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Chairman Mann, Ranking Member Costa, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this important topic. As Under Secretary for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Marketing and Regulatory Programs, I see up close every day how the hard-working employees of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) are protecting and enhancing the health of our nation's livestock and poultry.

I am joined by Dr. Alecia Naugle, Associate Deputy Administrator of APHIS' Veterinary Services program. She works closely with Dr. Rosemary Sifford, the Chief Veterinary Officer of the United States. Together they guide a workforce of veterinarians and other personnel dedicated to protecting the health and marketability of American livestock.

Their work is essential because too many farmers are in a precarious position – an outbreak of an animal disease on their farm would be disastrous. While the last couple of years have seen record national farm income, we know that nearly 50% of American farmers have had negative farm income. Our data shows that 40% of farms are small and midsize farms where the primary occupation of the household is farming, but the majority of their income to support their families is from off-farm sources. Only 11% of American farmers are mid-sized or larger—representing over 80% of the value of U.S. agricultural production, which drove the record-level farm income at a time when so many were struggling. And lest we not forget that 2% of those farms that did exceedingly well were actually owned by investment banks and institutional investors. Our farmers and ranchers deserve the opportunity to compete in a marketplace where they have a shot at being profitable.

Farmers and ranchers also face a changing climate which is causing animal and pest populations to shift into new or expanded habitats. This movement can result in increased spread of pests and diseases. Under the leadership of the Biden-Harris Administration and Secretary Vilsack, USDA has been working hard to make our food supply chain more resilient and provide rural communities with the tools they need to thrive through investments in developing more, new, and better markets for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners.

USDA's efforts to protect animal health are fundamental to achieving this goal. Every day, APHIS employees are out in the field, on farms, and at the borders, inspecting and conducting surveillance for animal diseases. They are working directly with individual farmers and ranchers, veterinarians, States, and Tribal officials. They share information and best practices about biosecurity and preparedness. They oversee imports and exports of animals and animal products to ensure continued safe trade, protecting and opening markets for agricultural products here and abroad.

The 2022-2023 Outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

Since the first commercial detection of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in Indiana in February of last year, APHIS and its state partners have responded aggressively, relying on long-established and well-practiced disease response plans that are proven to eradicate this virus from commercial facilities. And we have been successful. Compared to this time last year, we have a small fraction of the number of positive premises in commercial flocks: five in March of 2023 compared to 51 in March of 2022. We know the virus load remains prevalent in our wild bird population and APHIS, in partnership with states and industry, remains vigilant.

Our colleagues at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continue to assess that the circulating virus poses a low risk to human health, so we remain focused on limited impacts to animal health.

The 2014-2015 outbreak of HPAI taught us the value of biosecurity. Since then, USDA has emphasized its importance at every opportunity and our efforts have had meaningful results. Producers have made significant improvements in biosecurity, detection, and monitoring on their farms, which has resulted in very little lateral, farm-to-farm spread during this latest outbreak. In the 2014-2015 outbreak, approximately 70% of the cases were due to lateral spread. In this outbreak, lateral spread accounts for just 16% of the cases, a remarkable improvement. But that number could be even smaller. Our efforts show that even minor biosecurity measures have a massive impact on whether the virus impacts a farm. We continue to stress more than anything else, the importance of strong biosecurity to every producer -- from the largest commercial-scale farms to smallest backyard flocks. And we ask for your continued partnership in sharing the important message of biosecurity with poultry producers in your districts. Our Defend the Flock campaign outlines resources and steps that every producer can take to safeguard the health of their birds.

Our counterparts at the Agricultural Research Service are hard at work developing a vaccine to counter the strains of the virus currently circulating so that we are prepared in the unlikely event if we should ever need to turn to vaccination to complement our eradication efforts. This work is ongoing, and it will still be a while before a vaccine could be commercially available and easily applied. Even then, there would be many factors we would weigh before authorizing its use, especially with respect to the likely trade impacts of a vaccination campaign. We will continue to discuss these issues with stakeholders and our trading partners and weigh all these perspectives before making any decisions on policy.

At this stage of the outbreak, continuing our current strategy of eradication or "stamping out" HPAI is our best and most effective option. We can rapidly contain and eliminate the virus in commercial poultry; in fact, the majority of cases in recent months have been backyard flocks. APHIS and our state and industry partners and producers respond quickly and aggressively to reduce viral spread among poultry operations through rapid depopulation and disposal, and surveillance testing for the virus in high-risk geographic areas.

On top of the field veterinarians and support staff who have been leading the emergency response, I would like to highlight the excellent work the APHIS trade staff has done in keeping as many export markets open as possible. While some of these negotiations are done after we

experience an outbreak, APHIS has also made great strides in securing regionalization agreements to prevent market disruptions. APHIS' efforts on regionalization have ensured a science- and risk-based approach that is consistent with APHIS obligations under international trade agreements and the continued free flow of agricultural trade. Instead of limiting U.S. exports from the entire country, these negotiated agreements are often at the state or county level and are consistent with approaches to address HPAI in a science-based and trade facilitative manner. As a result, a contained outbreak in one part of a state may have little bearing on the export possibilities of producers in other parts of a state. This has been a huge benefit to producers across the country and these efforts have greatly helped producers stay afloat during these challenging times.

I thank every APHIS employee who has been deployed around the country, often for weeks at a time, away from family and friends, to respond to this outbreak and I thank our state partners for also responding aggressively. This outbreak has highlighted the critical need for public sector animal health professionals, specifically veterinarians. We need a robust state and federal workforce ready to respond to any outbreak. We are continually evaluating opportunities to recruit and retain talented professionals as well as encourage more students to consider careers in animal science. Unfortunately, veterinary student loan debt and other limitations may make public sector positions less attractive to new graduates. We look forward to working with Members of the Subcommittee and both chambers to identify solutions to workforce challenges, especially in retaining highly qualified, skilled professionals for the benefit of livestock and poultry producers.

2018 Farm Bill Section 12101: Animal Disease Prevention and Management

We know that responding to animal health emergencies is difficult and incredibly costly. The Secretary has used his emergency authority to transfer nearly $800 million from the Commodity Credit Corporation to combat the HPAI outbreak. The 2014-2015 outbreak cost taxpayers around $1 billion. An outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease or African swine fever would have even more devastating economic consequences for the country, producers, and consumers, with costs to the government and producers into the tens of billions. Prevention and preparedness are essential if we are to protect U.S. agriculture, our export markets, and the stability of the U.S. food supply.

That is why we are so appreciative of the tools that Congress gave us in the 2018 Farm Bill. The bill created a three-tiered program to support animal disease prevention and preparedness. It included the new National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program (NADPRP), the new National Animal Vaccine and Veterinary Countermeasures Bank (NAVVCB), and additional funding for the National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN). We are incredibly thankful for your leadership in establishing these new tools and we have worked diligently to fully implement these programs.

NADPRP gives APHIS additional resources to work with its partners to expand the reach of its animal health programs and to identify and fill in gaps in our existing preparedness and response capabilities. Under NADPRP, APHIS provides funds to States, universities, industry organizations, Tribal partners, and other eligible entities to support projects that help prevent and prepare for the most serious animal diseases that threaten U.S. livestock, poultry, and related

industries. Collectively, NADPRP projects boost the nation's capacity and capability to detect, respond to, and recover from animal disease outbreaks that may impact all livestock and poultry sectors and all livestock and poultry operation types and sizes.

NADPRP projects develop programs and provide resources to:

- increase producer's use of effective and practical biosecurity measures;
- training and exercises for animal agriculture emergency responders and producers;
- educate livestock and poultry owners on disease prevention and build awareness of what happens in an outbreak;
- develop and implement carcass disposal and decontamination techniques;
- create and test animal movement plans for outbreak scenarios; and,
- help States develop and exercise animal disease response plans to enhance their readiness to quickly control high-consequence animal disease outbreaks.

One major NADPRP success story is the Certified Swine Sample Collector Training Program, a cooperative agreement with Iowa State University, which has become a cornerstone of our African swine fever prevention efforts. Iowa State worked cooperatively with major swine industry organizations to develop, evaluate, and improve this highly regarded and frequently used training program. NADPRP funded online training videos and other materials to educate sample collectors, and the swine industry has been instrumental in sharing this program with producers and encouraging participation. This program is part of a national diagnostic sample collection training program designed to assure state and federal animal health officials that producers, caretakers, and other pork industry personnel have been trained through a standardized process by accredited veterinarians to correctly collect, handle, and submit samples. This would be invaluable in the unlikely event of an outbreak.

Overall, about 24 percent of NADPRP projects have been focused on improving biosecurity, the importance of which we now see with the HPAI outbreak. About one-third have been focused on improvements for depopulation and disposal, which would be critical in the event of an outbreak. The program has greatly improved the reach of our animal health efforts and improved our preparedness and ability to respond to foreign animal pests and diseases.

Last month, APHIS announced the FY 2023 list of projects funded under this section of the Farm Bill. We awarded $15.8 million to 60 projects led by 38 states, land-grant universities, and industry organizations to enhance our nation's ability to rapidly respond to and control animal disease outbreaks. This year's projects focused on enhancing prevention, preparedness, early detection, and rapid response to the most damaging diseases that threaten U.S. livestock. Projects will help states develop and practice plans to quickly control disease outbreaks, train responders and producers to perform critical animal disease outbreak response activities, increase producer use of effective and practical biosecurity measures, educate livestock owners on preventing disease and what happens in an outbreak, and support animal movement decisions in animal disease outbreaks, among others. APHIS also intends to fund additional projects that will be led by tribal partners and will announce those projects this spring.

The 2018 Farm Bill provided additional funding for NAHLN. NAHLN is a nationally coordinated network and partnership of 60 Federal, State, and university-associated animal

health laboratories, which provides animal health diagnostic testing to detect biological threats to the nation's food animals, thus protecting animal health, public health, and the nation's food supply. We are thankful to Congress for their ongoing support for NAHLN through annual appropriations bills, which provides most of the federal funding for the network. Funding provided by the Farm Bill supplements the existing yearly appropriation and allows the laboratories to take on new and important projects that enhance coordination and animal health diagnostics. As we saw with the HPAI outbreak, the labs that are part of NAHLN are the backbone of our disease surveillance and response, rapidly detecting disease and providing insight into where to focus our eradication efforts.

APHIS has awarded $21 million in funding from the Farm Bill to the NAHLN laboratories over the past 3 years, including a few projects funded jointly with NADPRP. We plan to award an additional $7.5 million this year. It is also worth noting that many NAHLN labs served as surge capacity for human COVID-19 testing during the height of the pandemic, demonstrating their value to our overall national healthcare infrastructure beyond their critical role for animal health.

The third component to the Farm Bill's animal health program is the National Animal Vaccine and Veterinary Countermeasures Bank. While our ultimate goal is to keep foreign animal pests and diseases out of the country entirely, the vaccine and countermeasures bank will allow us to respond quickly should a high consequence disease strike the United States. Per the direction from Congress, the bank is primarily focused on vaccines and countermeasures that would target an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). APHIS has kept FMD out of the country for nearly a century and we are confident that the system of overlapping safeguards we have in place – including the exclusion of imports from affected countries and at-the-border inspections of animals and animal products – will continue to keep the disease out. However, given the massive costs an outbreak of FMD would cause, having a vaccine at the ready is a prudent measure which would work with our existing inspection and eradication measures, and is an insurance policy should the worst occur.

The vaccine bank is focused on providing coverage for the highest priority strains of the FMD virus. APHIS, on the advice of the technical committee that provides scientific recommendations and oversees and guides the vaccine bank, has provided more than $56 million for the purchase of vaccine antigen concentrate and will invest an additional $15 million this year.

Although much of the focus has been on acquiring vaccine antigen concentrate, we also invested $520,000 in other countermeasures, such as diagnostic test kits for foot-and-mouth disease and African swine fever for the first time in 2022. We have a sources-sought notice open to gather worldwide information regarding available test kits for those two diseases and classical swine fever. We will make future purchases after reviewing the responses, with the intent to purchase from more than one source to ensure an adequate supply in case of an outbreak.

Response to the Threat of African Swine Fever

I mentioned previously how important it is to keep foreign animal diseases out of the country. That is why APHIS took immediate steps to strengthen our defenses when, for the first time in

several decades, we detected African swine fever (ASF) in the Western Hemisphere. ASF is a devastating, deadly disease of swine that would have a significant impact on U.S. pork producers and the economy if it were to be detected in the United States. There is no treatment or vaccine available for this disease approved for use in the United States, although we are hopeful that the work of our colleagues in the Agricultural Research Service will soon yield a vaccine that is fully tested and ready for commercial production. The only way to stop ASF is to temporarily halt the movement of all pigs and depopulate all affected or exposed swine herds. A detection here would immediately close overseas export markets, which are critical to the profitability of the swine industry, and it would take many months or years to fully restore those markets.

When an existing cooperative disease surveillance program identified the virus in pigs in the Dominican Republic in July 2021 and later in Haiti, APHIS took swift action to augment and enhance its many existing defenses. We already have a strong system of overlapping safeguards in place, including restrictions against imports of animals or pork products from ASF-affected countries. We looked closely at potential pathways the virus could enter and worked with our partners to close them. For example, our U.S. Customs and Border Protection colleagues enhanced inspections of passengers coming from the region and are closely monitoring the handling of regulated garbage from airplanes. We worked with the Coast Guard to identify boats traveling to Puerto Rico whose passengers could unintentionally carry the virus and have conducted appropriate disease surveillance where the boats were detected.

Most notably, we established a protection zone around Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Since those are U.S. territories, any incursion of ASF onto those islands could trigger trading partners to cut off trade from the mainland. The World Organisation for Animal Health permits the establishment of a protection zone within an area free of disease, as a temporary measure in response to an increased risk from a neighboring country or zone of different animal health status. The protection zone we created allows the continental U.S. to retain its disease-free status and continue our international trade, even if there is an ASF detection in Puerto Rico or the U.S. Virgin Islands. It also allows APHIS to enhance surveillance and create additional rules for movement restrictions of live swine and products out of the protection zone, protecting the islands from the virus and enhancing protections for the U.S. livestock industry.

Beyond establishing the protection zone, we are focusing additional resources on Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. We have removed feral swine in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands because feral swine are a natural reservoir for the disease and could help the virus spread quickly if it moved to those territories. We have also made improvements to the diagnostic laboratory in Puerto Rico, providing resources and technical assistance to increase that lab's capabilities to run important diagnostic tests. We have enhanced inspections of passengers traveling to and through the territories. We have run a bilingual public education campaign in those territories and the region to educate the public, veterinarians, and producers about the risks of ASF and how they can help stop the spread of the virus.

The Secretary, using his emergency transfer authority under the Animal Health Protection Act, transferred $500 million from the Commodity Credit Corporation for these and other enhanced ASF prevention and response activities. APHIS has used that funding to strengthen its response activities and has placed teams of veterinarians and animal health officials in the region. APHIS

officials are working closely with the Dominican Republic, providing technical and financial assistance for a plan to control the disease in the country, thereby strengthening the animal health security of our domestic producers. APHIS is also working closely with the Dominican Republic to modernize and support their animal health laboratory capabilities, ensuring effective and proactive surveillance testing is available in the region. In Haiti, APHIS is focused on providing supplies and remote technical laboratory support to agricultural officials and is working with them on long-range plans, although the political instability of that country presents an ongoing challenge. We will continue to work with animal health officials in the region in further developing those plans and do everything we can to keep this high consequence disease out of the country.

Domestically, we have built upon our existing system of safeguards to strengthen our defenses here. We have trained 65 additional detector dog teams who work with U.S. Customs and Border Protection at key commercial seaports and airports. We have ramped up testing capacity at our National Animal Health Laboratory Network. We also developed an extensive public outreach campaign, including advertising and signage at the largest international airports and digital advertising related to searches and other requests for information about international travel. We have also specifically geared information campaigns towards veterinarians and producers, educating them about ASF and what the signs of it are so that they can enhance our surveillance for the disease.

Animal Disease Traceability

Earlier this year, we issued a proposed rule that would update our animal disease traceability regulations. The rule would require electronic identification for interstate movement of certain cattle and bison, which would strengthen the Nation's ability to quickly respond to significant animal disease outbreaks. Major animal disease outbreaks hurt our ranchers and farmers and all those who support them along the supply chain, threaten our food security, and impact our ability to trade America's high-quality food products around the world. Rapid traceability in a disease outbreak could help ranchers and farmers get back to selling their products more quickly; limit how long farms are quarantined; and keep more animals from getting sick.

We recently extended the comment period for that proposed rule and are accepting comments through April 19. We have received over 1,000 comments already, and I can assure you that we will carefully review those and use that information to determine our next steps on this important initiative.

The Agricultural Quarantine Inspection Program

Before I conclude, I'd be remiss if I didn't note our appreciation for what this Committee and the Appropriations Committees have done to help shore up funding for the Agricultural Quarantine Inspection (AQI) program over the last few years. AQI is the backbone of our efforts to protect plant and animal health. With our frontline partners at U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the program provides the series of overlapping safeguards that ensure commodities, cargo, and passengers entering the country do not harbor harmful pests or diseases. Whether from the APHIS scientific, technical, and regulatory officials deciding what can be imported

safely under what conditions and from where, CBP's inspectors looking through cargo, or the APHIS-trained beagle brigade sniffing out passenger baggage and cargo for meat and other agricultural products, the systems we have in place protect U.S. agricultural resources.

During the pandemic, owing to changes in travel patterns, the user-fee funded program faced shortfalls that could have led to widespread furloughs curtailing our ability to conduct these inspections and scientific and technical work. Thankfully, Congress stepped in, giving the program necessary funding to fill the gap, and we are back on strong footing.

Nevertheless, it has been many years since those user fees were last adjusted and changes in transportation and conveyance methods and sizes have rendered those fees outdated. We are in the process of developing an updated fee schedule, which is going through the rulemaking process. While we are still early in this process, we will certainly keep this Subcommittee informed of our progress.

Conclusion

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to highlight these important programs for you today. I know we are in the midst of another Farm Bill cycle. The enhanced tools that Congress gave us in the 2018 Farm Bill have had very positive outcomes for our animal health programs and we are certain that the Subcommittee's work on the next Farm Bill will continue the critical work of safeguarding animal health. We stand ready to support you as you develop this important legislation and appreciate your understanding that "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Thank you for inviting me to join you today. I'm happy to answer your questions.