



**Testimony of  
Secretary Russell C. Redding  
House Appropriations Committee  
February 25, 2026**

Good afternoon, Chairman Harris, Chairman Struzzi, and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss how we are continuing to plant the seeds for meaningful, lasting impact across Pennsylvania by making strategic investments in agriculture.

In agriculture, it all begins with a seed – one planted in the ground, an idea to be nurtured, a desire to work with the land, an initiative to improve a community – and with some strong nurturing, a lot of hard work, and a little luck, these seeds grow.

Every dollar invested in agriculture is a seed. From these appropriations, we are making investments in Pennsylvania farms and growing impact that extends far beyond the farm gate. These impacts present themselves as we feed our nation, protect communities, preserve our natural resources, and provide a high quality of life for Pennsylvanians.

As we enter the fourth year of Governor Shapiro’s first term, the results of bipartisan, forward-looking investments in agriculture are clear. We have strengthened Pennsylvania’s agricultural foundation by backing farmers and agribusinesses, expanding market access, increasing resiliency, stewarding our land, and accelerating innovation across the sector.

Through strategic funding and strong partnerships, we are delivering real results for farmers, communities, and consumers while developing and supporting the next generation of agricultural leaders. And we are not slowing down - we are building on this momentum to drive growth, sharpen our competitive edge, and secure a resilient, prosperous future for Pennsylvania agriculture.

As every farmer knows, success in agriculture requires constant attention, adaptation, and planning. You must evolve with the seasons, respond to changing conditions, and anticipate future needs to ensure long-term viability. The same is true for how we govern and invest in Pennsylvania’s agricultural future.

As we look toward future harvests, Governor Shapiro’s budget proposal both protects our core programs and plants the seeds for the next generation of growth. It builds on the strong foundation we have established while making strategic investments in emerging priorities that will sustain agriculture for years to come.

Planting strong seeds today ensures a successful harvest tomorrow, and one of the strongest seeds planted early in the Shapiro Administration was agriculture’s inclusion as a central pillar in the Commonwealth’s economic strategy. This action recognized the industry not only as a proud tradition, but as a powerful engine of growth, innovation, and job creation.

That inclusion has already begun to bear fruit. By formally embedding agriculture within the state's economic development framework, we have elevated opportunities for investment, entrepreneurship, and value-added production.

As of December 2025, the Shapiro Administration has invested more than \$268 million in Pennsylvania agriculture through economic development grants, low-interest loans, leveraged private investments, and expanded technical assistance.

This funding spans a wide range of initiatives, including the PA Farm Bill, the PA SITES (Strategic Investments to Enhance Sites) program, financing through the Pennsylvania Industrial Development Authority, the Next Generation Farmer Loan Program, and additional business expansion efforts. In partnership with the Department of Community and Economic Development, we continue to plant the seeds of investment and impact, aligning agricultural innovation with economic growth.

We see that growth in Union County, where Il Pastaio USA opened its first U.S. gnocchi manufacturing facility, investing \$12.5 million and adding 74 jobs, strengthening Pennsylvania's specialty food sector. Or, with Kettle & Fire, who established its first dedicated manufacturing site in Lancaster County, transitioning from co-packing to in-house production, with a \$19.4 million investment that will create 149 jobs. These projects, and many more like them across the state, highlight the Commonwealth's growing food and manufacturing agriculture footprint, creating jobs and supporting local economies.

This strategic vision also directly spurred the creation of the Agricultural Innovation Grant Program, designed to support cutting-edge technologies, new business models, and forward-thinking solutions that strengthen competitiveness and expand markets for Pennsylvania producers.

The nation's first and only Agricultural Innovation Grant program has been a bold step to propel our growth, and we quickly saw the interest in and impact of that program. Funded at \$10 million in the 24-25 budget, this program saw incredible response from across the ag industry, pulling in applications from hardwoods, dairy, fruits and vegetables, hemp, and more. The Department awarded all \$10 million across 88 projects in 45 counties but received demand exceeding \$68 million. The 2025-26 application period is open, and we anticipate considerable interest in this funding as well. To meet this interest, Governor Shapiro has proposed increasing this fund to \$19 million in the 2026-27 budget.

This funding is delivering real, measurable benefits to food, farm, and forest businesses, as they modernize their operations, strengthen conservation practices, and adopt energy solutions that improve both environmental outcomes and the bottom line.

From Painterland Farms in Tioga implementing regenerative farming practices and enhanced manure management systems that build soil health, to James Hite Farms in Cambria upgrading sprayer equipment to enhance crop protection and efficiency, to Chester County's Walmoore Dairy's digester, these projects show how targeted on-farm investments can drive modernization, strengthen conservation, and generate clean energy - ensuring Pennsylvania agriculture remains resilient, profitable, and sustainable for generations to come.

Each of the 88 projects not only benefits the recipient but has ripple effects across the ag industry. Rice Fruit Company in Adams County packs apples for over 40 growers, so their modernized processing equipment increases efficiency for them, and results in on-farm benefits for growers. Metzler Forest Products' grant funds biochar production, which creates a market for low-grade lumber, bringing more value for timber companies, landowners, foresters, and conservation. Swift Aero Seeds from Cumberland County is using drones for cover cropping, and this investment helps them reach more farmers accelerating the impact on water and soil health. Mark's Custom Meats in Centre County previously had to pay a hauler to remove fat from their processing plant. With this grant they are able to produce energy through a boiler using the fat. This reduces the cost of the operation that serves numerous livestock farms and creates a valuable byproduct -- electricity.

Governor Shapiro has been clear: Pennsylvania's energy future must be reliable, affordable, and locally driven, and agriculture is key to helping deliver that vision. Farms and agribusinesses can serve not only as energy consumers but also as producers and resilience anchors for their communities. From anaerobic digesters that convert manure and food waste into renewable energy, to agrivoltaics and modern food processing facilities, agriculture strengthens both rural and urban energy systems.

The Governor's proposed EDGE Tax Credit modernization will attract large-scale investment in energy infrastructure, signaling Pennsylvania's commitment to innovation and growth. This broader investment in climate benefits agriculture by driving technology development, expanding energy markets, and creating opportunities for on-site generation and efficiency upgrades. Supporting agricultural energy innovation lowers costs for producers, strengthens rural economies, and builds a more resilient statewide energy system.

The modernization of the EDGE Tax Credit also makes the Pennsylvania Milk Processing Tax Credit Program more accessible to the dairy industry. The current milk processing credit, which falls under EDGE, has high eligibility thresholds, limiting participation. The proposed restructuring would provide credits to projects that invest \$50 million or create 100 permanent jobs producing dairy products using Pennsylvania milk, with additional incentives for the use of Pennsylvania organic milk. Together, these reforms help dairy processors pursue facility upgrades, expand capacity, strengthen supply chains, and increase milk utilization to strengthen the dairy and farm economy.

Expanding opportunities and market access has been a key priority of the Shapiro Administration. Building on its proven expertise in food safety, plant inspections, and commodity development, the Department will regulate the new adult-use cannabis marketplace, helping farmers bring a new crop to market while safeguarding consumers and increasing public safety.

With nearly all neighboring states - New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Ohio - already legalizing adult-use cannabis, Pennsylvania is losing revenue and business opportunities. Up to 60 percent of border-state cannabis customers come from Pennsylvania, highlighting untapped potential.

This budget proposes legalizing adult-use cannabis effective July 1, 2026, with sales beginning January 1, 2027. It invests \$25 million in PDA to support new and diverse small businesses, including farmers entering this market, and projects more than \$200 million annually in additional revenue. It also allocates \$15 million to operations and technical assistance. Innovation and new

market opportunities emerged as seeds planted in the healthy, well-tended soil of Pennsylvania's long-standing commitment to farmland preservation and conservation. For generations, the Commonwealth has been a national leader in land stewardship, building a foundation strong enough to support new ideas and forward-thinking investments.

That foundation was first established in 1945, when Pennsylvania responded to the Dust Bowl by creating Conservation Districts and the State Conservation Commission. Rooted in stewardship and local leadership, that early seed has grown for eighty years into the largest conservation district network in the nation, now supported by more than 1,000 dedicated professionals and volunteer board members serving communities in every corner of the Commonwealth. What began as a response to environmental crisis has evolved into a powerful, locally driven system that protects our land, restores our waters, and strengthens our agricultural economy.

From that original seed has grown significant impact and sustained investment. Last year, the General Assembly, working alongside Governor Shapiro, demonstrated a renewed bipartisan commitment to conservation by securing \$50 million annually for the Clean Streams Fund. This investment reflects strong confidence in our conservation districts and in the farmers who are implementing practical, measurable solutions on the ground. Through the Fund, critical resources support the Agriculture Conservation Assistance Program (ACAP), the Clean Water Procurement Program, the Nutrient Management Fund, stormwater initiatives, acid mine drainage treatment, and tree planting efforts, reinforcing a comprehensive and coordinated approach to protecting Pennsylvania's natural resources.

Before the creation of ACAP, Pennsylvania lacked a true statewide agricultural conservation cost-share program. Today, ACAP ensures funding reaches all 67 counties, empowering conservation districts to make decisions locally, where knowledge of the land and trusted relationships with producers are strongest. That local model is one of the program's greatest strengths. Farmers are not navigating distant bureaucracies; they are working side-by-side with professionals who understand both agricultural realities and environmental priorities.

The results demonstrate both strong demand and measurable impact, both locally and to the Chesapeake Bay. Nearly 2,000 farmers have applied for financial and technical assistance, and well over 1,000 contracts have already been executed. In fiscal year 2022–23, \$154 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding was committed to the Clean Streams Fund, benefiting nearly every county in the Commonwealth, including Philadelphia. More than \$139 million of those funds have already been deployed through signed contracts with farmers, translating public investment into conservation practices that reduce nutrient and sediment runoff, improve soil health, and enhance long-term farm viability. The 2026–27 budget builds on this momentum with a proposed additional \$35.75 million annually to sustain and expand these efforts, which is critically important as federal funding sources and technical assistance are being reduced.

At Twin Brooks Farm in Wayne County, a \$1.37 million project funded by ACAP, DEP Growing Greener, federal NRCS EQIP dollars, and the landowners themselves, implemented fencing, grazing management, manure storage, and water systems to reduce runoff, protect a High-Quality stream, and improve farm resiliency. In Westmoreland, the John Kitz family farm completed a \$157,600 conservation project, supported by ACAP and partner contributions. The farm installed streambank fencing, stabilized crossings and heavy-use areas, livestock watering systems, paddock fencing, and a riparian forest buffer. These measures reduced sediment and nutrient

runoff, improved pasture health, and strengthened the farm's long-term resilience. These stories, and many more like them across the state, are showing the incredible impact these investments are making for our farmers and our environment.

A significant milestone in this conservation journey was the PA Farm Bill, which created the Conservation Excellence Grant (CEG) program and since starting in 2019, has provided more than \$34 million to support innovative, voluntary conservation practices. The program also directed \$2 million toward nutrient management efforts in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, an area the EPA has recognized as one of the most effective basins in the nation for implementing agricultural best management practices. These investments underscore Pennsylvania's leadership in combining environmental stewardship with agricultural productivity.

Eighty years after the first conservation districts were formed, we can clearly see the harvest of the seed planted in 1945. It has grown into a trusted statewide network grounded in local leadership, measurable outcomes, and strong partnerships with farmers. In 2025, Governor Shapiro was elected Chair of the Chesapeake Bay Program's Executive Council, which is made up of Governors from Bay states, marking the first time a Pennsylvania governor has served as Chair in 20 years.

By continuing to invest in conservation, we honor that legacy while ensuring future generations inherit a Pennsylvania defined by productive farmland, clean water, and resilient rural communities. We are also working to make these efforts easier for farmers by improving permitting.

In 2025, the Governor's Office of Transformation & Opportunity (OTO) helped more than 300 businesses navigate permitting and other state resources. Nearly 70 of those businesses were members of the food and agriculture community.

A great example of this support is the Kulp Dairy Farm, a third-generation family farm in Blair County. The farm reached out to OTO when they became concerned about potential permitting delays for their new expansion. OTO worked closely with the farm and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to elevate the project's needs. As a result, the Kulp family received their permit more than four months ahead of schedule.

Today, the Kulp's expansion is well underway, adding new barns and other infrastructure improvements that will allow the farm to add nearly 1,000 dairy cows, increasing its milking capacity while sustaining and creating local jobs.

With a whole-of-government approach to permitting and process reform, we are all striving to work at the speed of business - time is money for project owners, but it is also community jobs, local economic development, and overall regional and state growth. Our partners at DEP have championed this in their efforts to streamline permitting, reducing backlogs and seeing significant reductions in processing times. From 2023 to 2024, there was a more than 65% decrease in Chapter 102 General Permit processing time - a win for agriculture, a win for business, and a win for the Commonwealth.

Another transformative seed was planted in 1988 with the creation of the Farmland Preservation Program. Since then, the program has safeguarded 6,673 farms in 58 counties, accounting for over 662,940 acres of productive farmland and invested \$1.8 billion dollars to ensure agriculture

remains a cornerstone of our economy, heritage, and future. Farmland preservation is not simply about protecting productive open space, it is a long-term commitment to food security, economic vitality, and preserving a way of life that defines Pennsylvania.

To nurture this seed further, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Business Development Center runs the Farm Vitality Planning Grant, which has invested \$638,134 across 54 projects to support business planning, farm transitions, and long-term economic sustainability. Since 2023, more than 170 grants have been approved, reaching 80% of Pennsylvania's counties. About 60% of these projects focus on farm transition planning, with all supporting the enduring success of participating farms. Almost one third of the farms who received these grants are preserved.

Each of these grants tells the story of many seeds planted, nurtured, and harvested. Jubilee Heritage Dairy in Dauphin County proudly completed the transition of their family farm to the next generation - the tenth generation to steward that land. After years of farming side by side with the senior generation, the family used grant support to bring together trusted financial, legal, and agricultural advisors to guide thoughtful estate planning and succession decisions. The process honored their legacy while easing the financial strain of transition, ensuring the farm remains strong, sustainable, and in family hands for generations to come.

The goal of the Farmland Preservation Program is to protect prime, productive soils from development, ensuring that Pennsylvania's agricultural resources remain strong for generations to come. This forward-looking commitment to safeguarding our future is central to the Department's mission.

That same spirit of protection extends beyond the land itself to the people and communities it supports. Through the Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement, the Bureau of Weights, Measures, and Rides, and our Food Safety programs, the Department works every day to protect consumers, ensure fair commerce, and uphold public safety. Governor Shapiro's budget underscores this commitment by protecting a safe and stable food supply, with investments ranging from animal health to food access and assistance.

One of the greatest challenges facing Pennsylvania agriculture is the threat of animal diseases that can disrupt entire sectors, jeopardize livelihoods, and place livestock at risk. Since 2022, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has tested our poultry industry and our response systems. Working closely with industry, academia, and state, local, and federal partners, the Department has remained vigilant as cases ebb and peak with wild bird migration patterns, continuing active monitoring and rapid response into 2026.

From when the current outbreak began in February 2022 to when we hit the four-year mark last week, Pennsylvania has lost more than 14.5 million birds — with approximately half of these lost since the beginning of 2026. As of mid-February 2026, Pennsylvania's response team is working in 21 locations across the Commonwealth, battling a historic surge of the virus and the situation continues to evolve.

From the beginning, every dollar committed to combating HPAI has been an investment in the future of Pennsylvania agriculture.

We established the nation's first dedicated HPAI Recovery Fund, committing \$75 million between 2022 and 2024. Today, \$59.45 million remains in reserve to meet ongoing needs. To date, 300 poultry businesses have received \$15.55 million in grants to offset losses, stabilize operations, and strengthen biosecurity. For 150 farms, those grants funded long-term improvements that reduce disease risk and build resilience. These investments are not temporary relief; they are structural safeguards for the future.

At the same time, we strengthened prevention and detection capacity. From July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2025, Pennsylvania's Animal Diagnostic Laboratory System processed 672,342 HPAI tests, including more than 200,000 poultry samples and 29,000 cattle samples. Early detection limits spread, reduces losses, and protects both domestic and export markets.

Recognizing that risk evolves, our capacity must as well. Governor Shapiro secured \$6 million in the 2024–25 bipartisan budget to establish a fourth diagnostic laboratory at Penn State Beaver. His proposed 2026–27 budget includes \$11 million for Agricultural Preparedness and Response, including \$2 million to support operations at that new lab. These investments will increase surge capacity, accelerate diagnoses, and expand access to timely testing — particularly for producers in western Pennsylvania.

We have also strengthened our workforce. Act 1 of 2025 modernized Pennsylvania's animal health laws, expanding the authority of Certified Poultry Technicians and broadening eligibility to individuals legally authorized to work in the United States. With this law, expanded training and translated materials, 211 new technicians have been certified, helping meet critical demand during outbreaks.

Despite these sustained investments, HPAI remains a serious threat. Since February 2022, Pennsylvania has lost more than 14.5 million birds across 23 counties. In 2026 alone, confirmed infections on 21 premises resulted in the loss of more than 7.3 million birds, and growing.

And HPAI is not the only risk. African swine fever, porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome, and New World screwworm pose significant economic and biosecurity threats to Pennsylvania livestock. Any one of these diseases could disrupt markets and strain rural communities. That is why sustained investment in diagnostics, surveillance, and coordinated response systems remains essential.

The Pennsylvania Animal Diagnostic Laboratory System (PADLS) is central to this strategy. In 2024 alone, PADLS laboratories tested more than 600,000 specimens for diseases including avian influenza, rabies, and chronic wasting disease. Timely, accurate testing allows producers to identify issues early, limit spread, meet regulatory requirements, and maintain consumer confidence.

Strong partnerships amplify this work. Organizations such as the PA Center for Dairy Excellence, the Centers for Poultry & Livestock Excellence, the Center for Beef Excellence, PennVet, and Penn State University and Extension provide research-based expertise, on-farm training, and biosecurity guidance that strengthen resilience across the sector.

Governor Shapiro's budget continues to prioritize these efforts. From the HPAI Recovery Fund to PADLS expansion and workforce modernization, these investments reinforce our agricultural

infrastructure and protect one of the top sectors within Pennsylvania's \$132.5 billion agriculture industry. By investing in animal health today, we are safeguarding farm families, rural communities, market stability, and the long-term security of Pennsylvania's food supply.

These state investments come at a critical time as the national farm economy remains strained. Declining revenues, rising land prices, and extreme weather events continue to be major issues for farmers, and federal-level disruptions - including the government shutdowns, high inflation, labor shortages, immigration pressures, and tariffs - have amplified these challenges, creating volatile markets and squeezing already tight margins. Despite the federal Farmer Bridge Assistance Program, the American Farm Bureau cites that "government payments do not fully offset the scale of losses farmers have absorbed in recent years. With production costs still high and market prices under pressure, many operations remain below breakeven, even after accounting for disaster and economic assistance, leaving significant financial gaps."

Federal-level changes have added to the challenges facing farmers and the broader food system. The passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act shifted program spending to farm programs, while also creating fundamental changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that ultimately resulted in fewer people qualifying. This has a direct impact on the purchasing power of the American consumer, which negatively impacts farms. Coupled with elimination of the Local Food Purchase Cooperative Assistance Program (LFPA), this has created additional pressures for food insecure individuals.

When the current federal Administration made the unprecedented decision to stop funding SNAP benefits during the federal government shutdown, the Shapiro Administration took immediate action. Moving swiftly to safeguard food access for Pennsylvanians affected by the federal government stepping back, the Governor signed a disaster declaration and directed \$5 million in emergency state funding to support the charitable feeding network. Utilizing these funds, the state's network of food banks was able to purchase and distribute Pennsylvania-produced foods, providing critical support to the two million residents who rely on SNAP. In addition, the Shapiro Administration launched the SNAP Emergency Relief Fund, which generated more than \$2 million in private donations to strengthen the Commonwealth's charitable food network.

Beyond the program's critical health and food benefits, SNAP is also an economic driver for Pennsylvania's local businesses. In Pennsylvania, more than 10,600 retailers, across 38,000 locations, accept SNAP benefits for food purchases. If millions of Pennsylvania residents are forced to cut back on food spending all at once, this will immediately and drastically affect the economic well-being of vendors, farmers, and stores across Pennsylvania. According to the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS), nearly 25-cents of every \$1 spent on food for use at home directly benefits the farmer. Moreover, ERS found that each \$1 issued in SNAP benefits grew Pennsylvania's economy by \$1.54 through job retention, creation, and income for farms and other agricultural producers.

The Governor's proposed budget includes \$6.5 million for the PA Agricultural Surplus System (PASS), an innovative program that connects Pennsylvanians at risk of hunger with healthy, locally grown food. This program not only addresses hunger but also provides vital sales channels for farmers, benefiting the state's agricultural economy. To date, since this program was first funded in the 2015-2016 state budget, PASS funds have been used to purchase more than 36 million pounds

of food from more than 270 unique growers and producers in Pennsylvania. Collectively, over the past decade, PASS has helped to put food on the table for more than 9 million households.

The budget also proposes more than \$23 million for the State Food Purchase Program. These funds provide a critical supplement to the foods provided by the federal government, ensuring counties have the resources to purchase and distribute a well-rounded food package to low-income residents.

The need is urgent: more families are struggling to access nutritious food, and one in six children in Pennsylvania face food insecurity.

The Governor's proposed budget also creates and protects economic opportunity through several proposals that plant the seeds of opportunity.

Pennsylvania's minimum wage has remained at \$7.25 an hour for more than 15 years, eroding purchasing power and leaving hundreds of thousands of working families struggling to meet basic needs. As wages lag behind the cost of living, demand increases on food assistance and other public support programs that serve communities across the Commonwealth.

The 2026–27 budget again calls on the General Assembly to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour beginning January 1, 2027. Higher wages would strengthen consumer purchasing power, enabling families to better afford fresh, local food and supporting Pennsylvania farmers and food businesses in the process. Increased household income also promotes workforce stability across the broader food system and local economies.

By raising wages for thousands of workers who currently rely on public benefits, the Commonwealth would reduce dependence on SNAP and other assistance programs, generating significant taxpayer savings while easing pressure on safety net services. Strengthening economic stability for working families ultimately reinforces both Pennsylvania's agricultural economy and the food assistance network that ensures families have reliable access to nutritious food.

By strengthening wages and economic stability, we not only support working families but also reinforce the broader agricultural economy and the food system that nourishes communities. These efforts plant the seeds for stronger local economies, healthier communities, and more resilient food networks, creating a foundation for long-term growth and opportunity.

Through these investments, Governor Shapiro is strengthening food access, supporting local agriculture, and promoting the health and well-being of communities across Pennsylvania. Cultivating a strong workforce is a key part of this effort. By partnering with the Department of Labor and Industry and industry leaders, the Department is helping to sow the seeds of opportunity through apprenticeships, training, education programs, and workforce services. These initiatives expand capacity, close critical gaps, and ensure that Pennsylvania's farm, forest, and food industries have the skilled, dedicated talent they need to grow, thrive, and continue providing for communities across the Commonwealth. The Department recognizes 10 ag apprenticeship programs and 4 pre-apprenticeship programs that have been registered with PA's Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO).

This work continues, with L&I dedicating \$2.54 million in grant funds through the *"Supporting Pennsylvania's Agriculture Sector through Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeships"* program, designed to cultivate agricultural-specific apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. For a long time, we have been hearing from the industry about the need for specialized programming tailored to agriculture, and this initiative directly addresses that need. The grants were awarded in April 2025 to 8 different organizations supporting creation and expansion of 4 new apprenticeship programs and 4 pre-apprenticeship programs. This marks a significant step forward in creating a robust pipeline for agricultural talent, helping to bridge the gap between workforce development and the agricultural sector's unique demands.

In addition to these efforts, L&I has targeted support for agriculture employers and businesses, providing critical human resources and business assistance through a grant awarded to Penn State Extension. This funding will allow Penn State Extension to offer HR services to over 100 agribusinesses and connect more than 1,000 agriculture employers with the workforce system. These grants and initiatives are helping to elevate the connection between workforce development and the agricultural industry, ensuring the rise of a skilled and dependable workforce for the future.

I was proud to join Labor and Industry and the PA State Council of Farm Organizations again this year to present the Frontline Ag and Farm Worker Award, honoring the people who are the backbone of our food system. These awards recognize the often unseen individuals whose labor makes Pennsylvania's nation-leading agriculture and food system possible. This year, we celebrated three workers whose contributions span the full supply chain - from field and livestock labor to seasonal planting, harvesting, and food processing. Each recipient was foreign-born, underscoring the essential role immigrant labor plays in the strength, stability, and security of our food system.

On the ground, immigration is not abstract. It shows up every morning on farms, in milking parlors, across orchards and fields, and throughout processing, packaging, and distribution. Federal data underscores this reality: in fiscal year 2025, the H-2A program reached more than 400,000 certified positions for the first time, while only 182 local applicants applied for more than 415,000 available jobs – less than .04 percent. These are not jobs that can be filled without skilled guest workers. From caring for livestock and operating specialized equipment to safely handling food in processing facilities, immigrant workers bring expertise critical to quality, safety, and productivity. When labor becomes uncertain, entire operations and the broader food system are put at risk.

We must also recognize the human side of this conversation. Many immigrants live with daily uncertainty about their legal status, families, and futures, yet they show up and work long hours to keep our food system running. They are neighbors, parents, and contributors to communities across Pennsylvania. At the same time, we must balance this reality with enforcement and fairness, ensuring legal pathways are accessible and reliable. Programs like H-2A are a start, but thoughtful federal reform is needed to provide stable, practical solutions for year-round and seasonal agricultural labor, strengthening both our workforce and the security of America's food supply.

Just as we must invest in supporting today's workforce, we must also plant seeds for the next generation. Pennsylvania's youth represent the future of agriculture, and providing opportunities, training, and mentorship is essential to sustaining a skilled, resilient, and innovative workforce for years to come.

Programs like the PA Farm Bill's Farm to School and Agriculture and Youth initiatives, and the Pennsylvania Farm Show's educational programs give students hands-on experience and introduce them to careers in farming, food production, and sustainable practices. Leadership and technical skills are further developed through 4-H, FFA and agricultural education programs, while mentorship initiatives connect young people directly with farmers and industry professionals.

Each of these efforts is a seed - an investment in knowledge, experience, and opportunity that will grow into a workforce capable of supporting Pennsylvania's farms, food systems, and rural communities. By nurturing both today's employees and tomorrow's leaders, we ensure that the Commonwealth's agricultural sector remains strong, innovative, and resilient for decades to come.

None of this progress would be possible without the dedicated employees of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. Their unwavering commitment to supporting our agricultural industry is like planting seeds in great soil - each day, their expertise, energy, and passion cultivate growth across the Commonwealth. Whether managing regulations, overseeing inspections, providing technical guidance, or safeguarding food safety, their work ensures that Pennsylvania's farms, food systems, and forests thrive. These employees are not just part of the team; they are the roots and foundation of the state's agricultural success, nurturing resilience and cultivating opportunities even in the face of new challenges.

Each investment we make, each program we implement, is a seed sown for long-term prosperity. Pennsylvania has a proud history of partnering with its agricultural industry to cultivate success, and the results are clear: thriving communities, robust local economies, strong job growth, and a secure, accessible food supply. The achievements of our farms and food systems produce a ripple effect that benefits all Pennsylvanians - a harvest of stability, opportunity, and shared prosperity.

Governor Shapiro's budget continues to plant these seeds for the future. By investing in our agricultural workforce, supporting innovation, expanding market access, and strengthening food security, the budget ensures that the fruits of Pennsylvania's agriculture community continue to grow. These investments are not simply expenditures - they are deliberate plantings that yield resilience, opportunity, and impact over time.

Through people, programs, and policies, the seeds we plant today will continue to bear fruit, strengthening our farmers, communities, and the entire Commonwealth. Each action is an investment in growth, and each harvest reflects the lasting impact of strategic, forward-looking support for Pennsylvania agriculture.