

US Agriculture Subcommittee Testimony
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Thank you, Chairwoman Stacey Plaskett and Ranking Member Neal Dunn and members of the House Committee for the opportunity to enter this written statement for the record.

On behalf of our nearly 3,300 students, more than 600 faculty and staff, and over 25,000 alumni thank you, Madame Chairwoman, for the opportunity to provide comments regarding *1890 Land Grant Institutions – 130 Years of Building Equity in Agriculture*.

From the ashes of the Civil War, Alcorn State University was founded in 1871 and traces its heritage back to both the 1862 and 1890 Morrill Acts. Alcorn is unique among the 1890 institutions because it is the only HBCU founded with a land-grant purpose after the first Morrill Act, making it America's oldest public historically black land-grant institution. Also, Alcorn is Mississippi's second oldest state-supported university.

Our founding leadership included this nation's first Black senator, Hiram Rhodes Revels and our students have followed his lead, pioneering new paths in academics, agriculture, athletics, civil rights, government, medicine and other domains – Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alex Haley, Academy Award nominee actor Michael Clarke Duncan, Civil-Rights icon Medgar Wiley Evers and his wife Myrlie Evers-Williams, and NFL legend Steve McNair stand as just five distinguished alumni who dared to challenge the odds.

Alcorn's mission is framed around helping students overcome the challenges before them. We attract a racially and ethnically diverse student body that currently represents 36 states and seven countries as well as students from varied socio-economic backgrounds, with nearly 30 percent first generation and over 70 percent Pell Grant eligible students. For nearly 150 years, Alcorn has demonstrated its resilience and commitment to providing affordable and equitable educational opportunities. It is because of this long tradition of success, 1890's, such as Alcorn, continue to serve as an answer to the nation's agricultural workforce needs of the future.

Alcorn State University serves as the lead institution for the federally funded *Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center*, which was established by the 2014 Farm Bill. The Center collaborates with other 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities as well as private non-governmental organizations on research proposals, policy development, and funding to implement actionable items for the success of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Despite the current challenges presented by the COVID-19 virus, our faculty, staff, and extension agents have continued to find innovative ways to support students, the community and farmers who lack the necessary resources to deal with a pandemic. COVID-19 has further exposed the funding inequities experienced by HBCUs and communities of color. Yet, with our limited resources we continue to do more with less in order to fill the widening gaps in the areas of health disparities, food insecurities, and workforce development.

Agriculture, as you are aware, is critical to Mississippi's and America's food and economic security. Mississippi agriculture, representing \$7.45 billion is the top industry in the state, directly and indirectly employing approximately 29% of the state's workforce. The strength of Mississippi's agriculture is due, in large part, to the strength of the state's two Land-Grant universities – of which Alcorn is the oldest. Through the academic program offerings, research and extension work, the output and efficiency of agriculture in Mississippi continues to improve.

Alcorn State University continues to contribute to the workforce development, cutting-edge research, and outreach efforts in innovative ways. For example, Dr. Keerthi Mandyam's, assistant

professor, is researching in the area of microbiomes of energy grass. Her results have led to the development of 1000+ fungal culture collection with hundreds of fungal endophytes with favorable attributes in enhancing plant productivity and/or soil health.

Assistant professor Dr. Ananda Nanjundaswamy's research focuses on addressing variable yeast ethanol production and the development of efficient conversion rates of yeast transcriptomics under ethanol fermentation from different substrates and fermentation strategies.

Dr. Jacqueline McComb, director of the Mississippi River Research Center, received investigates the use of novel sensor technology in Mississippi to aide in enhancing nutrient use efficiency and increased crop production for limited resource farmers as well as to improve environmental quality.

Alcorn's Extension delivers research-based information and resources through community based programs that improve the quality of life for Mississippi's small and limited resource farmers, ranchers, rural communities and underserved audiences through education and outreach. This past year, over 134, 600 individuals across the state have participated in our programs.

Alcorn's Extension Program is also home to a unique program that helps small and disadvantaged farmers gain access to capital and technical assistance who could not otherwise attain credit from traditional financial credit sources. The Small Farm Loan Program assists Mississippi's small farmers who endeavor to start new farm operations or sustain existing farm operations.

Building on our history of daring bravery, Alcorn today stands as a bright beacon of opportunity, shining forth with a future focused on sending out proud graduates into the world. However, in order to continue this rich tradition of producing top-notch graduates in agriculture our nation must continue to invest in 1890 institutions.

The 1890s are very grateful for the funding provided to support scholarships for students interested in pursuing careers in Agriculture and agriculture related fields. Alcorn State University received \$750,000 from USDA Scholars program, which supported 75 high-achieving scholars of color, including a 2020 Gates Scholar. Additionally, the support provided to establish the three Centers of Excellence, of which Alcorn partners in two of the Centers, supports innovative research and programming at our institutions. These are just two examples of programs that should be continued and scaled through increased funding and support.

The future of American agriculture, farming, and ranching rests in the future of its 1890 land grants. To understand this statement, one must look back and reflect on what we have done to see a vision for what tomorrow will look like. Always on the cutting edge of innovation and progress in agriculture, HBCU land-grants have been at the forefront. Without the work of Dr. George Washington Carver at Tuskegee University, the various colors of clothing we all have on today would not be visible. However, there is an even more important role for 1890s. Artificial Intelligence, Drones and Vertical Farming are only a few of the emerging fields in sustainable agriculture that 1890 students and researchers are capable and prepared to help strengthen the nation's agricultural landscape. In order to remain competitive, facilities at 1890 institutions must remain on par with 1862 institutions if expectations and outcomes are to remain on par.

As alluded to earlier, equity and impact are central to the conversation around the future of 1890 land grant institutions. As many of you know, whether an institution is an 1862 or 1890 land grant, the expectation is that high quality academic programs and relevant extension programs are available to support the citizenry of our state and nation. We must address inequities in ways which more strongly support the intended outcomes of our programs and to ensure that we have representation of color at the appropriate levels in the agricultural community