

serenbe

Written Testimony of Steve Nygren, Founder & CEO of Serenbe

**Submitted to the Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives**

“Soil Health Practices and Programs that Support Regenerative Agriculture”

September 14, 2022
1300 Longworth House Building and via Zoom
Washington, D.C.

Thank you to Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee for the honor to address you today.

My name is Steve Nygren, Founder & CEO of Serenbe, a 20 year old community located in Chattahoochee Hills, in Georgia’s 13th District. I want to talk about soil health and how it can lead to economic vitality - my written testimony will expand on these points.

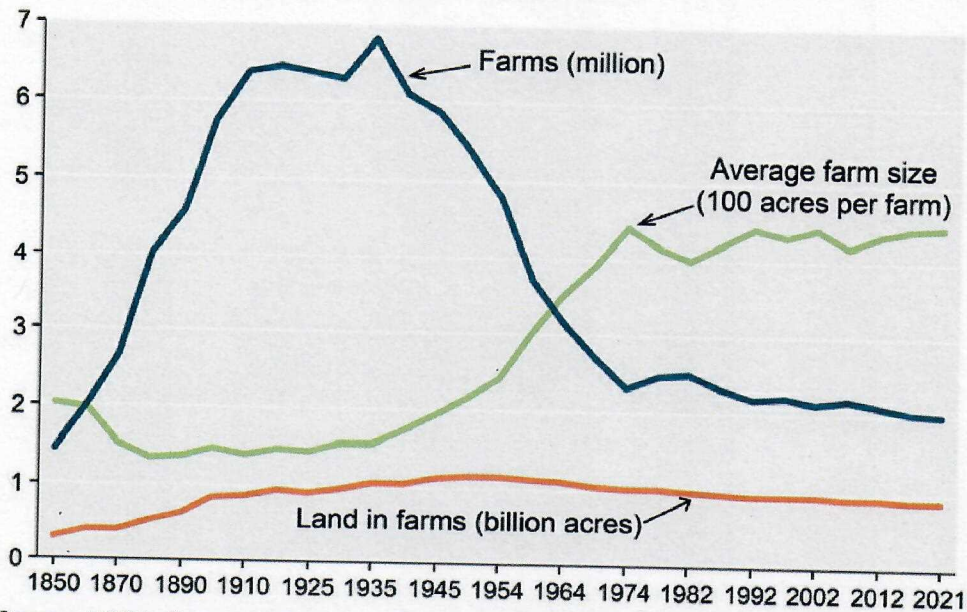
It starts with the local farm and farmers. It leads to the physical and economic health of our citizens and our planet.

The recognition that we need healthy soil should compel us to reorganize our American agrarian economy and what drives it - starting with how we inhabit the landscape. We must produce food locally, implement policies and programs that support this local production, and prioritize regenerative organic farming.

You are very aware of the shrinking number of U.S. farmers and the conversion to industrial agriculture, replacing the family farm. The U.S. lost two thirds of farms during the 25 years period from 1945-1970. What we don't talk about is the damage to the local agrarian economy. Industrial ag dollars do not support the local banks, the local hardware stores, or the main street merchants in the same way that local farmers do. Prior to this Industrialization, every rural community processed its farm production locally. These foods were also consumed locally. Every farm community had an abattoir and butcher, a grist mill, a creamery, a vegetable packing shed, and all other necessary infrastructure to maintain a local foodshed. Farmers strove to increase the value of their production by adding as much quality as they could. In essence, they were competing against each other in their local market. After the Centralization, the goal was to merely meet "minimum standards" and accept commodity prices for it. Rural America has been stripped of its identity and economic stability. And it doesn't end on the country roads but bleeds into the suburbs and urban centers.

Farms, land in farms, and average acres per farm, 1850-2021

Million farms, billion acres, or 100 acres per farm



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Censuses of Agriculture (through 2017) and *Farms and Land in Farms: 2021 Summary* (February 2022).

We are now feeling some of the negative results of this drastic shift and consolidation.

The good news is there has been a renewed interest in local farms, markets and foods that continues to accelerate. The pandemic has also placed a spotlight on food production, the increased health issues our country is facing and how people are dramatically reassessing where they live and what they eat.

In 1950, Georgia produced over 80% of the food consumed in the state.¹ Today it is a fraction of that amount. We are consuming products imported from around the world and eating food grown on U.S. soil with detrimental chemicals based on relationships with foreign governments. This increased dependence

¹ Sanford H. Bederman. *Southeastern Geographer*
[Vol. 10, No. 2, A SPECIAL ISSUE ON AGRICULTURE IN THE SOUTH \(NOVEMBER 1970\)](#), pp. 72-82
(11 pages)
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on a global supply chain for our food could make the difficulties of the pandemic seem mild - should there be a disruption to our global industrial food system.

I grew up on a generational family farm in Colorado. Following college I entered a different segment of the food industry as a hospitality entrepreneur opening restaurants across the country. For those of you who worked on the Hill in the '80's and early '90's, you may remember my restaurant, the Peasant on Pennsylvania. During this period, I bought a historic farm just outside of Atlanta - in an area that would later become Chairman Scott's district - enabling my young children to experience in a small way the rural life I had growing up.

Recognizing the need for investment in the local community and our farmlands, in 2000, I drove an effort to save the rural landscape we had come to love with 500 neighboring landowners. We formed a county overlay for 40,000 acres saving 70% of the land for agriculture. In 2003, we passed Transfer Development Rights (TDR)² legislation for Georgia and in 2004 broke ground on Serenbe, as a community model of balanced growth³ with a working organic farm at its center, Serenbe Farms.⁴ Serenbe is an example of how agriculture can be incorporated within developments, as a financial and lifestyle advantage. For \$34/week, 75 families receive a farm share that includes their produce for the week. Hundreds more are reached through our farmers market, local restaurants - and to combat food waste, our farm has opened the first citywide compost station. Americans throw away about 25% of the food

² Georgia Planning. Transfer of Development Rights. April 23, 2007. https://georgiaplanning.org/student_reports/2007/13--TDR%20and%20Chatt%20Hill/CHC_TDR_report.pdf

³ Serenbe. <https://www.serenbe.com> Accessed September 11, 2022.

⁴ Serenbe Farms. <https://serenbefarms.com> Accessed September 11, 2022.

they purchase for at-home consumption.⁵ The Serenbe model and the emergence of the Agrihood⁶ movement is replacing the indulgence in the golf course communities of the 80s and 90s.

The 2040 Farms Under Threat analysis from American Farmland Trust (AFT) mapped development scenarios for every state in the U.S. If recent trends continue, 798,400 acres of Georgia's farmland will be paved over, fragmented, or converted to uses that jeopardize agriculture. That's 7%. And the equivalent of losing 7,200 farms, \$756 million in farm output and 10,700 jobs.⁷ This speaks to not only the loss of the most productive versatile and resilient soils, it points out the loss of farms, farm output, farm jobs. These are compounded by the inland migration that will result from coastal flooding. We can slash conversion, save farmland and safeguard the future of agriculture and the environment by choosing compact development.

The local regenerative organic farm is an economic solution. I may have built a town but Will Harris of White Oak Pastures, has saved one. Bluffton, Georgia has gone from a ghost town to a destination in a decade. His transition to regenerative cattle farming⁸ now employs 180 with more than \$100,000 in weekly payroll - White Oak is the largest private employer in the county restoring the economy and changing lives in one small rural community.⁹

Many people are interested in returning to the land and there is a growing market for locally produced food grown in soil without chemicals. But we need programs in place to support and promote these

⁵ American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture's Food and Farm Facts book (2021 edition) <https://www.agfoundation.org/resources/food-and-farm-facts-2021>

⁶ Urban Land Institute. Agrihoods: Cultivating Best Practices. 2018. <https://2os2f877tnl1dvtmc3wy0aq1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/ULI-Documents/Agrihoods-Final.pdf>

⁷ American Farmland Trust. Farms Under Threat. 2022 www.farmland.org/farmsunderthreat

⁸ Little, Amanda. Bloomberg. The Biggest Ideas in Farming Today are Also The Oldest. March, 5, 2021. https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-05-15/the-biggest-ideas-in-farming-today-are-also-the-oldest?utm_source=url_link

⁹ White Oak Pastures. Our Transition. <https://whiteoakpastures.com/pages/our-transition> Accessed September 11, 2022.

efforts. Small farms and organic regenerative farmers need an equal opportunity. They need supportive policies with designated dollars that reach hard working farmers in the fields. A few examples of Georgia organizations that support farmers to thrive by providing funds and programs are Georgia Organics and The Conservation Fund.

The member-supported, non-profit organization, Georgia Organics, has been rooted in providing direct support to small and organic farmers across our state since the 1970s. It has more than doubled the number of organic farms in the state through its organic transition campaign – bringing nearly 3,000 more acres under organic management. They prioritize direct outreach to farmers and also provide advice and assistance with paperwork and organic requirements. They pair their organic transition work with a farmer Accelerator Program that coaches farmers on business planning, recordkeeping, and other skills that support financial stability for farms. They point to staff training on the organic certification process and maintaining close relationships with producers as two key elements of their success.¹⁰

In 2018, with financial support from the USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement and the Bradley-Turner Foundation, Georgia Organics led a one-year project to develop a supply chain and marketplace around Certified Organic peanuts that could support small farmers. One of their Accelerator Program participants, Sedrick Rowe, is building the organic peanut sector in Georgia, one farmer at a time.¹¹ Rowe worked with Georgia Organics to experiment with organic peanut production and build the Georgia Organic Peanut Association.¹² He entices more farmers to transition by showing that organic peanut production is both healthier and more profitable.

¹⁰ Georgia Organics. Farmers Services: Accelerator Program.
<https://farmerservices.squarespace.com/accelerator> Accessed September 11, 2022

¹¹ Black Farmer Network. Sedrick Rowe Organic Farmer.
<https://blackfarmersnetwork.com/sedrick-rowe-rowe-organic-farm/> Accessed September 11, 2022.

¹² Georgia Peanut Tour. Growing Peanuts for The Organic Market.
<https://georgiapeanuttour.com/2019/09/growing-peanuts-for-the-organic-market/> Accessed September 11, 2022

The Conservation Fund is working to secure farmland with its Working Farms Fund (WFF), to create patient pathways to affordable land ownership and build wealth for a diverse community of next generation farmers.¹³ In the 2021-2022 year they were able to save 8 Georgia farms across 705 acres, securing \$5.9M in land, supporting 33 farmers and \$100k was invested directly in on-farm infrastructure. Plus 75% of the farm business are minority/immigrant/women-owned.¹⁴ WFF partnerships include Common Market, a distributor of sustainable, local farm foods helping farmers connect to new markets by providing access to a wide variety of wholesale and retail customers and connecting them with institutions and communities throughout the Southeast.¹⁵

Think of soil health as the platform to bring our small towns back to life. This foundational element can be local networks of agriculture, supply and retail. When farming and the soil is rescued, then many other businesses and value-added production will follow. After a while, we'll have fully functioning towns again, built on social and economic roles that give people a reason to think that life is worth living.

Soil health is imperative to America's health.

Through the Farm Bill and the direct actions of this committee, you can affect real change for our farmers, our food systems, our economy and our communities. I thank the committee for their time, and urge you to fund organizations that will directly impact small and historically marginalized farmers working to produce regenerative organic foods. In 2020, only 1% of producers of color received EQIP and CSP funding.¹⁶

¹³ The Conservation Fund. Working Farms Fund.

<https://www.conservationfund.org/our-work/working-farms-fund> Accessed September 11, 2022.

¹⁴ Conservation Fund. Summer Update 2022.

<https://www.conservationfund.org/images/WFF22-Summer-Update-Brochure-081722.pdf>

¹⁵ The Common Market. <https://www.thecommonmarket.org> Accessed September 11, 2022.

¹⁶ American Farmland Trust. 2023 Farm Bill Recommendations. July 2022.

https://farmland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/AFT_2023_Farm_Bill_Recommendations_Summary.pdf

Supporting innovative farmers and ranchers in adopting conservation practices is key to adapting to and mitigating climate change while also improving water and air quality, soil health, and even profitability. Farm Bill conservation programs provide cost share and technical assistance (TA) to help producers implement these practices, but these programs often need more funding and staff to address service gaps and fulfill demand. More must be done to equitably scale up long-term adoption of conservation and climate-smart practices by farmer-leaders, and to set up systems of support to help others build the same resilience. In the 2023 Farm Bill, AFT recommends that Congress:

Increase Conservation Program Funding

- ▶ Increase funding to meet demand for financial support and TA, especially for practices that improve soil health, contribute to climate and water resilience, and reduce GHG emissions.
- ▶ Expand funding set asides for historically marginalized producers.

Support Producers in Long-Term Adoption of Soil Health and Climate-Smart Practices

- ▶ Increase funding for the EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts program and focus these longer 5-10 year contracts on soil health practices to mitigate transition risks.
- ▶ Direct NRCS to continue to increase TA capacity, fill service gaps, and streamline programs to address bottlenecks, reduce producer wait times, and improve implementation.
- ▶ Improve the Technical Service Provider program to enable additional qualified experts to provide TA.
- ▶ Establish a peer-to-peer program that offers CSP awardees and experienced EQIP awardees training and financial incentives to mentor other producers interested in trying out conservation practices.

- ▶ Increase funding for Conservation Innovation Grants and Trials and soil health demonstrations. Prioritize applications that measure soil health improvements and carbon sequestration.

Help Small-Scale and Historically Marginalized Producers Access USDA Programs

- ▶ Increase support for small-scale farms by creating an Office of Small Farms, by piloting a tiered payment rate system that increases EQIP and CSP payments for small farms, and by tailoring application processes to small-scale growers' needs.
- ▶ Fund Community-Based Navigators to help historically marginalized producers apply for NRCS programs.
- ▶ Support NRCS in continuing its examination of potential inequities that may disadvantage producer participation based on farm size, race, income, or gender through the current application process, program ranking criteria, or payment rate-setting process.

Improve NRCS Program Application Processes and Increase Transparency

- ▶ Direct NRCS to streamline the application process for practices that address multiple resource concerns, especially practices that help farmers adapt to and/or mitigate climate change.
- ▶ Direct NRCS to regularly share additional aggregated information on program applicants and awardees based on race, gender, farm size, income level, and funded practices.
- ▶ Direct USDA to regularly share additional information on program outcomes, including GHG reductions, carbon sequestration, water quality, and soil health.

These specific programs and recommendations were pulled from the American Farmland Trust “Building Resilience in a Change World: AFT’s 2023 Farm Bill Recommendations”.¹⁷

¹⁷ American Farmland Trust. 2023 Farm Bill Recommendations. July 2022.
https://farmland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/AFT_2023_Farm_Bill_Recommendations_Summary.pdf

Additional legislation to highlight is the Agriculture Resilience Act¹⁸, that supports soil health through crop insurance, EQIP, CSP and state assistance. Authored by folks at NSAC (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition), this legislation is currently looking for co-sponsors, it is a marker bill that we hope gets adopted into the Farm Bill.

I look forward to your questions.

¹⁸ National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. Agriculture Resilience Act. April 2021.
https://sustainableagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ARA-Section-by-Section-2021_FINAL.pdf