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## REP. JIM BAIRD IN-04

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of Indiana's farmers, researchers, and rural communities.

I represent a district where agriculture is not just an industry, it is the backbone of our economy and a driver of innovation. From corn and soybean production to world-class research at Purdue University, my constituents are leading the next generation of American agriculture. That is why I am here today to emphasize the importance of strong, strategic investments in agricultural research and market development.

First, I want to highlight the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, or AFRI. AFRI is the cornerstone of USDA's research portfolio and the largest competitive grant program supporting food, agriculture, and natural resource innovation. Over the past several years, AFRI has faced funding shortfalls that limit its ability to support cutting-edge research. For Fiscal Year 2027, I strongly support funding AFRI at \$455 million to restore these cuts and ensure that researchers can continue developing solutions to the challenges facing our farmers.

Closely related is the need to fully support the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority, or AgARDA. Modeled after programs like DARPA, AgARDA was designed to take on high-risk, high-reward research that can transform agriculture. Today, our producers are facing increasingly complex threats—from emerging pests and diseases

to extreme weather and supply chain disruptions. AgARDA gives us the ability to think ahead, invest in breakthrough technologies, and maintain our global leadership in agriculture. Continued and robust funding for AgARDA is essential to ensure we are not simply reacting to challenges but staying ahead of them.

In addition to research, we must also ensure that our farmers have strong and growing markets for what they produce. The BioPreferred Program is a prime example of a successful, market-driven initiative that supports domestic manufacturing while creating demand for American-grown feedstocks. Through federal procurement preferences and voluntary product labeling, BioPreferred helps connect farmers to new markets in the bioeconomy.

However, the program's funding has remained flat since its inception, despite rising costs and expanded responsibilities. USDA has recently announced new policy initiatives that increase the program's workload, but no additional resources have been provided. Without adequate funding, BioPreferred risks falling behind at a time when demand for biobased products is growing. I urge the Subcommittee to ensure this program has the resources necessary to maintain its core operations and fulfill its expanded mission.

At the same time, I want to express concern with the hemp provision included in the Fiscal Year 2026 Agriculture Appropriations bill. Producers across the country have invested heavily in hemp as a rotational crop since it was legalized in the 2018 Farm Bill. While I recognize the need for appropriate consumer protections and clear regulatory standards, this provision was included without sufficient input from stakeholders or the committees of

jurisdiction. As written, it risks undermining legitimate producers and creating uncertainty for farmers who are already operating on tight margins. Respectfully, any changes to hemp policy should be considered through regular order, with proper hearings, stakeholder engagement, and a science-based approach that protects consumers without eliminating economic opportunity for responsible producers.

Finally, I want to underscore the importance of maintaining strong support for our international food assistance programs, including Food for Peace and the McGovern-Dole Food for Education Program. These programs are not only vital humanitarian tools—they are also critical to supporting American agriculture. By utilizing U.S.-grown commodities, they create reliable demand for our farmers while advancing U.S. interests abroad.

Additionally, I want to be sure that Food for Peace continues to purchase Ready-To-Use Therapeutic Foods (RUTFs), made with American crops, to ensure the most vulnerable malnourished children receive the nutrients they need.

In closing, I encourage the Subcommittee to prioritize investments in agricultural research, innovation, and market development. Programs like AFRI and AgARDA ensure that American agriculture remains on the cutting edge, while initiatives like BioPreferred and our food aid programs help translate that innovation into economic opportunity for our farmers.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to working with you to support the future of American agriculture.