

U.S. HOUSE of REPRESENTATIVES

Committee on Agriculture

Room 1301, Longworth House Office Building

Washington, DC 20515-0001

Summary of Testimony of Paul A. Jones Ph.D.

10th President

Fort Valley State University

For

June 16, 2021, Congressional Hearing

Fort Valley State University

1005 State University Drive

Fort Valley, Georgia 31030-4313

Summary of testimony to the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture regarding H.R. 6020, *Funding for Student Scholarships for the 1890s Land-Grant African American Colleges and Universities Act* before the Committee on June 16, 2021.

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the House Committee on Agriculture, I am Paul Jones, and I have the privilege of serving as the tenth president of Fort Valley State University located in the heart of Middle Georgia.

First, I would like to thank you for your leadership during these unprecedented times. The support the U.S. Congress has provided for higher education, including 1890 Land-Grant Institutions, Minority Serving Institutions, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities, has been instrumental in undergirding our students financially, keeping our doors open, and ensuring our faculty, staff, and students remain safe. Although COVID-19 has presented many challenges over these last 15 months since March 2020, we have also discovered several opportunities for investment and innovation that will enhance the experience of our students and change our approach to higher education for the better. We have seen our enrollment increase despite budget challenges; we have developed partnerships with Georgia Power/Southern Company,

Central State Hospital Local Redevelopment Authority, and Ford Motor Company, as well as expanded our use of technology in our operations, teaching, and outreach.

It is an honor to be here along with my colleagues to testify in continued support of funding for scholarships for young men and women who aspire to serve our country by pursuing careers in the food and agricultural sciences, including agri-business, food production, and food distribution. Along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the land-grant system has a monumental responsibility of addressing global food security through rigorous research, extension, and educational programs. Technological advances applicable in agriculture, natural resource utilization and conservation, and food production will enable us to meet this daunting challenge, provided there is an appropriate workforce. The new 1890 scholarship program created in the 2018 Farm Bill helps us develop a highly skilled workforce, and I am happy to report we have seen significant success. Fort Valley State University awarded 76 scholarships last year, resulting in a 22% increase in undergraduate student enrollment within the College of Agriculture, Family Sciences, and Technology. All eight majors offered in the College recorded an increase in student enrollment, with the largest increase in the Animal Science Program. We believe that had it not been for the COVID-19 Pandemic and students' reluctance to being on campus, we would have seen larger enrollments in these agricultural fields.

Given our success and the report released by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Purdue University, I believe the future is bright. I also believe that this scholarship program will continue to bear fruit by consistently producing 1890 graduates who are well prepared to tackle some of the pressing challenges in agriculture and food production facing the world today.

Furthermore, this program will allow students not to be saddled with student loan debt, which is a major crisis today, particularly for students of color. I have no doubt that the number of graduates that 1890 institutions produce in agriculture-related disciplines will tremendously increase with an increasing number of scholarships awarded.

A major issue of concern to all public institutions receiving support for food, agriculture, and natural resource research is aging infrastructure and the lack of funding for maintaining facilities. A recent APLU-sponsored Gordian study revealed some alarming data, indicating a severe backlog of deferred maintenance, and the report estimated the cost to be more than \$11.5 billion. For example, the cost for updating Fort Valley State University's agriculture facilities, including classrooms, farm buildings, greenhouses, research laboratories, and support facilities, is estimated to be \$40 million. While the USDA 1890 Facilities Grant Program helps us address this issue to some extent, allocating funds for a project over a period of five years considerably slows down the progress. A timely and appropriate level of funding for improving infrastructure suitable for 21st-century science that addresses emerging issues in agriculture and food production is absolutely essential.

Emerging technologies warrant institutions to establish suitable research infrastructure and adjust their outreach and educational programming to enable them to effectively train the present and future generation of agriculture workforce and the farming community. There is an imperative and urgent need for institutions to build the capacity to handle huge volumes of data and at the speed and frequency with which they are being collected. This is particularly critical

for smaller land-grant institutions charged with a unique mission of addressing the needs of underrepresented communities and producers and landowners with limited access to technology and resources. In this context, rural broadband access will have to be our top priority to revitalize rural and economically depressed communities throughout the nation. To this end, Fort Valley State University recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Georgia College and State University's Rural Studies Institute to collaboratively work toward three distinct objectives: to enhance broadband access to rural agriculture communities, to enhance economic development in underrepresented communities, and train future leaders to bring economic transformation in rural Georgia.

This is why I was thrilled to see the President's budget include additional funding for HBCUs for infrastructure as well as the ***Institutional Grants for New Infrastructure, Technology, and Education at HBCUs Act (IGNITE HBCU Excellence Act)*** be introduced by **Congresswoman Alma Adams (D-NC), Senator Tim Scott (R-SC), Senator Chris Coons (D-DE), and Representative French Hill (R-AR)**. This bipartisan piece of legislation would be transformational in modernizing our campuses with state-of-the-art learning environments. Furthermore, this will support our unique mission of conducting applied and basic research and outreach to empower small, limited-resource, and underrepresented farmers with the knowledge and skills needed to sustain successful agricultural enterprises.

As you may be aware, FVSU had the honor of hosting Secretary Tom Vilsack, Members of the Georgia delegation, including Congressman Sanford Bishop, a member of this committee to meet

with African American farmers from across the state of Georgia. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's new farmer relief program announced by Secretary Vilsack will make a significant difference in keeping Black-owned farms operational and eventually fiscally strong. As the USDA, with your support and leadership, strives to make it a level playing field for all American farmers by implementing amended lending and subsidy policies to address food insecurity and rural inequality, 1890 Institutions can be valuable partners to help achieve these goals.

When examining ways to promote economic growth and lessen the wealth gap in rural and minority communities, access to technology and workforce development become our top priorities. It is essential that policymakers provide resources for programs that will directly flow into our communities. Increased funding will allow 1890 institutions to deploy resources and programs focused on the needs we see on the ground in our communities. The new initiatives created in the 2018 Farm Bill and the subsequent funding that this Congress has given for our new Centers of Excellence and the 1890 scholarships to increase the number of graduates in agriculture disciplines and the USDA initiative to improve the lives of minority farmers are significant steps that our nation can build upon.

I am grateful for this opportunity to address the House Agriculture Committee today. On behalf of the dedicated faculty, staff, and students at FVSU and throughout the 1890 System, I thank you for your continuous support of our institutions and agriculture.