff throughout the food system and supply chain, is being taught in gardens on city streets across the Commonwealth. Almost all of the urban farms and gardens in the Commonwealth have a youth component, working diligently with children in their communities, often serving as a classroom, a source of meals, and for some, a safe space.

We must build bridges from our classrooms and these farms to the future. Governor Shapiro’s budget increased funding for Career and Technical Education and apprenticeships, and we must ensure these opportunities are accessible to all students. Additionally, the Commission for Agricultural Education Excellence has adopted a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan, focused on how to better build out supports and avenues for students to engage with agriculture. Pennsylvania has seen growth in membership in MANRRS and Junior MANRRS, organizations dedicated to advancing minority youth in agriculture, natural resources, and related sciences. Through this effort and coupled with our other youth organizations like FFA and 4-H, we are investing and partnering with our future leaders.

As we think of the next generation of stewards, we must also be diligent in protecting their natural resources. Urban agriculturalists are vital in restoring and protecting soil and water quality, and these efforts have driven revitalization and preservation of green space. Soil health is just as critical to the success of farming in urban areas as it is in rural. However, many urban producers face an uphill battle, not only with building soil health, but also remediating contaminated soils. Our urban infrastructure grant program can help urban farmers with soil remediation efforts.

Rain capture systems can help reduce runoff and erosion and ensure the soil stays where it is needed to grow food. Through the Department, State Conservation Commission and local conservation districts, the Department of Environmental Protection, and federal partners like Natural Resources Conservation Service stand ready to support urban farmers in Pennsylvania with conservation efforts, to include discussions about creating a conservation district in Philadelphia. Funding and momentum to support the conservation efforts of farmers, wherever they are, is growing.

In addition to promoting stewardship of urban spaces, we must also ensure that land is attainable, affordable, and accessible. Development pressures are driving higher prices for land, with growers and organizations unable to compete financially. While the Commonwealth offers some resources, like the Beginning Farmer Tax Credits and Next Generation Farmer Loans, and Realty Transfer Tax Credits, land costs remain a barrier for new farmers as does the expansion of existing farms across rural and urban areas alike.

Urban farmers are also often working on land that may be sold or developed, because that land is owned by another individual or entity who does not intend to preserve the agricultural operation over time. We, as a complex partnership involving levels of government, community organizations, and individuals, must work together to resolve long-standing issues with land ownership and access, and preserve and expand the footprint of urban agriculture by increasing access to land and land security.

The importance of land access, farm transitions, and the long-term profitability and vitality is a national conversation, but particularly critical to Pennsylvania. We lead the nation in both the number of farms and acres preserved – we must build the connection for the long-term ownership and stewardship.

The upcoming Federal Farm Bill offers some potential to add resources to meet these challenges. The 2018 Federal Farm Bill created programs for urban and indoor agriculture, and we are hopeful this bill will continue to increase and expand these supports. The Department and stakeholders are actively engaged with Chairman Thompson to further these efforts to increase access to capital, conservation resources, and to make other initiatives scaled and accessible to urban agriculturalists.

The Federal Farm Bill is just one opportunity we have to grow urban agriculture and the multitude of benefits it brings to the Commonwealth. While this testimony focuses on the cultivation and production side of urban agriculture, the impact on the food system does not stop there. From processing, manufacturing, transportation, logistics, small scale kitchens and value-added products, and restaurants, the urban food system is a complex, dynamic, and incredible engine of empowerment and opportunity.

From water and irrigation systems built out of rain barrels to a cheese-processing facility that started in a storage container, revitalizing abandoned lots and city dumping grounds into vibrant green space, teaching youth about their heritage and future, and recognizing the strength in our diversity, urban agriculture brings innovation, impact, and outcomes to the table. This week, and our many interactions beyond these few days, will leave a lasting and resounding hope and inspiration for what is possible in agriculture, anywhere and everywhere in Pennsylvania.

As a Commonwealth, our ability and willingness to grow opportunities through investments, policies, and connections, makes us a unique and powerful partner in realizing the full potential of urban agriculture. By partnering with the community leaders, organizations, volunteers, students, and residents, we can amplify this incredibly valuable work to keep our communities, and Pennsylvania, growing.