

Testimony of

Clay Oliver, Owner Oliver Oil Company LLC; Pitts, Georgia

To the

**United States House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture; Subcommittee on Biotechnology,
Horticulture, and Research**

At the hearing, on

Economic Opportunities for Local Agricultural Markets

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Good morning subcommittee Chairwoman Plaskett, Ranking Member Dunn, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you about my family's farm and the Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG) Program. My name is Clay Oliver and I am the owner of Oliver Farm Artisan Oils.

Oliver Farm Artisan Oils is a small family business located in Pitts, Georgia. Currently we produce oils from six different seeds and nuts. Our oils are sold in retail size, 8 and 16 oz bottles, up to industrial volumes. Cold pressed and unrefined, our oils taste like the seed or nut they are extracted from. They retain their vitamins and healthy nutrients because of the slow, gentle way they are processed and can be used in many ways, from making dressings to cooking and frying. At Oliver Farm we also mill our defatted meal after the oil pressing into finely ground flours. These seed and nut flours offer a tasty Gluten Free option to wheat and grain flours for those with grain allergies, and a tasty twist on classic desserts.

I grew up on a small family farm near Pitts in Wilcox County. My father was the fourth generation to buy and live on the same land. He worked hard to make it during the late 70's and early 80's as a small dry land farmer. My mother and father strived to provide and improve our way of life and instilled in me a strong work ethic and desire to learn that I am very thankful for. I worked on the farm for my daddy and at other jobs throughout my youth. After college and a brief time working in education, I found myself back on the farm working for my father and eventually with my brother Clint. Clint and I rented a 500 acre farm of our own and worked as partners for ten years. On April 18, 2008 Daddy died of a sudden heart attack at 55. My mother, Jurice, Clint and I were thrust into roles we did not anticipate overnight.

During 2008 the great recession also began and people all over felt the effects. Our fuel prices skyrocketed and there was a lot of talk about alternative fuel sources. That sparked in me an interest in an area that I knew very little about. I began researching, visiting oil plants, and talking to individuals in this field. My initial thought was to make my own fuel to supplement what we used. However, the equipment needed to extract oil is expensive, and the savings on fuel would not pay for the equipment for many years. During my research and exploration, I was fortunate enough to meet a couple of people who influenced me to consider growing, processing, and selling food grade oil. After spending some time thinking about it and doing my research, I fell in love with the idea of growing and processing sunflower oil on our farm.

In 2012 I grew my first crop of sunflowers for oil production and by the end of 2012 I had pressed oil from sunflowers, pecans, and peanuts all grown in Wilcox County. From that time until now I have slowly grown our little business and awareness of the benefits of cold pressed oils. My brother now manages our family farm for my mother along with his own farm. Our little artisan oil business has been so successful that after seventeen years of teaching school my wife left education to help with the oil business. We have two beautiful daughters Maggie and Mollie that also help when they are not in school.

When I made the decision to pursue my dream I knew I would need guidance from the Georgia Department of Agriculture and soon joined their marketing program Georgia Grown. Through my involvement with Ga Grown I first became aware of the VAPG program and that I might qualify for it. Then I met Al Burns with USDA Rural Development in Georgia and he encouraged me to apply for the VAPG. I did and in 2015 Oliver Farm was awarded a matching 250,000 working capital grant. The funds were used for:

1. Processing (hire a press operator, bottle costs)
2. Sales (new markets, set up, hire market reps, travel expenses)
3. Marketing (attend trade shows, advertising billboards and other)

The impact of the grant was phenomenal for our company. Having a trained press operator allowed me the time to focus on other things and led to an overall increase our production of oils. The money we used to enter new markets helped build awareness of our brand and a connection to the people. The money I used for marketing opened doors not only for immediate sales, but for relationships to be established and a sense of community beyond our little farm to form. The VAPG money we used for advertising was not only successful in growing awareness of our brand, it also has opened doors for new opportunities as consumers ask for other products and tourism related ventures. For instance, increased requests for on farm visits and direct purchasing has led Valerie and I to invest in a storefront and event space.

Oliver Farm Artisan Oils have since been featured in publications such as Garden and Gun Magazine and The New York Times. Our products have been winners of five Good Food Awards, an International Flavor Award, a LUXE Life Award and our products have been featured in the PBS Documentary TasteMAKERS :Extracted. In addition, our oils are used by great chefs and everyday cooks nationwide and can be found at many retail outlets and at www.oliverfarm.com.

Overall, VAPG gave me support and encouragement to take a leap of faith and grow my business beyond my means. Though it required getting out of my comfort zone in many ways, without a doubt it made our business stronger. The paperwork is daunting and until I was familiar with the process, it was confusing. Thankfully my awesome grant manager I worked with at RD was readily available to help and keep me on the right track. If I could change one thing about the VAPG it would be that the money received is not considered taxable income. It does not seem fair to be taxed on reimbursement of money that one has been taxed on already.

I am very appreciative of the funding we received from VAPG from 2015-2018 and also to the USDA for funding other programs that have benefited our farm. Incentives from the EQIP program helped

transition our farm from conventional tillage to conservation tillage and has helped support and maintain wildlife habitat on our property. My brother and I have used the help of USDA to renovate outdated irrigation equipment and control erosion on an abused farm we purchased in 2010. The impact of these improvements will be felt for generations to come.

Looking forward I hope that Oliver Farm Artisan Oils will continue to be a leader in the good food movement by producing high quality, straight off the farm oils and by building a stronger sense of community through our partnerships with other makers and consumers, and to rebuild the local, fresh food presence in my hometown of Pitts through our new store.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about my family's farm and business and the importance of VAPG. I also want to thank you for reauthorizing VAPG in the 2018 Farm Bill and providing it with mandatory funding as a subprogram of the Local Agriculture Market Program.