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Committees:

Agriculture and Natural Resources - *Ranking*
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Finance
Energy and Public Utilities

Chair Cirino, Vicechair Chavez, and fellow members of the Finance committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on Senate Bill 120, the Urban Farmer Youth Initiative Program.

This legislation builds upon the success of the Urban Farmer Youth Initiative Pilot Program from the previous General Assembly, implemented in partnership with the extension centers at Central State and Ohio State Universities. The pilot program has demonstrated that when we invest in urban youth and provide them with hands-on agricultural education through collaboration with our institutions of higher education and community leaders, we can not only address food insecurity and health disparities at the local level, but we also strengthen Ohio's agricultural future.

Senate Bill 120 proposes an increase from the \$500,000 allocated over the 2023-2024 biennium to a \$1 million appropriation over the next two years to expand this initiative. These funds will support programming for urban youth ages six to eighteen, delivered through our land grant universities' extension offices to community leaders across Ohio in the Urban Agricultural space. The program's goal is to provide meaningful, practical agricultural education to youth with hands-on training of specialized small-scale and non-traditional farming practices. This means working directly with growers and educators in urban environments who are also community leaders that already engage young people in farming and food production to feed their local areas.

Last year I met with the young farmers of 10 farms in the areas of Cincinnati, Dayton, Akron, Toledo, and Springfield that received grants from the pilot program in the last General Assembly. I saw first-hand the transformative power of this initiative. These farms weren't just growing produce—they were helping to grow local food systems, and they were creating future farmers and leaders. Many of the youth I met would have never had the opportunity to participate in a program like this without the expertise of these urban farmers from their communities and the support that the 135th GA's budget allocation provided.

The Urban Farmer Youth Initiative Program is different from traditional farming programs like the 4-H program and FFA. It is specifically tailored to the realities of urban environments, meaning: often utilizing smaller plots, managing smaller or less farm animal stock, specializing in unique methods of planting produce and irrigating plots, and so much more. While 4-H and FFA have historically been most successful in rural to suburban areas, and are now working to embrace urban youth, the Urban Farmer Youth Initiative Program is an addition—not competition—too these historic programs. The Urban Farmer Youth Initiative Program offers a different set of expertise. This program not only fills the gap for many Ohio youth by giving them access to green space, agricultural mentors, and the infrastructure that

supports non-traditional farm education, but it also helps secure Ohio's future in remaining competitive to the agricultural industry. Through this program, we can offer young farmers the tools, knowledge, and inspiration to pursue careers in agriculture, food science, and environmental and food-system sustainability that will offer both these young farmers and the state of Ohio endless future opportunities.

By investing in the Urban Farmer Youth Initiative Program, we are leveraging the best resources Ohio has to offer— in our youth, in our land grant institutions, and in our food production—to secure Ohio's future in agricultural production. Senate Bill 120 is an investment in the promise of tomorrow. I urge your support the Urban Farmer Youth Initiative Program.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony. I stand ready to answer any questions.

