

**TESTIMONY OF BILL HURLEY, CHAIR, ASSOCIATION OF EQUIPMENT MANUFACTURERS AG SECTOR BOARD**

**BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE**

Hearing on

*“Closing the Digital Divide in Rural America”*

JUNE 21, 2023

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and for holding this hearing today on closing the digital divide in rural America.

**A. INTRODUCTION**

My name is Bill Hurley, and I currently serve as Chair of the Ag Sector Board of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers. I am also a Vice President with AGCO Corporation, headquartered in Duluth, Georgia.

I was born and raised in Franklin, a small town in central Texas with a population of less than 2,000 people. My family had a small farm not far from there in a place called Ridge, where my grandmother lived. I spent a lot of time on that farm, and I vividly remember the challenges that came from 10 families sharing a party line. While we have come a long way since then, today’s hearing is a reminder that we have still not fully closed the digital divide in rural America.

The Association of Equipment Manufacturers is the North American-based international trade group representing off-road, heavy equipment manufacturers, with more than 1,000 companies and more than 200 product lines in the agriculture and construction-related sectors worldwide. The

equipment manufacturing industry supports 2.3 million jobs in the United States and contributes \$316 billion a year to the U.S. economy.

The men and women who make the equipment that builds, powers, and feeds the world are not just welders, fabricators, and machinists. Some are farmers and ranchers. And 1 in 3 of them live and work in rural communities across the country, compared to just 1 in 5 people overall in the United States. Our industry is not only deeply connected to rural America—we are a big part of it.

Equipment manufacturers are proud to provide American farmers and ranchers with the next generation of innovative tools that will keep our agriculture sector competitive for generations to come. But farmers and ranchers cannot take advantage of the benefits of precision agriculture technologies without reliable and affordable connectivity across all of rural America.

## **B. THE BENEFITS OF PRECISION AGRICULTURE TECHNOLOGY**

Precision agriculture leverages technologies to enhance sustainability through more efficient use of critical inputs, such as land, water, fertilizer, and pesticides. For example, herbicide use could be further reduced by 15 percent at full adoption. Water use could decrease by 21 percent at full adoption of precision agriculture technologies.<sup>1</sup> Just one-quarter of farms in the United States are currently able to leverage precision agriculture technologies due to the lack of high-speed connectivity. There is a great opportunity for growth in this area. Reliable internet access and smart policies that help farmers and ranchers adopt these cutting-edge technologies will lead to a transformative shift in agriculture practices that drive productivity while conserving resources.

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<sup>1</sup> ASSOCIATION OF EQUIPMENT MANUFACTURERS, THE ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF PRECISION AGRICULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES (2021), <https://newsroom.aem.org/download/977839/environmentalbenefitsofprecisionagriculture-2.pdf>

### **C. PRECISION AGRICULTURE CONNECTIVITY NEEDS**

A multifaceted strategy including fiber optic, low earth orbit (LEO) satellites, and 5G will continue to close the rural connectivity gap, enabling farmers and ranchers to leverage important technologies and management strategies that will help them produce more with less. For precision agriculture technologies to reach their full potential, we need technology-neutral deployment of broadband dollars. It is imperative that all aspects of rural America are connected, from the hospital to the school and from the farmhouse to the field.

We should not prioritize one technology over the other, but rather take an all-encompassing approach, or many parts of rural America will be left further behind. Other game-changing technologies such as soil and weather sensors, machine learning and machine autonomy, equipment tracking, and food traceability will increasingly rely on connectivity. The opportunity in front of us is to prioritize connectivity for the essential food supply chain across rural America versus entertainment streaming speed.<sup>2</sup>

### **D. OPPORTUNITIES TO ADVANCE PRECISION AGRICULTURE THROUGH THE FARM BILL**

The 2023 farm bill is this Committee's opportunity to fully embrace the potential of these technologies by including three bipartisan pieces of legislation in the final package:

- *The Precision Agriculture Loan Program Act* establishes the first federal precision agriculture loan program within the Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency. Loans at lower interest rates and extended terms will give small and midsized producers the tools they need to monitor, manage, and maximize their operations, while significantly

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<sup>2</sup> ASSOCIATION OF EQUIPMENT MANUFACTURERS, THE FUTURE OF FOOD PRODUCTION (2022), <https://www.aem.org/AEM/media/docs/Whitepaper/AEM-Future-of-Food-Production.pdf>

reducing their environmental impact more effectively. I would like to thank

Representatives Feenstra and Panetta for introducing this bipartisan legislation.

- *The PRECISE Act* designates precision agriculture as an applicable practice in the EQIP program. Precision agriculture technologies do and will continue to play a huge role in conservation. Adoption of these technologies allows American producers to do more with less. I would like to acknowledge Representatives Finstad, Hinson, Craig, and Panetta for working together in a bipartisan fashion on this bill.

The Association of Equipment Manufacturers believes that these two bills provide an all-encompassing approach for the adoption of precision agriculture technologies, and respectfully urges the Committee to include them in this year's farm bill.

*The Promoting Precision Agriculture Act* builds on a recommendation from the FCC's Precision Agriculture Task Force, which the Association of Equipment Manufacturers played an integral role in creating and which includes several equipment manufacturers. This important bill directs the Department of Agriculture and the National Institute of Standards and Technology to work together with equipment manufacturers to create standards around interoperability. Having uniform standards for our industry will give American farmers and ranchers more free market options when choosing the technology solution that best fits their operations. I would like to thank Representatives Davis Mann for introducing this bill.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The implementation of precision agriculture technologies depends entirely on the successful deployment of broadband dollars. It is imperative that we work together to ensure that rural America has the same affordable and reliable connectivity as the rest of America.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. The Association of Equipment Manufacturers looks forward to continued engagement with members of this Committee as we work to close the digital divide and strengthen rural communities. I look forward to your questions.