

Hello members of the Ways and Means Committee.

My name is Kate Hodges. I farm as one of the owners of Foraged & Sown. I live in Columbus and I farm in West Jefferson.

I come today to testify in support of HB95, the Family Farm ReGeneration Act, as a first generation farmer in central Ohio. My farm, foraged & sown, is a women-owned certified organic farm, founded by me almost 8 years ago. As an informed consumer, I followed a passion for growing flavor-filled produce as a gardener since childhood down a natural path towards farming. And as a first-generation farmer, I started in the place that so many do, my own residential lot.

We focus on culinary herbs and specialty berries, crops that can grow in small spaces. As customer interest in our farm-grown teas, culinary salt blends and fruit and herb preserves surpassed the quantity we could eek out of our patched together growing spaces in the city of Columbus, it came time for the farm to make a land purchase.

This decision was not made lightly, yet the necessity of assuming the risk of a mortgage was clear.

For 2 years I watched the market closely and found properties, still very small by farming standards, come up for sale and quickly sell and be split into residential parcels. I spoke with farmers - whose properties were too large for my management who wanted their land to stay in production but didn't have children who wanted to take over their business. I dreamed and schemed of ways to make any of the properties work that I found, and I became disheartened.

Farming is a necessary occupation. The inherent instability of so many aspects of growing give no guarantee for profit or livelihood. Farmers know this. There's little we can do to mitigate some amount of loss to weather, pests, labor shortages... the list is long.

And farming is an occupation whose average age is rapidly increasing. We know, and we farmers especially know, that young age is your friend in such physically-demanding work. The average age of a farmer in Ohio is 55.

If the right folks who are, maybe the most pathologically hopeful humans around, find themselves racing into the complicated world that is farming, it behooves all of society to place the wind at their back.

Building a farm is a complex set of simultaneous acquisitions, especially for those of us coming into farming as first-generation: To get started, we need to acquire knowledge, physical tools, equipment, seeds and rootstock, and of course access to land. That land access is the toughest piece of the puzzle.

The good news in Ohio is that we're in the top 10 states when it comes to the number of beginning farmers. However, our state loses farmland at the rate of 3 acres per minute. And my story of a lack of land security is not an outlier. Land is becoming more expensive, as farmable land looks just like land that is ripe for development.

My story has a happy stopping point. My mentor was compelled to split a parcel from their farm so that I could purchase the 3.5 acres in West Jefferson in January of 2020 that now house our much expanded production and a new pole barn drying facility. This was a sacrifice for their production capability, as they are still farming and still well below the average age of 55.

As Foraged & Sown continues to grow, if it's on the same trajectory we've cultivated since our beginning in 2015, we'll be on a quest for more land in 3 years. And I'm watching the rural landscape around our farm change rapidly into residential lots whose purchase price and zoning preclude them from purchase for agricultural use.

Tax credits seem to be, from the experience of other states, an effective tool for incentivizing the sale of agricultural land from one farmer to the next farmer. Like I said, any tool that can make any part of the farming business less risky is worth using. If you enact this bill, my women-owned farm, with owners who are all first-generation and early career farmers, might be one of the first to benefit.

Even more importantly, you have the opportunity to include an addition to the bill that would begin to address racial inequity in agriculture. I know from numbers and facts, and anecdotally from farming peers, that Black and Indigenous folks face an enormous amount of discrimination which specifically comes into play during land purchase. Please include the OEFFA-recommended 8% credit on the sale price of agricultural assets other than land and a 13% credit on the value of agricultural land transferred to an underserved or minority farmer.

And I urge you to also include the possibility of waiving the educational requirements written into this bill for farmers who demonstrate knowledge from hands-on or educational experience so as not to unnecessarily tie up access to the benefits that HB95 will offer once enacted.

I thank you for your time and for your attention to this issue.