

A REVIEW OF OPPORTUNITIES AND BENEFITS FOR MILITARY VETERANS IN AGRICULTURE

HEARING BEFORE A SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS UNITED STATES SENATE ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS SECOND SESSION

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TUESDAY, APRIL 5, 2016

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT,
FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION AND RELATED AGENCIES,
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met at 2:37 p.m., in room SD-192, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry Moran (chairman) presiding.
Present: Senators Moran, Daines, Merkley, and Tester.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JERRY MORAN

Senator MORAN. This hearing will come to order. Good afternoon. The purpose of today's hearing is to review opportunities and benefits for military veterans in agriculture. Several of us on this subcommittee serve on the Veterans Committee, and all of us on this subcommittee have an interest in veterans, and all of us have an interest in agriculture, and I think there is an opportunity for us to serve our veterans and serve the agricultural community as well.

We have before us today Mr. Lanon Baccam, Deputy Under Secretary and Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Mr. Gary LaGrange, president of Soldier Agricultural Vocation Education (SAVE) from Manhattan, Kansas; Ms. Alison Perry, executive director of the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch; and Mr. Paul Kanning, owner of Tom Tilda Farm in Montana. I appreciate each of you being here with us today.

I am especially proud to have a fellow Kansan here to tell a story about what is happening in regard to agriculture and veterans in our State, and Mr. LaGrange is an advisor of mine on veteran and military issues, and I appreciate and value his friendship.

This program is known as SAVE. The SAVE Program provides transition assistance, training and therapy on training farms so that veterans can be equipped to farm on their own, and I look forward to Mr. LaGrange telling you today about the impact of that program on veterans' lives.

Chief Ulrick is joining Mr. LaGrange to share some of his experiences with SAVE.

As all of you know, the President's budget requested a number of increases to enhance opportunities in the agricultural sector for

military veterans, so I appreciate the insight we will gather from this today.

I know I speak for all of us in saying we are anxious to hear what you have to say and to learn from your experiences. I think the goal that I have is to figure out how best we can utilize the resources that we provide, the taxpayer dollars we provide to the Department of Agriculture to assist individuals and private organizations as we attempt to create greater opportunities for those who served our country.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SENATOR JERRY MORAN

This hearing will come to order. Good afternoon. The purpose of today's hearing is to review the opportunities and benefits for military veterans in agriculture.

We have before us today Mr. Lanon Baccam, Deputy Under Secretary and Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison at USDA; Mr. Gary LaGrange, President of Soldier Agricultural Vocation Education, from Manhattan, Kansas; Ms. Alison Perry, Executive Director of the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch; and Mr. Paul Kanning, owner of Tom Tilda Farm in Montana. I appreciate all of you for taking the time to be here today.

I am especially proud to have a fellow Kansan here today to tell you all about the great things happening in Manhattan with the Soldier Agricultural Vocation Education program, also known as the SAVE program. The SAVE program provides transition assistance, training, and therapy on a training farm so that veterans can be equipped to farm on their own, and I look forward to Mr. LaGrange telling you today about the impact that the program is making in veterans' lives. Also, I'd like to thank Chief Ulrick for joining Mr. LaGrange to share some of his experiences with SAVE.

As you all know, the President's budget requested a number of increases to enhance opportunities in the agricultural sector for military veterans, so I appreciate the insight you all bring on these efforts.

I think I speak for everyone in saying we are anxious to hear from today's witnesses about their experiences, so I will now turn to our Ranking Member, Senator Merkley, for his opening remarks.

Senator MORAN. I now will turn to the ranking member, Senator Merkley.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you for holding this particular hearing. 1,300 veterans return to civilian life every day here in America. Combine this with the fact that although rural Americans make up only 16 percent of the population, 40 percent of returning veterans are from rural areas, and opportunities for veterans in agriculture, therefore, are very important.

I do want to welcome all of you and the work that you are doing, and particularly appreciate the investment of time and energy both in the mission and to come here to testify, and I would especially like to welcome Ms. Alison Perry from Bend, Oregon.

Ms. Perry is a licensed professional counselor and founder of the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch. She is a sister, an aunt, and a granddaughter of Army, Marine, and Air Force veterans. She has been a strong advocate for the veterans of Central Oregon for many years.

She has worked with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) patients at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities in Portland and Bend, and it was from those experiences that she developed the vision of a ranch for veterans to come and connect with each

other and the land. Her hard work and drive has brought this vision to life, and now the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch is a 19-acre farm where veterans of all walks of life can come to work, to heal, and to support one another.

The three counties surrounding the ranch have more than 20,000 veterans, and certainly many of them are going to find their way to Ms. Perry's project. Thank you very much for your work on behalf of our servicemen and servicewomen, and for coming to testify today.

Thank you.

Senator MORAN. Senator Merkley, thank you very much. We also have a witness from Montana, and there are two Senators from Montana at the table who I would welcome to introduce and speak about that witness.

Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Well, welcome, a warm welcome to Paul Kanning. Paul is from Flaxville, Montana. That is not the end of the Internet but you can see it from there. It is truly out in the great part of our State.

I understand he is third generation there from Northeast Montana, a lieutenant colonel as well in the Air Force, served his country for 20 years after graduating from Montana State University, my alma mater, a Bobcat, and then came back to the family farm there. Paul, warm welcome to Washington, DC. Thanks for taking time off the farm to bring your voice here to DC.

Senator MORAN. Senator Tester.

Senator TESTER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank Ranking Member Merkley, also. Hopefully, Jeff, your finger being hit by the mallet will not end up like mine did when I hit mine by mallet. It is great to be here.

Senator MERKLEY. How large was that gavel that got your finger?

Senator TESTER. It is part of the hazards of the job when you have Moran sitting to your left.

I appreciate the opportunity to introduce a fellow Montanan and fellow farmer before this subcommittee. Paul does farm in what he would call "God's country," Flaxville, Montana, a family farm, totally diversified with wheat and peas, lentils, fava beans, flax, and granola. It has been in his family like mine has for over 100 years. You just stopped a little quicker. Mine kept going west a little further.

Paul has been back on the farm since 2013. Prior to that, he served his country in the Air Force as a lieutenant colonel. I cannot think of a better voice to speak to the opportunities in rural America and the opportunities in agriculture than a veteran such as Paul.

There is nothing more therapeutic than having your hands in the dirt, and I am little biased when I say that, being somebody who has their hands in the dirt.

In Montana, agriculture is the number one industry. Couple that with the fact that we have one of the highest rates of veterans per capita in this country, it makes sense to get more veterans involved in family farm agriculture.

So, this hearing is about jobs, it is about the economy, it is about honoring our commitment to veterans, and it is about making rural America all it can be while the veterans make this country all it can be.

So, it is great to have you here, Paul. We thank you for traveling to DC from Montana, and thank you for your testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator MORAN. Thank you, Senator Tester. We will start with Mr. Baccam. I have been practicing, sir. We welcome you and look forward to your testimony.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF LANON BACCAM

Mr. BACCAM. Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to provide information on the programs, accomplishments, and objectives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, on behalf of our military veterans.

In addition to serving as Deputy Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services, I also have the honor of serving as the USDA's military veterans agricultural liaison, a position created in the 2014 farm bill. This position allows me to track resources across the USDA, and to coordinate with other government agencies at the Federal, State, and local levels, as well as with farm associations and veteran serving organizations.

Through these partnerships, the full suite of USDA programs can be shared with veterans nationwide. Taking care of our veterans is personal for me, and it is particularly rewarding to work with those moving back to rural America where I am from.

My family's story is the American dream, and was molded by the unrest in Southeast Asia in the wake of the Vietnam conflicts. Many people left everything behind to escape the war, including my parents and sisters, who risked their lives to escape from Laos, only to become political refugees.

With the help of the U.S. Government, and with the generosity of the American people, in 1980, my family settled in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, a small town of less than 7,000 residents. I was born and raised in Mount Pleasant, and that is where my parents instilled in me that the United States of America offered the greatest possibilities of reaching one's highest potential, that the opportunities I had to go to school to get an education, and to have a good meal each day were because we lived in a free country.

It is where I learned the importance of giving back to my country, to fight for the freedoms every citizen enjoys in this great Nation, and why I enlisted and spent nearly 8 years in the U.S. Army and Iowa National Guard.

I am a post 9/11 veteran from rural America, and I can connect directly with the veterans we seek to help. I served as an Army combat engineer in a year long deployment to Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2004. I was stationed on a small provincial reconstruction team base, focusing on construction and explosive demolitions.

My experiences growing up in rural America with the military and from my deployments help me understand what our current transitioning servicemembers are going through today.

As Secretary Vilsack has noted, rural America sends a disproportionate amount of its sons and daughters into the Armed Forces.

This is because the values that rural Americans have are many of the same values held by members of the military, belief in hard work, love of country, respect for the land, and the importance of giving back and investing in the collective prosperity and future of this country.

These values coupled with every veteran's skills, experiences, training, as well as with their leadership development and dedication, makes them the perfect fit for a career in agriculture.

There are many ways we are working to assist veterans, and I look forward to sharing them with you today, from connecting veterans with organizations to help them create business plans and to get financial management training, to apply for farm ownership and operating loans and risk management tools, to implementing conservation practices and expanding into value-added products.

The USDA will be there to help them at every step along the way. It is not just about farming or ranching either. The USDA can help veterans purchase homes or start a business in rural America. With our nutrition programs, we can help make sure there is enough food on the table for their families, and we are also working very hard to expand the number of veterans we employ at the Department. I am proud to say we currently have over 11,000 veterans who work at the USDA.

The work that we are doing at the Department is especially important now that nearly 200,000 servicemembers are expected to separate from active duty each year. According to the Department of Defense (DOD), this results in approximately 1,300 veterans and their families returning to civilian life every single day.

While many troops have plans upon returning home, many others have challenges, finding new jobs, assimilating back into civilian life, or transitioning their skills into new careers.

We want these veterans to know that rural America has a place for them, and that the USDA has tools and resources to help them follow their dreams of starting a farm or ranch business.

As I like to tell every servicemember who is considering a career in agriculture, your mission in the Armed Forces is to protect this country. Our mission in agriculture is to provide for it. We want you to join us. Farming and ranching will give you that same sense of duty, purpose, and meaningful work when you are no longer wearing the uniform of the United States military.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LANON BACCAM

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to provide information on the programs, accomplishments, and objectives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on behalf of our nation's military veterans.

As you know, I recently assumed the role of Deputy Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign

Agricultural Services, overseeing the Farm Service Agency and Risk Management Agency.

I also have the honor of serving as the USDA Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison, a position created in the 2014 Farm Bill to coordinate activities throughout the Department, as well as with other government agencies and nonprofits, so that USDA resources reach more active duty military service members and veterans, particularly those interested in exploring or entering agriculture as a profession upon their return to civilian life.

As I'm sure you would agree, our veterans' military service illustrates the type of values held by those of us who grew up in rural America—love for our nation, respect for the land, belief in hard work, and the importance of investing in the freedoms that we are so fortunate to have in this country.

That is certainly true with me. I was born and raised in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, population 8,600. My hometown is where my parents instilled in me that the United States of America offered the greatest possibilities of reaching one's highest potential. It is where I learned the importance of giving back to my country, and it is why I enlisted and spent 8 years in the U.S. Army and Iowa National Guard.

During my active duty service in 2004–2005, I served as a combat engineer during a 15-month mobilization and deployment in Kandahar, Afghanistan. I was stationed on a small provincial reconstruction team base and my responsibilities included working to improve our facilities and defenses, as well as explosive demolitions of unexploded ordnances, confiscation of drugs, and improvised explosive devices.

Those who have served in the U.S. military, often from diverse backgrounds and with extensive training, leave the service with unique skills, experiences, and perspectives. These skills and experiences include leadership development, dedication to the mission, a culture of service, and technical know-how, which all translate and can have enormous benefits for farming and ranching.

I am here today to discuss how USDA can serve veterans returning from their service who find themselves drawn to agriculture and to rural America. Providing assistance to returning military veterans is not a new activity for USDA; in fact, during the past 8 years, we've achieved some notable results.

Since 2009, USDA has provided \$466.8 million in farm loans to help 3,991 veterans purchase farmland, buy equipment and make repairs and upgrades. Of those loans, our direct operating microloan, which we started offering 3 years ago to meet the needs of beginning or smaller operations, is also popular with veterans, providing \$25.8 million in support to help veterans start or grow their farming businesses. USDA has recently expanded its microloan program portfolio to include farm ownership as an eligible expense under this program, creating further opportunity. In 2014, to further support access to credit for beginning farmers who are veterans, USDA announced it would recognize leadership positions in the military as a way to satisfy experience requirements when applying for farm operation microloans.

Since 2009, USDA has invested in housing, job training, and financial assistance for veterans, such as providing safe and sound housing through Rural Development's Rural Housing Service by making and guaranteeing 12,368 loans and providing 1,769 grants to veterans. USDA has also invested in training and experience for over 850 veterans through the Veterans Fire Corps, many of which become permanent Forest Service employees. Including our staff located in communities across the U.S., there more than 11,000 veterans employed across USDA.

As we work to expand upon these efforts, USDA is focused on three main goals. First, we are developing and deepening the pipeline that will create paths from military service to careers in agriculture, including careers at USDA. Second, we are meeting an increasing number of transitioning service members at the source (before they leave the military) by integrating agricultural information into transition activities in which active duty service members participate around the world. Lastly, we are working to strengthen and expand the network of support for veterans, including developing outreach resources, leveraging technology, and building strong partnerships with national and community-based veteran organizations. Since the establishment of the Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison position, we have made considerable progress towards these goals. USDA has created new, user-friendly resources for transitioning service members and veterans to increase access to USDA programs, including a Veterans in Agriculture resource booklet, and a one-stop website—www.usda.gov/veterans—that also provides resources for new farmers. This site directly partners with www.usda.gov/newfarmers, which provides new and beginning farmers and ranchers—many of whom are veterans—with one-stop access to the programs, technical assistance, and advice available via USDA, in service of their new and beginning farm businesses.

We've been cultivating more Federal, State, local, and community partners to ensure that information about agriculture careers and USDA programs reach the widest audience of service members and veterans. For example, last fall we joined with the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program so that USDA could reach an additional 200,000 military veterans and their families, providing information ranging from farm loans, risk management, and conservation programs, to business programs and technical assistance opportunities to the veterans interested in farming and ranching.

In February, we entered into an agreement with Hiring Our Heroes (HOH), a program at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation that helps military veterans

and families find meaningful employment in the civilian workforce, so that these transitioning members can now have access to businesses in the agriculture industry, as well as USDA programs and resources.

And just two weeks ago, I launched the first military-focused agricultural career workshop hosted by USDA, at a HOH Transition Summit at Fort Bliss, Texas, where we introduced service members, preparing to transition from the military, to USDA program information and local staff expertise. USDA staff also participated in a hiring fair, and this Friday, Texas A&M Extension will be providing a local farm tour for those service members whose interest was piqued by the workshop. This is the first of many future agricultural workshops that will be hosted by USDA staff at these Transition Summits nationwide.

The Department's fiscal year 2017 budget request reflects our belief that veterans will help lead the next generation of agriculture and builds on the long standing work of this committee and the Department to support our veterans. The fiscal year 17 budget includes approximately \$246 million in mandatory and discretionary budget authority, an increase of about \$46 million over the fiscal year 2016 enacted level for New and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, including veterans. This level of funding will support a program level of more than \$3.3 billion. The request includes an increase of about \$12 million in discretionary budget authority specifically to support military veteran farmers and ranchers. This includes an increase of \$9.2 million in the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to support a program level of \$208 million in direct operating loans, to an estimated 3,800 veteran farmers and ranchers, a guaranteed operating loan fee waiver for veterans, for an estimated \$39 million in guaranteed loans, and a certified training program which will prequalify veterans for eligibility for FSA farm ownership loans. Further, the fiscal year 17 budget requests roughly an additional \$20 million to support outreach and coordination activities for New and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, including veterans.

The budget also requests \$2.5 million for a new competitive Food and Agriculture Resilience Program for Military Veterans (FARM-Vets) through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. FARM-Vets funding will be used to promote competition for basic and applied research that explores career opportunities and pathways, therapeutic interventions, resource conservation, and related studies for the veteran population in the food and agriculture sector. Understanding why and how best to engage veterans in the agricultural sector is congruent with the critical need to identify a new generation of farmers, livestock producers, and entrepreneurs as an aging workforce transitions to retirement, especially in rural areas where shortages are acute. Similarly, there is a limited body of research that points to the therapeutic value of working the land in terms of psychological and behavioral health function and benefit. This funding will help us address these needs.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman, when service members return home, we want them to know that there are real and rewarding opportunities in U.S. agriculture, that rural America has a place for them, and that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has tools and resources to help them follow their dream of starting a farm or ranch business—no matter where they're from.

That is especially important to me because rural America had a place for my family, too. In 1980 my parents and sisters settled in Mount Pleasant, Iowa after escaping from Laos and becoming political refugees in Thailand.

Many of you will remember that the 1960s and 1970s was a period when Southeast Asia was struggling with unrest in the wake of the Vietnam conflict. Militias roamed the countryside fighting for territory and terrorizing families and towns caught in the middle of the conflict. With widespread food shortages and safety threats, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled, leaving behind everything they knew to escape tyranny and famine.

Because America gave my parents a chance, I sit before you today as a proud Iowan and American who served his nation in wartime. That is what America is all about and it is reflected in the spirit of our rural communities. It is why I am honored to be in this position today, to do all that I can to help my fellow veterans secure opportunities and achieve their own personal versions of the American dream, while revitalizing rural America.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify today, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

Senator MORAN. Thank you so very much. Ms. Alison Perry.

STATEMENT OF ALISON PERRY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTRAL OREGON VETERANS RANCH

Ms. PERRY. Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you so much. It is an honor to be here today.

My name is Alison Perry and I am here to speak to you today about some of the challenging realities facing our Nation's combat veterans and how innovative programs like Central Oregon Veterans Ranch are integrating agriculture and changing veterans' lives.

I am a licensed professional counselor and family member of three combat veterans spanning World War II to Iraq, and the founder of the nonprofit Central Oregon Veterans Ranch.

I began working for the Department of Veterans Affairs 2 years after my brother deployed for the invasion of Iraq as an Apache helicopter pilot. I worked for 6 years as a trauma therapist within the VA, treating primarily veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress in both urban and rural settings.

It was those years of intensive clinical work that compelled me to influence our current methods of veteran health care by developing innovative ways that veterans can heal and continue to positively serve our Nation.

By now you are aware of the unacceptable statistics of 22 veteran suicides a day, and the grim reality that we lose a veteran to suicide in this Nation every 19 minutes. Currently, our veterans come home from war, are discharged from the military, and face an existing healthcare system that deems them disabled, wounded, unable to work, and is limited in its scope of diagnosing and treating solely the symptoms of combat trauma.

Based on these ongoing alarming statistics, in the years of direct clinical experience of therapists like myself, it is evident that we at a critical juncture in identifying innovative approaches that address the complex dimensions of combat trauma, including moral injury, identity issues, disillusionment, lack of meaning and purpose, and confusion about how to move forward.

The New York Society for Ethical Culture states "Along side the renewed attention on complimentary therapies for post-traumatic stress, there is a growing understanding that treating acute trauma is only the first stage of treatment. Any effective intervention must also incorporate structures for reintegrating veterans back into their families, workplaces, and communities."

All across the United States today, priority is placed on agriculture, whether within urban settings or rural America. Emphasis is placed on utilizing land in ways that optimizes food production while enhancing our environmental health.

I am here to tell you today that there is a third dimension to our focus on agriculture as a valuable tool to heal our combat veterans with post-traumatic stress, help them find peace, and help them to re-enter civilian life successfully.

Agriculture is proving itself to be a viable therapeutic option for veterans, effectively assisting in their transition into civilian society. Veterans benefit from being outdoors, being engaged in physical activity, strengthening themselves through work with purpose and interacting with the natural world.

Growing and caring for living things is curative for those who have participated in war. The pace on a farm built around the growing seasons is a contrast of a high speed atmosphere of deployment. Completion of concrete tasks in agriculture is empowering and therapeutic.

Additionally, agriculture provides a vehicle for meaning and purpose for veterans in the local community. It can be a means for veterans to contribute to their communities and environment as stewards of the land, while preserving one's sense of autonomy and empowerment.

Veterans are aligned with the military values of survival and self sufficiency that agriculture often requires. Self sufficiency is important in a veteran's healing journey and can decrease dependence on outside help, lessening the need for continual therapy, interventions, and medication.

U.S. soldiers are adapting and improvising, using existing skill sets from military training. To enlist veterans in successful agribusiness endeavors will strengthen our veterans, food systems, and local economies.

Across America and in communities like Central Oregon, there is a growing interest in small scale agriculture, and how niche markets and value-added products can contribute to economic vitality. Veterans in our community are interested in these endeavors but lack the knowledge and awareness of the growing veteran farming movement and/or the USDA's efforts and resources.

I recently sat with an Iraq combat veteran in my office and had to clarify what the acronym "USDA" stood for, followed by his comment, "When I think of USDA, I think about meat."

Promoting veteran endeavors in agriculture is a means of increasing social capital as communities become safer and healthier, and dependency on social services is decreased. It is also a vehicle of therapy for those deemed unable to work by the VA, who are seeking purpose and health in their every day lives.

Newer models of veteran healthcare are integrating agriculture as a means of bringing veterans together for education, purpose, and peer support, creating new opportunities and pathways of hope.

In Oregon, we are developing such an innovative model that is changing veterans' lives. Central Oregon Veterans Ranch is a 1,900-acre working ranch that implements agriculture for both vocational and therapeutic benefit. A unique component of our program will be the integration of specialized end of life care for up to five veterans and an adult foster home on the property.

Thus far, the model's success is rooted and is focused on peer support, intergenerational healing, and a system of strategic community partnerships.

The ranch is currently run by an Iraq combat veteran, 100 percent medically retired from the military for post-traumatic stress. Because of the ranch's mission to restore purpose and spirit to veterans of all ages, this veteran has committed 3 years of his life without pay to this project.

Veterans coming out to work at the ranch find community and comradery that they treasured while serving in the military and re-

lief from social isolation and the intrusive thoughts and images that often haunt them.

Many veterans find meaning and purpose from contributing to the development and management of the ranch and its programs, including a female Air Force veteran who served as a combat flight nurse in Iraq, and is taking the lead on developing healthcare services for future residents.

The ranch also serves as a hub, a safe haven, and a non-stigmatizing environment that provides support and resources for veterans who may not reach out directly for help.

In the words of one veteran, a 38-year retired female Army Colonel with five deployments, "The ranch is a touchstone" and "Just knowing it is there is therapeutic." Colonel Pam is spearheading a B project on the property and speaks of the sense of pride and ownership that veterans feel as they develop this agricultural land together.

On a more striking note, I have heard from at least three veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress to traumatic brain injury and addictions that the ranch has saved their lives.

The message I would like to impart to you today is that innovative programs like this that incorporate agriculture and provide veterans a hub where they can learn, work, grow and serve together are working to give them hope, healing, and new pathways.

I am pleased to see that conversations about these types of initiatives are taking place at the national level, and I hope that we can work together to continue to develop and implement these types of programs.

On behalf of the veterans I work with and serve, and as founder of the Central Oregon Veterans Ranch, thank you for this opportunity today.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ALISON PERRY

INTRODUCTION

My name is Alison Perry and I'm here today to speak to you about some of the challenging realities facing our nation's combat veterans, and how innovative programs like Central Oregon Veterans Ranch are integrating agriculture and changing veterans' lives.

I am a Licensed Professional Counselor and family member of three combat veterans spanning WWII to Iraq, and the Founder of the nonprofit Central Oregon Veterans Ranch. I began working for the Department of Veterans Affairs 2 years after my brother deployed for the invasion of Iraq as an Apache helicopter pilot. I worked for 6 years as a trauma therapist within the VA, treating primarily veterans diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress, in both urban and rural settings. It was these years of intensive clinical work that compelled me to influence our current methods of veteran healthcare by developing innovative ways that veterans can heal and continue to positively serve our nation.

GIVENS

By now you are aware of the unacceptable statistics of 22 veteran suicides a day, and the grim reality that we lose a veteran to suicide in this nation every 19 minutes. Currently our veterans come home from war, are discharged from the military, and face an existing healthcare system that deems them disabled, wounded, unable to work, and is limited in its scope of diagnosing and treating solely the symptoms of combat trauma. Based on these ongoing alarming statistics, and the years of direct clinical experience of therapists like myself, it is evident that we are at a critical juncture in identifying innovative approaches that address the complex dimensions of combat trauma, including moral injury, identity issues, disillusionment,

lack of meaning and purpose, and confusion about how to move forward. The New York Society for Ethical Culture states, “Alongside the renewed attention on complementary therapies for post-traumatic stress, there is a growing understanding that treating acute trauma is only the first stage of treatment. Any effective intervention must also incorporate structures for reintegrating veterans back into their families, workplaces, and communities.”

All across the US today, priority is placed on agriculture whether within urban settings or rural America. Emphasis is placed on utilizing land in ways that optimizes food production while enhancing our environmental health. I am here today to tell you that there is a third dimension to our focus on agriculture—as a valuable tool to heal our combat veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress, help them find peace, and help them to re- enter civilian life successfully.

SOLUTIONS

VETERAN HEALTH BENEFIT

Agriculture is proving itself to be a viable therapeutic option for veterans, effectively assisting in their transition into civilian society. Veterans benefit from being outdoors, being engaged in physical activity, strengthening themselves through work with purpose, and interacting with the natural world.

Growing and caring for living things is curative for those who have participated in war. The pace on a farm, built around the growing seasons, is a contrast to the high-speed atmosphere of deployment. The completion of concrete tasks in agriculture is be empowering and therapeutic.

Additionally, agriculture provides a vehicle for meaning and purpose for veterans in the local community. Agriculture is a means for veterans to contribute to their communities and environment as stewards of the land. Agriculture can preserve one’s sense of autonomy and empowerment. Veterans are aligned with the military values of survival and self-sufficiency that agriculture requires.

Agribusiness entrepreneurship supports veteran self-sufficiency and promises to help decrease dependence on outside help and lessens the need for continual therapy, interventions, and medications. Self-sufficiency is important in a veteran’s healing journey for strengthening internal resources and a healthy sense of autonomy.

ECONOMIC/ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFIT

Veterans recognize that small businesses and entrepreneurship are important to the fabric and strength of small towns across the US. To many veterans, helping revitalize communities through local economic development is just as important a purpose as growing healthy food for the community.

US soldiers are adept at adapting and improvising. Using existing skill sets from military training to enlist veterans into successful agribusiness endeavors will strengthen our veterans, food systems, and local economies.

SOCIAL/COMMUNITY BENEFIT

Through the investment of veterans in agriculture, social capital is increased as communities become safer and healthier. The alarming rate of suicide, Post-Traumatic Stress, and related issues let us know that innovative community-based approaches must be in place. Reducing dependency on social services and providing realistic support to re- enter society through new models of care is critical.

In Oregon we are developing an innovative model of healthcare that is changing veterans’ lives. Central Oregon Veterans Ranch is a 19-acre working ranch that implements agriculture for both vocational and therapeutic benefit. A unique component of our program will be the integration of specialized end of life care for up to five veterans in an Adult Foster Home on the property. Thus far, the model’s success is rooted in its focus on peer support, inter-generational healing, and a system of strategic community partnerships. Veterans coming out to work at the ranch find the community and camaraderie they treasured while serving in the military, and relief from social isolation and the intrusive thoughts and images that often haunt them. They find meaning and purpose through contributing to the development and management of a place that has become their own. The ranch also serves as a hub; a safe haven and non-stigmatizing environment that provides support and resources for veterans who may not reach out directly for help. In the words of one veteran, a 38-year retired female Army COL with five deployments, the ranch is a “touchstone”, and “just knowing it is there is therapeutic”. More strikingly, I have heard from at least three veterans, a female combat flight nurse, a six tour Marine veteran, and an Iraq combat veteran, that the ranch has “saved their life”. The message I would like to impart to you today is that innovative programs like this, that

incorporate agriculture, are working to save and improve our veterans' quality of life and our local communities.

Thank you.

Senator MORAN. Thank you for telling your story. I appreciate it very much.

This is what you produce, Gary LaGrange, but it is not all of what you produce, and I am glad you are here to tell your story. You are the inspiration that caused me to have an interest in this topic and in conducting this hearing, so thank you very much for coming from Kansas, and we look forward to your testimony.

STATEMENT OF GARY LaGRANGE, PRESIDENT, SOLDIER AGRICULTURAL VOCATION EDUCATION, MANHATTAN, KANSAS;

ACCOMPANIED BY JOHN ULRICK, CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER 4, U.S. ARMY

Mr. LaGRANGE. Thank you for having me. I am deeply honored to be here today to represent our Nation's veterans and transitioning military servicemembers, in particular, the large percentage of them who desire to enter agriculture and more specifically, farming.

I wish to address two pressing national challenges and present potential solutions to them. Our Nation has 1,500,000 veterans and 800,000 transitioning servicemembers soon to become veterans. According to the Department of Labor, a significant number of them, 40 percent or more, desire and wish to find farming or farm related occupations, and a significant number of them suffer with visible and invisible wounds of war.

I am one of them, having served multiple tours in Vietnam and Laos during the war there, and having come out several times on alert. My passion is to help them with programs now that did not exist at that point in time. They deserve it.

Our Nation has a farm succession challenge with the average age of our farmers approaching 60, 40 percent of our farms owned and operated by farmers over 65, and 63 percent of our farms in the last generation. There is a need for a million new and younger farmers over the next 15 years, huge numbers, but there is a gap between these two challenges that should be bridged.

How can these veterans and servicemembers become farmers? Given the scope and scale of the need, where can they go to learn to be farmers? How can they find the resources that will lead to farm ownership, how can they find the resources to purchase expensive land and equipment? Where do they go to learn?

Since many of them possess visible and invisible wounds of war, how can they find therapy as they transition from one culture to another?

The Service-member Agricultural Vocation Education, SAVE, Program addresses that gap by providing transition assistant, training, therapy, and succession assistance on a training farm. Veterans and servicemembers will be prepared to work on, manage, and one day own their own farm.

Our vision and plan is to develop a model training farm that can be replicated on all land grant universities that will graduate hundreds of farmers each year. Veteran and servicemember students will learn a wide variety of farming skills in a relatively short period of time.

Those in need of clinical care, physically or psychologically, will have an on campus clinic to assist them in their transition. The students and family members can live on the farm campus for the full training cycle, and will also be matched with a mentor farmer who is interested in hiring or having a manager or selling his farm to them after graduation.

That will enable those graduates to move into farming upon graduation and begin farming immediately, whether as a worker or as an owner, a fully integrated transition, training, therapy, and succession program.

This program offers a critical bridge from the security and camaraderie of the military to the serenity and immersion offered by farming, avoiding what can be a most debilitating and often dangerous period following discharge.

Most importantly, it offers an opportunity for multiple government agencies to coordinate for the betterment of servicemen and women. That is something that is lacking at this point.

Well, that farm has been designed and a team of professionals are in the midst of developing its programs. The board of directors of Service-member Agricultural Vocation Education, which is now a public charitable 501(c)(3) educational organization, and professionals from Kansas State University are well on the way to making that farm a reality.

Sixteen graduate students from the College of Architecture with the assistance from the College of Agriculture and a wide body of advisors, including the Veterans Administration, have worked together to design a 155-acre training farm contiguous to Fort Riley and a few short miles from the university.

Sir, that is Marvin Hackmeister's farm. You may be familiar with that person.

The farm has full spectrum with orchards, produce gardens, bee colonies, training and research plots, and wheat, soybeans, corn, grains sorghum, and alfalfa. There will be cattle, sheep, goats, swine, horses, and a fleet of poultry, a shop to teach general mechanics, metal working, welding, and woodworking, a chapel, residences for 100 students and family members, classrooms, a greenhouse with three high tunnels, a dining facility with a commercial teaching kitchen, a commercial honey producing facility, and a public center where customers can pick their own produce and purchase other products of the farm.

The farm includes a certified clinic, staffed with clinical psychologists and physical therapists capable of caring for 100 clients a week. Clients will consist of students on the farm program and other veterans from the general population.

It is envisioned that with your support, the full class of 100 students and their family members could begin classes on the farm during January of 2018, and in 3 years, this farm should be able to reach self sufficiency.

All of the students will be trained first as an apprentice level student, and then a journeyman level prior to farm placement, and during their studies, they will be teamed with a mentor and perhaps successor farmer where they will work immediately thereafter.

As a pilot study, 50 soldiers from Fort Riley's Warrior Transition Battalion were taught beekeeping by me over the past 3 years, a niche agricultural endeavor, beekeeping is critical, of course, to the Nation's food supply.

Interest was very high with all soldiers completing the basic beekeeping course and 12 becoming trained at a commercial level. Further, these soldiers now have produced over 6,000 pounds of honey over the last 3 years, completely covering all costs and growing the operation from 12 to 58 colonies, showing that we can indeed even in that small niche become self sufficient. New classes are underway.

The soldiers that engaged in the development of our business plan and the design, and we had a whole team of them, all with PTSD or brain injury, wanted an interim program so that we could bring them along also until this farm could come to fruition.

So, last year we began a farm tour program and we visited with 28 students, 22 different farms and 12 governmental and nine governmental farm agencies, granaries, COOPS, equipment sales and service organizations, including a two full-day session on farm planning, soil preparation, and produce operations.

Each student was taken through a guide to business planning for the farm. Results were so successful that we have continued the program, and we just began our next round of tours on the 15th of March.

This year, the Veterans Administration has included their clients with Wounded Warriors from Fort Riley. This year we have also added equipment manufacturers and the KSU Drone facility to our tour schedules, as well as several other high value farms.

The SAVE farm with its integrated approach will enable research to be conducted in multiple areas. Agricultural research in that the farm is full spectrum and close to a major land grant university. Research regarding farming for those with physical disabilities can be accomplished partnering with AgrAbility and equipment manufacturers, we will find new and innovative modifications that can be tested to enable those with disabilities to function as farmers.

Psychological research can more closely examine the therapeutic effects of farming expanding the sparse knowledge base extant today.

Today, we have engaged 82 soldiers and veterans, nearly all are now farming, actively searching for a farm, enrolled in agricultural college courses, or engaged in farming career orientation. All of them suffer from physical or psychological wounds. They are good, disciplined, intelligent, skillful people that are ready and want to farm.

I have worked beside them, shared our home with them, laughed with them, cried with them, prayed with them, and heard their stories, shared their ups and downs, and they have become my friends.

The SAVE Program in building a bridge that will lead them to a full and purposeful life on the farm while addressing a critical farm succession program, as one of our SAVE soldiers, Chief Warrant Officer John Arthur Ulrick, a wounded warrior with two tours

in Iraq and two tours in Afghanistan, sitting beside me today, states "It is just the right thing to do."

Thousands of veterans, transitioning soldiers and farmers are aware of my testimony today. It is a little heavy, frankly. They are hopeful that you will give them hope that this project with your support can become a reality and a reality soon. They await the results of this testimony.

Please help me to help them realize their dreams. We owe them programs of substance in dealing with all these huge numbers as they reintegrate into our farming communities.

Thank you for hearing me this day.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF GARY L. LAGRANGE

I am deeply honored to be here today to represent our nation's veterans and transitioning military service-members, in particular the large percentage of them whom desire to enter agriculture and more specifically farming.

I wish to address two pressing national challenges and present a solution to them.

—Our nation has 1,500,000 veterans and 800,000 transitioning service-members soon to become veterans. According to the Department of Labor, a significant number of them wish to find farming or farm related occupations and a significant number of them suffer with visible and invisible wounds of war. I am one of them.

—Our nation has a farm succession challenge. With the average age of our farmers approaching 60, 40 percent of our farms owned and operated by farmers over 65, and 63 percent of our farms in the last generation, there is a need for 1,000,000 new and younger farmers over the next 15 years.

There is a gap between the two challenges that must be bridged. How can these veterans and service-members become farmers? Given the scope and scale of the need, where can they go to learn to be farmers? How can they find the resources that will lead to farm ownership? How can they find the resources to purchase expensive land and equipment? Where do they go to learn, and since many of them possess visible and invisible wounds of war, how can they find therapy as they transition from one culture to another?

The Service-member Agricultural Vocation Education (SAVE) program addresses the gap. By providing transition assistance, training, therapy and succession assistance on a training farm, veterans and service members will be prepared to work on, manage and one day own a farm of their own. Our vision and plan is to develop a model training farm that can be replicated on all land grant universities that will graduate hundreds of new farmers each year. Veteran and Service-member students will learn a wide variety of farming skills in a relatively short period of time. Those in need of clinical care, physically or psychologically, will have an on campus clinic to assist them in their transition. The students and family members can live on the farm campus for the full training cycle. They will also be matched with a mentor farmer who is interested in hiring a farm worker or selling his farm. That will enable the graduates to move into farming upon graduation and begin farming immediately, whether as a worker or as an owner; a fully integrated transition, training, therapy and succession program.

This program offers a critical bridge from the security and comradery of the military to the serenity and immersion offered by farming, avoiding what can be a debilitating and oftendangerous period following discharge. Most importantly, it offers an opportunity for multiple government agencies to coordinate for the betterment of servicemen and women.

That farm has been designed and a team of professionals are in the midst of developing its programs. The Board of Directors of Service-member Agricultural Vocation Education (SAVE) Corp, a public charitable 501c3 educational organization, and professionals from Kansas State University (KSU) are well on the way to making the farm a reality. 16 graduate students from the College of Architecture with assistance from the College of Agriculture and a wide body of advisors including the Veterans Administration worked together to design a 155 acre farm contiguous to Fort Riley and a few short miles from the University. The farm is full spectrum with orchards, produce gardens, bee colonies, training and research plots of wheat, soy beans, corn, grain sorghum, and alfalfa. There will be cattle, sheep, goats, swine, horses and flocks of poultry; a shop to teach general mechanics, metal working,

welding and woodworking; a chapel, residences for 100 students and family members, classrooms, a greenhouse with 3 high tunnels, a dining facility with commercial teaching kitchen, a commercial honey producing facility, and a public center where customers can pick their own produce and purchase other products of the farm. The farm includes a certified clinic staffed with clinical psychologists and physical therapists capable of caring for 100 clients a week. Clients will consist of students in the farm program and other veterans from the general population. It is envisioned that, with your support, the first full class of 100 students and their family members could begin classes on the farm during January of 2018 and in 3 years this farm should be able to reach self-sufficiency.

A PILOT STUDY

As a pilot study, 50 soldiers from Fort Riley's Warrior Transition Battalion were taught beekeeping over the past 3 years. A niche agricultural endeavor, beekeeping is critical to the nation's food supply. Interest was high with all soldiers completing basic beekeeping and 12 becoming trained to the commercial level. Further, these soldiers produced over 6000 pounds of honey completely covering all costs and growing the operation from 12 to 58 colonies. New classes are underway.

FARM TOURS

The soldiers engaged in the development of the SAVE business plan asked if an interim agricultural program could be developed for them. A farm tour program was arranged and beginning with Agriculture Day of 2015, 28 students began touring farms of different types. Each Friday for the following 120 days, soldiers toured 20 high value farms, 12 governmental and non-governmental farm agencies, granaries, COOPS, equipment sales and service organizations including 2 full day sessions on farm planning, soil preparation and produce operations. Each student was taken through a Guide to Business Planning for the farm. The results were so successful that the next round of tours began on 15 March 2016. The Veteran's Administration includes regional clients with this round of tours. Equipment manufacturers and the KSU Drone facility have been added to the tour schedules as well as several additional high value farms.

RESEARCH

The SAVE Farm with its integrated approach will enable research to be conducted in multiple areas. Agricultural research in that the farm is full spectrum and close to a major university. Research regarding farming for those with physical disabilities can be accomplished. Partnering with AgrAbility and equipment manufacturers, new and innovative modifications can be tested to enable those with disabilities to function as farmers. Psychological research can more closely examine the therapeutic effects of farming expanding the sparse knowledge base extant today. To date we have engaged 82 soldiers and veterans. Nearly all are now farming, actively searching for a farm, enrolled in agricultural college courses, or engaged in farming career orientation. All of them suffer from physical or psychological wounds. They are good, disciplined, intelligent, skillful men and women who want to farm. I have worked beside them, shared our home with them, laughed and cried with them, heard their stories, shared their ups and downs and they have become my friends.

The SAVE program, in building a bridge that will lead them to a full and purposeful life on the farm while addressing a critical farm succession program, is as one of our SAVE soldiers, CW4 John Ulrick, sitting beside me here today states, "just the right thing to do".

Thousands of veterans, transitioning soldiers and farmers are aware of my testimony today. They are hopeful that you will give them hope that this project, with your support, can become a reality and become a reality soon. They await the results of this testimony. Please help me to help them realize their dreams. We owe them programs of substance as they reintegrate into our farming communities.

Thank you. www.thesavefarm.org

Senator MORAN. Thank you for allowing us to hear you. I think it may be most sensitive to go to Mr. Ulrick next. Mr. Ulrick, welcome. My only concern is that you left Kansas. We are surprised that you decided to find another home in another State. We appreciate your service at Fort Riley.

**STATEMENT OF JOHN ARTHUR ULRICK, CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER 4,
U.S. ARMY**

Mr. ULRICK. Good afternoon, Senator, and subcommittee members. I want to personally thank Gary LaGrange for asking me to be here today. One of my lifelong dreams was an opportunity to come to Washington, DC, and speak to some of our government people, and I come here today with a very humble heart.

I think we can and will through the SAVE farm help restore the American dream for many soldiers and veterans. Many soldiers have paid the price for the freedom, and they have done this in both direct and indirect, carrying scars that interfere with family, lives, and being productive in civilian life.

I thought for a long time of how I could put into words how the soldiers feel. I could not put it into words. Excuse me. I thought for a long time of how I could put it into words how many of the soldiers feel after being exposed to war or stationed away from their families, and could not come up with the right words.

If you have lost a child, you would know the loss. It stays with you every day, every minute, until you learn to accept and understand the loss. If you have never been in war, you would never be able to feel the emotions of these soldiers. As you know, many soldiers come back from deployment seeing the world in a different way.

I was sent to Fort Riley with several medical issues from my four deployments with the United States Army. I injured my neck and could not lift my arms above my shoulders, had lung issues, and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, the stress of war.

I had to have surgery and was deemed unfit for continued duty with the Army. Many of the thoughts I had was what am I going to do now, what is it going to be like without the military in my life.

I met Gary LaGrange a few weeks after I arrived at Fort Riley. Gary had a class to learn and work with honey bees, and I thought to myself, I will try it, and found that the class helped me to think about something positive and learn something new. During this time, Gary started talking to me about how he wants to set up a farm for soldiers to learn farming.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was a program that would rebuild healthy lives for people. After thinking about his program for several weeks, the light went off in my head. I could not think of a better thing for soldiers to do that would keep them in charge of their lives and operate a business that is a way of life. I started thinking about what classes he should have, and what types of machinery, livestock, and how the overall operation would work.

The thoughts gave me a new outlook on the rest of my life and how I could use what I have learned to help others. I spent 32 years, 10 months, 16 days of my life serving my country, and was forced to retire. For those years, I put the military at the top of my list, and I hate to say this, I put it before everything, always wanting to defend my country and our way of life.

Yes, I worked hard during my life and own a farm in Minnesota, and now I am using my knowledge to help others leaving the military to live a healthy productive life.

I am looking forward to being the first farm manager. After all, farmers feed the world, and it takes people that can do all to be good farmers. If you do not help these people become farmers, who will feed the world in a few short years? I believe this is a good thing to do, and we must find a way to get it done.

I would like to close with a quote from somebody that I admired when I was young and still do. "God's work must surely be our own," and I do believe this is God's work. I welcome your questions. [The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOHN ARTHUR ULRICK

Good afternoon, I would like to thank Gary LaGrange for asking me to be here today. One of my life long dreams was the opportunity to come to Washington D.C. for business and speak to members of our government. I come here today with a humble heart.

I think we can and will, through the S.A.V.E farm, help restore the American dream for many soldiers and veterans. Many soldiers have paid the price for the freedom, they have done this both directly and indirectly, carrying scars that interfere with their family lives and being productive in civilian life. I thought for a long time of how I could put into words how many of the soldiers feel after being exposed to war or stationed away from their families and could not come up with the right words. If you have lost a child you would know that loss if you have not you just don't know the loss, it stays with you every day and every minute until you learn to except and understand the loss. If you have never been in war you would not be able to feel the emotions of these soldiers.

As you know many soldiers come back from deployments seeing the world in a different way. Many have deep depressions that keep them from entering back into society and fitting well and adjusted. We can see that many take their lives because of adjustment issues. I believe we can restore the basic thoughts and goals of the American Dream. Freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity, success and to achieve through hard work in a society with few barriers.

Many soldiers do not make the change from being a soldier to being a civilian very well; many have struggles because they have been in positions of leadership, being in charge of many operational needs of the military that do not directly transfer to civilian jobs and life style.

It has been proven that working with livestock is like having a service dog as a companion. People taking the courses at the S.A.V.E. farm will be able to learn a new way of life that uses all the things they have been taught about scheduling, planning, managing and being in charge of their lives.

I was asked here today to explain how this program helped me during my time in the wounded warrior unit at Ft Riley, Kansas, during the years of 2014-2015.

I was sent to Ft Riley with several medical issues from my four deployments with the US Army. I injured my neck and could not lift my arms above my shoulders, lung issues and was suffering from P.T.S.D., the stresses of war. I had to have surgery and was deemed unfit for continued duty with the Army. Many of the thoughts I had was what I am going to do now, what is it going to be like without the military in my life. I met Gary LaGrange a few weeks after I arrived at Ft. Riley. Gary had a class to learn and work with Honey Bees, and I thought to myself, I will try it, and found that the class helped me to think about something positive and learn something new. During this time Gary started talking with me about how he wants to set up a farm for soldiers to learn farming. The more I thought about it the more I thought it was a program that would rebuild healthy lives for people.

After thinking about his program for several weeks, the light went off in my head, and I could not think of a better thing for soldiers to do that would keep them in charge of their lives and operate a business that is a way of life. I started thinking about what classes he should have, what types of machinery, livestock and how the overall operation would work. The thoughts gave me a new outlook on the rest of my life and how I could use what I have learned to help others.

I spent 32 years 10 months and 16 days of my life serving my country and was forced to retire. For those years I put the military at the top of my list and I hate to say before everything always wanting to defend my country and our way of life.

Yes I worked hard during my life and own a farm in Minnesota, and now I am using my knowledge to help others leaving the military to live a healthy productive life.

I am looking forward to being the first farm manager.

After all farmers feed the world and it takes people that can do it all to be good farmers? If we don't help these people become farmers, who will feed the world in a few short years?

I believe this is a good thing to do and we must find a way to get it done.

I would like to close with a quote from John Fitzgerald Kennedy, "God's work must surely be our own," and I believe this is God's work.

I welcome your questions.

Senator MORAN. Mr. Ulrick, thank you very much for your testimony.

Mr. Kanning.

STATEMENT OF PAUL KANNING, OWNER/OPERATOR, TOM TILDA FARM, FLAXVILLE, MONTANA

Mr. KANNING. Thank you, chairman, members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify here today about military veteran benefits.

Prior to my current career, I served as an Active Duty officer for 20 years in the Air Force, retiring in 2013. My service included assignments to 10 military installations, five combat deployments to Southwest Asia, including an 1 year tour in Iraq with the Coalition Air Force advisory team. I was a squadron commander twice, a deputy commander of a fighter maintenance unit, and retired as the senior ranking sustainment officer for the F-22 program.

I used to be somebody important. Today, I am a farmer. I am the owner and operator of Tom Tilda Farm in Daniels County, Montana. I am the fourth generation of my family to operate the farm, which is now 103 years old.

I am often amazed that I own and operate this farm. As a young man, my sole ambition was to find a way off of it, and to find success out in the greater world. I decided I needed to go to college to achieve that goal, but because I could not afford to pay for college, I enrolled in and was awarded a scholarship by the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) Program. Through ROTC, I obtained my degree at Montana State University and got commissioned as an Air Force officer.

Approximately halfway through my military career, I began to think about what I would do after retiring from the military. In 2003, during the initial campaign of Operation Iraqi Freedom, I suddenly realized my aspiration was to be a farmer.

I then spent the next 10 years of my military career working as hard as I could to get back onto that place that I wanted to leave so desperately to begin with.

Many of my fellow servicemembers were surprised to learn of my military to farming aspiration. However, there are numerous similarities between the two professions. Both are comprised of honest, reliable, trustworthy people who value integrity. Both professions entail service to a higher calling, either through defending our Nation or providing food for the same. Both have leadership as a key element to success.

Both professions are meritocracies, offering great opportunities regardless of race, color, or creed. Both involve a great level of risk and adventure. Both require dedication, discipline, and a willingness to sacrifice for achieving success. Finally, mission accomplishment in both culminates in the production of a tangible and highly valued product, freedom and food.

Because of these similarities, it was only natural I would be drawn to agriculture following my military service. During my transition to my farming career, I faced obstacles which many beginning farmers confront. I also seized on many opportunities to alleviate those challenges. My status as a veteran afforded me benefits in some situations, while others were addressed through means available to any beginning farmer.

I would be happy to talk about the many programs that I turned to, including the farm bill commodity titles, crop insurance, the Beginning Farmer/Rancher Development Program grants, and the outreach and assistance programs for socially disadvantaged farmers.

In conclusion, I am honored to have the opportunity to farm in rural America. I am honored to provide high quality food to America. While I used to assist in preserving national security as a member of the military, today I assist in that same effort by providing food security for our citizens.

I again thank the members for the honor of testifying about the benefits and programs available to military veterans in agriculture, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF PAUL KANNING

Thank you Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Merkley, and members of the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies for the opportunity to testify on the opportunities and benefits available to military veterans in agriculture.

I am the owner and operator of TomTilda Farm in Daniels County, Montana. I am the fourth generation of my family to operate the farm, which is now 103 years old. The farm of just over 11,700 acres produces small grains (spring wheat), pulses (peas, lentils, faba beans), and oilseeds (flax, canola). I am in my fourth production year on the farm, having started in 2013.

Prior to initiating my farm career, I served as an active duty officer for twenty (20) years in the U.S. Air Force, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel in 2013. My service included assignments to ten (10) military installations and five (5) combat deployments to Southwest Asia, including a 1- year tour in Iraq with the Coalition's advisory team to the Iraqi Air Force. I was a squadron commander of two aircraft maintenance units, deputy commander of a fighter maintenance group, and the senior-ranking sustainment officer for the F-22 program office.

I am often amazed that I own and operate the farm which I grew up on. As a young man, my sole ambition was to find a way off of the farm and find success out in the larger world. I decided that attending college was the best means to achieve that goal. Because I could not afford to pay for college, I enrolled in and was awarded a scholarship by the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program. Through ROTC, I was able to obtain my degree at Montana State University and get commissioned as an Air Force officer.

Approximately half way through my military career, I began to think about what I would do after retiring from the military. Then in 2003, while engaged in the initial campaign of Operation Iraqi Freedom, I suddenly realized my aspiration was to be a farmer. I then spent the next ten (10) years of my military service working as hard as I could to become a farmer.

Finally, in 2013, my dream was achieved and I have never been more content in my choice of profession.

Many of my fellow service members were surprised to learn of my military-to-farming aspiration. However, there are numerous similarities between the two professions. Both are comprised of honest, reliable, and trustworthy people who place a high value on integrity. Both professions entail service to a higher calling, either through defending our nation or providing food for the same. Both have leadership as a keystone element to success. Both professions are meritocracies, offering great opportunities regardless of race, color, or creed. Both involve a great level of risk and adventure. Both professions require dedication, discipline, and a willingness to sacrifice personal goals in exchange for achieving success. And finally, mission ac-

accomplishment in both culminates in the production of a tangible and highly valued product—freedom and food. Because of these professional similarities, it was only natural I would be drawn to agriculture following my military service.

During my transition to my farming career, I faced obstacles which many beginning farmers confront. I also seized on many opportunities to alleviate those challenges. My status as a military veteran afforded me benefits in many situations, while others were addressed through means available to all beginning farmers.

VETERAN-RELATED BENEFITS UTILIZED

Veteran Farmer/Rancher Recognition in the Agriculture Act of 2014

Recognition of “Veteran Farmers” as a distinct class in the Agriculture Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) provided numerous new benefits. While the definition is essentially the same as that for beginning farmers and ranchers, this new classification afforded additional USDA program priorities to veterans.

Veteran Preference and Priorities

The USDA is required to set aside a portion of the acres available for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for beginning and socially-disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. Under the 2014 Farm Bill, a preference must be given to veterans that fall within one of these set-aside categories. Veterans now receive points when applying for the program which are in addition to any points granted for being a beginning or socially-disadvantaged farmer. This preference allowed me to qualify and enroll TomTilda Farm in CSP in 2014. This significantly helped me to obtain additional farm revenue while also providing a great incentive to conserve my critical land resources. I encourage Congress to support the President’s request of no limitations on mandatory funding for Farm Bill conservation programs.

Microloan Assistance

The 2014 Farm Bill specifically excludes microloans used by veterans from the term limits applied to other USDA Direct Operating Loans. In addition, the legislation also allows veterans to choose between the microloan interest rate (set at 5 percent) or the regular interest rate for USDA operating loans. I am currently in the process of applying for a microloan to assist in the purchase of new capital equipment for TomTilda Farm.

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program Grant

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) provides grants to organizations providing training, education, outreach, and technical assistance to beginning farmers and ranchers. Under the 2014 Farm Bill, assistance for veterans is made a priority under the BFRDP by specifically including “agricultural rehabilitation and vocational training” as an eligible service and by providing a 5 percent set-aside of BFRDP funding for programs serving veterans.

I have benefited greatly from programs funded through BFRDP grants. For example, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program through Montana State University provided me training in commodity price risk management, farm income tax management, acquiring farm financial credit, and USDA program overviews.

In addition, Montana State University partnered with Montana Grain Growers Association to provide additional training through the use of these grant funds. This allowed me to participate in an intermediate grain marketing strategy workshop, gain farm bill program training, and obtain membership in the Montana Grain Growers Association.

Because of the significant training I have received through BFRDP grants, I encourage Congress to continue funding the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program.

Outreach and Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers

The Outreach and Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, commonly referred to as the 2501 Program, was expanded to include veterans. This allows the USDA to provide additional technical assistance to veterans focused on enabling farm ownership and operation as well as outreach to encourage participation in USDA programs.

Specifically for me, this benefit was realized through the Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC). The FVC has provided access to a large network of other veteran farmers, provided me with numerous training and education opportunities, and enabled my certification in the nation-wide “Homegrown By Heroes” agriculture marketing label program. I encourage Congress to meet the President’s request of \$10 million in discretionary funding for the 2501 program in fiscal year 2017 in order to restore

total program funding to its previous total funding level of \$20 million. This appropriation would restore total program funding to its historical level in order to meet the increased demand for outreach and technical assistance by veterans.

Land Transition Incentives

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Transition Incentive Program (TIP) provides owners of land coming out of CRP with additional program payments if they lease or sell the land to a beginning farmers, including veterans. While I have not yet participated in this outstanding program, I am actively seeking an opportunity to do so.

Military Retirement Income

As a retired officer, I am blessed with an advantageous source of non-farm income through my military retirement. While many of my farming peers are forced to obtain a second job to assist in paying family living expenses, I am able to cover those expenses through my retirement pay. This allows me to focus solely on farm management and operations.

Military Healthcare

Likewise, I am also blessed with a healthcare plan as part of my military retirement which significantly reduces my living expenses. Although not a member of the Veterans Affairs healthcare system, I am enrolled in the military TRICARE Standard program which requires nopremium payment. Additionally, dental care is provided through the TRICARE Retiree Dental Program at a significantly reduced premium.

Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was established to meet the needs of separating service members during their period of transition into civilian life by offering job-search assistance and related services. Through TAP, I participated in the Entrepreneurial Module which provided outstanding training and assistance as I established my farm business.

NON-VETERAN RELATED BENEFITS UTILIZED

USDA Conservation Programs

In addition to enrollment in CSP as previously mentioned, my farm also has acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). As stated previously, I encourage Congress to fully fund all USDA Conservation Programs. Through CRP, I have been able to keep environmentally-sensitive land out of agricultural production while planting valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat. However, the 2014 Farm Bill and sequestration have cut over \$6 billion from conservation programs.

USDA Agricultural Risk Coverage Program

TomTilda Farm is enrolled in the Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) Program. I encourage Congress to fully fund staffing requirements of local USDA offices for management of Farm Bill programs. The benefits of the ARC program are critical to my continued farming operation. This safety net provides revenue loss coverage in years when I may be unable to pay all of my operating expenses due to weather-related crop failures or commodity price deflation. In addition to management of ARC, local USDA offices provide outstanding advice to veteran farmers such as me. This critical service must continue.

In addition, I am certain USDA will seek to reduce and/or consolidate local offices in the future. Proponents will advocate the use of technology as a replacement for local USDA officials. However, the lack of broadband Internet service in rural America, the many elderly farmers who are not proficient in utilizing computer services, and the lack of personal interaction with USDA officials will undoubtedly lead to lack of service and missed opportunities. I encourage Congress to resist any future attempts to reduce and/or consolidate local community USDA offices.

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Benefits for Federal Crop Insurance

Beginning farmers are eligible for additional Federal Crop Insurance benefits under the 2014 Farm Bill. Because of this, I was able to obtain an additional ten (10) percentage points of premium subsidy for my multi-peril crop insurance. This is a significant cost reduction in one of the programs that is the most critical to my continued success as a farmer. Without affordable crop insurance, I will be unable to obtain an operating loan and unable to pay my expenses in disaster years. Therefore, in addition to sustaining this benefit to beginning farmers, I further encourage

Congress to fully fund crop insurance programs and to restore the President's proposed \$18 billion cut to crop insurance.

Additional Training and Education Programs

Through the National Farmers Union, I was able to participate in the Beginning Farmer Institute which includes educational seminars, farm and cooperative tours, meetings with USDA and Congressional staff personnel, and opportunities to participate in Farmers Union activities. The program is funded by the National Farmers Union Foundation, Farm Credit Council, Cenex Harvest States Foundation, CoBank, and Farmers Union Industries Foundation. While I do not know specifically why my application to this program was successful, I am inclined to believe my status as a military veteran was a significant influence.

USDA Rural Development Grants

A significant factor in enticing veterans into agriculture is the viability of rural communities. Specifically, the families of veterans want to live in communities with a strong school system, reliable healthcare delivery, adequate business services, and sufficient recreational opportunities. USDA Rural Development Grants are crucial to ensuring the continued viability of each of these. I encourage Congress to fully fund staffing all state Rural Development offices. Specifically in Montana, the staffing of these offices has been reduced from 58 to 43 personnel in recent years. The closest office to my community is located 350 miles away in Billings, Montana.

Simply put, the combination of insufficient staffing and a large coverage area leads to reduced program effectiveness for communities such as mine.

Agriculture Research Programs

Because of outstanding past research in agriculture research, I have been able to grow high-yielding crops which are resistant to pest pressures. Continued research is critical to continuing to improve yields and ensuring food security for America. Specifically, I encourage Congress to provide the full \$10 million of funding for the US Wheat and Barley Scab Initiative in order to help fight scab pressures which have extended into Montana. In addition, I encourage Congressional oversight to ensure USDA continues to prioritize research into crop pests at research facilities such as that at the Northern Plains Agriculture Research Lab in Sidney, Montana.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

USDA Farm Loan Programs

Through Direct Farm Ownership Loans, beginning farmers are able to obtain low-interest loans to purchase farmland, construct buildings, and make farm improvements. Currently the maximum loan amount is \$300,000. However, with recent price increases in farm real estate, this amount is often insufficient. Therefore, I encourage Congress to increase the limit to assist beginning farmers and ranchers in purchasing land in areas with high real estate values. In addition, I encourage Congress to increase funding for Direct Operating Loans from \$1.25 billion to \$1.46 billion, in line with the President's request, so that future veteran farmers can access capital critical to their farm operations.

Outreach Services Supporting New, Beginning, and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers

The President proposed \$5 million for USDA enhanced outreach to beginning, women, and military veteran farmers. This funding would be provided to the Office of the Secretary, but could be transferred to other agencies in USDA as needed.

New, Beginning, and Veteran Farmer and Ranch Initiatives

The President proposed \$3.9 million for targeted outreach by USDA to those interested in getting into farming. It will include a certification program to help veteran farmers prequalify for loans, 25 new full-time staff devoted to providing outreach, a pilot new farmer mentoring network that includes stipends for 200 mentors, and funding for cooperative agreements which support organizations in providing assistance and outreach.

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Account Pilot Program

In addition to loans, the Administration's beginning farmer proposals include first-time funding of \$1.5 million for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Account (IDA) Program. The IDA program has not received an appropriation in years past and thus has not yet been launched as directed in the last two Farm Bills.

In conclusion, I am honored to have the opportunity to farm in rural America, providing high-quality food. While I used to assist in preserving national security as a member of the military, today I assist in that same effort by providing food secu-

rity for our citizens. I again thank the members for the honor of testifying about the benefits and programs available to military veterans in agriculture.

Senator MORAN. Thank you very much, Mr. Kanning. Let me start with Mr. Baccam. Mr. Secretary, could you outline for us what programs are available at the Department of Agriculture that might assist the folks that you just heard testify, assist them, assist veterans? If you would like to highlight provisions of the President's budget request that would alter or enhance those opportunities, I would like for the subcommittee to hear that.

Mr. BACCAM. Senator, thank you for that question. Within this space, USDA has really taken off in recent years, and that is thanks to the military veterans agricultural liaison position that was created in the 2014 farm bill. With our agencies all across the Department, we have an ability to direct our resources to be able to have a stronger focus on supporting veterans.

Through many of our agencies, we have programs to do exactly that. The Beginning Farmer/Rancher Development Program in our National Institute of Food and Agriculture is a grant program that helps provide funding for organizations that will do outreach, education, and training for veterans.

There is a [5 percent] set-aside within that program for any organization that has all or in part states that will assist veterans, so the Beginning Farmer/Rancher Development Program is key for us.

For folks who are interested in getting into farming and ranching starting off, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) is one of the key places we go. First off, the Farm Service Agency has a footprint that spans across the United States. We have over 2,100 offices, and we can provide in-person service to the veterans who are out there in the rural communities.

With our Loans Program, we have over \$465 million in farm loans that we have put out there since 2009 that have helped almost 7,000 veterans. We think this is really impressive, and \$25 million of those dollars were through the Micro, a direct operating microloan program, which is good for the new beginning farmers who are just starting off. For Mr. Kanning who has a large operation, he has the opportunity to apply for these programs as well.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has programs in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) that have priority preferences for veterans.

These are just a few of the many, many programs and support we have through our agencies within USDA.

As for the President's budget, there is one thing in particular I would like to highlight, and that is the FARM-Vets proposal, and the Food and Agriculture Resilience Program for Military Veterans. It is a \$2.5 million proposal for an education and training program that will assist veterans in helping them gain the skills needed to get into farming and ranching.

Beyond that, as Ms. Perry has noted in her organization, there is a therapeutic aspect to it as well. FARM-Vets will do some research into the therapeutic value of farming and ranching, psychologically, behaviorally, which is a limited space in terms of research that exists currently. We would like it done.

Lastly, the Office of Advocacy and Outreach has a proposal for an additional \$10 million for outreach programs that we believe will continue to assist veterans.

Mr. Kanning, I think, knows about the 2501 Program, which we believe has been very successful. If 2014 and 2015 are indications, over 50 percent of the grants each year have gone to organizations that have helped veterans.

If we are able to get the additional funding, we believe we can double the assistance out there.

Senator MORAN. I want to highlight or question the point because I think in the first part of your answer to my question, it was individual farmers who could be helped with USDA programs, and if you would again indicate to me and to the subcommittee what assistance can the USDA provide to organizations trying to help farmers, individuals become farmers?

Mr. BACCAM. Senator, thank you for that question. It is the Beginning Farmer/Rancher Development Program, which provides grants to community organizations, organizations of higher education, universities, as well as the cooperative agreements that we have with many veteran services organizations, like the Farmer Veteran Coalition.

I think a lot of the folks up here are familiar with that, and you may be as well. We provide these cooperative agreements to be able to do risk management training, business planning, for veterans. The organizations will execute those types of educational programs for us.

Senator MORAN. Thank you for your answer. Before I lose any of my members, I am going to next call on the ranking member, but I wanted to highlight a Senate bill that I introduced and Senator Tester is a sponsor of, it is Senate bill 1870 entitled "Veterans Entrepreneur Transition Act."

This bill was passed by the Small Business Committee last year, and we are anxious for it to be considered and anxious for any of my colleagues who are supportive of this concept to join us in sponsoring this bill.

It is a 3-year pilot program through the Small Business Administration (SBA) for 250 veterans to pursue the opportunity to start a business, to be an entrepreneur, utilizing their G.I. Bill of Rights. This requires some training through the SBA in entrepreneurship and helps them phase in that training by offering collateral to launch their business through the G.I. benefits. Again, it would have application in agriculture if given the opportunity, but another avenue that we are actively pursuing.

Let me now turn to Senator Merkley.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to apologize now that I will have to leave at 3:30, so this will be the only round of questions I will be able to be a part of.

Ms. Perry, have you currently benefited from any of the veterans programs or farming programs that Mr. Baccam has mentioned?

Ms. PERRY. Thank you for the question. I am sad to say the answer is no. We are in close communication with our local USDA office. We have had several meetings talking about the Farm Service Agency and actually the Beginning Farmer/Rancher Program, where we have run into issues that we are an organization, we are

not an individual veteran, so we have actually sat in meetings where somebody said well, maybe one of your veterans could apply for a loan and buy the property.

We just sort of have not found the avenues, and perhaps that is simply because it is a bureaucracy, but we are really looking for ways that we can work together and be supported as an organization because we would like to be a hub. We would like to be a resource hub. We would like to be that sort of front entry for veterans who may have an interest either vocationally or who are drawn out to the ranch because of the therapeutic aspect and the comradery, so we really view agriculture as a vehicle.

We are still working on ways that USDA can help us.

Senator MERKLEY. Mr. Baccam, I will not take the time now but can you follow up with us in terms of brainstorming about that particular obstacle and how groups which are really leveraging their resources to help many veterans might be eligible for some of these programs?

Mr. BACCAM. Yes, Mr. Ranking Member, I would be happy to do that.

[The information follows:]

USDA has been promoting a three pillar approach to helping veterans who are interested in the business of agriculture which include: help veterans who are interested in farming and ranching; imbue veterans with the knowledge of farming and ranching and the agricultural industry; and help veterans when they are in need.

Becoming Farmers and Ranchers

Several USDA agencies provide access to land, capital, and opportunities to veterans who are interested in becoming farmers and ranchers.

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) assists veterans with a two-pronged approach to becoming a farmer or rancher. FSA programs focus on the loans that make it possible for veterans to begin the work of farming and ranching as well as programs to promote the ownership of land. Since 2009 FSA has helped to provide \$466 million in farm loans to veterans through Direct and Guaranteed Loans. Utilizing the direct loan programs and promoting their availability to veterans ensure that veterans are able to successfully enter the farming and ranching business. The fiscal year 2017 budget proposal requested an increase of \$208 million for the direct operating loan program to be targeted for veteran farmers for a portion of the fiscal year to fund loans for approximately 3,800 veterans. Additionally, the fiscal year 2017 Budget proposes a fee waiver for the guaranteed operating loan program as well as a \$90,000 increase for new, beginning and veteran farmers and ranchers to support a certified training program to pre-qualify for all veterans to be pre-qualified for the FSA direct ownership loans upon completion of a program.

FSA also helps with making land available for ownership. FSA implements the Transition Incentives Program (TIP) which is part of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). TIP is designed to help beginning farmers and ranchers—including veterans—find access to land. Retiring farmers with expiring CRP contracts can receive 2 years' worth of additional rental payments for leasing or selling land to beginning farmers and ranchers which is inclusive of veterans. In addition, the CRP Grasslands program allots additional ranking points for veterans, when determining which grasslands to accept into CRP.

Another FSA program is Non-insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP), which provides financial assistance to producers of non-insurable crops when low yields, loss of inventory, or prevented planting occurs due to natural disasters. FSA waives the application fee for the NAP for applicants with limited resources, or beginning, or socially-disadvantaged, farmers, and ranchers, including veterans. FSA also reduces premiums on NAP buy-up coverage for limited resource, beginning, and socially-disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, including veterans.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) administers the Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Each program gives specific preference to eligible veteran farmers and ranchers, and EQIP and CSP provide specific prioritization of veteran farmers and ranchers within the beginning farmer and rancher special funding pools. AMA and EQIP provide specific

benefits for a veteran farmer or rancher to allow them to be eligible to receive a higher payment rate. Since 2014, NRCS has funded nearly 3,300 contracts and provided over \$54.6 million to veterans through AMA, EQIP, and CSP.

Through Rural Development (RD), veterans can access Value Added Producer Grants which support producers in ventures that will increase the return on their agriculture commodities through value-added projects. This program is designed to assist expansion of business at all stages.

Obtaining Training and Knowledge

USDA's funding and support is key to the training programs for veterans who are interested in farming and ranching, giving them a network and support system to make their ideas a reality.

Key to veterans in agriculture is programs that help train veterans to be successful in an agricultural business. Rural Development, USDA's Office of Advocacy and Outreach, and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture have created programs to ensure the success of helping veterans train for jobs in the agricultural industry.

The National Center for Appropriate Technology, through funding from USDA, runs the Armed to Farm program, which is veteran-specific training, consisting of a week long program. This program consistently receives high marks from veterans who have completed the training. The program connects veterans with USDA and extension services which are essential for any beginning farmers or ranchers. The skills that are taught in the Armed to Farm program are key to giving veterans a strong foundation in farming and the basic principles of ranching. The program touches upon everything from the creation of business plans and financial management to marketing assistance and making each veteran farmer's goals a defined reality.

Two other key programs for veteran training is the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) and AgrAbility. BFRDP provides grants to organizations for education training and technical assistance that is designed to help new farmers and those looking to begin farming. BFRDP has received \$20 million annually in discretionary funding and has a 5 percent set aside for organizations that all or in part serve veterans. AgrAbility is focused on education and assistance to eliminate or minimize the challenges that disabled farmers and ranchers face. This is essential for veterans who have an interest in farming and ranching but may need special assistance due to injuries sustained during their time in the military. AgrAbility makes grants to organizations that provide assistance to those with disabilities.

Getting Help

USDA's mission to help veteran includes housing and food assistance through the Rural Housing Service (RHS) and Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

RHS is a strong loan provider for veterans and their families. With more than 12,000 direct and guaranteed loans to purchase single family homes and more than 1,700 grants for making home repairs since 2009, RHS provides veterans with the loans necessary to purchase their first homes and make necessary improvements. In addition, repair grants have helped with accessibility enhancements at their homes that otherwise would shut them out of the farming and ranching community. With over \$1.3 billion in obligations for Single Family Housing for veterans since 2009, RHS has provided important loan abilities for veterans in rural communities.

In addition to housing services, USDA also supports veterans through FNS food assistance programs. When a veteran is food insecure, FNS has programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Women, Infant, and Children, which veterans can access. FNS, along with Mazon, an anti-hunger organization, provided an accredited continuing education seminar for more than 12,000 Veterans Administration social workers and dietitians regarding the purpose of SNAP, the eligibility requirements, and application process. In funding initiatives like this, USDA is ensuring that veterans gain the most benefit from services and programs that are available to them.

USDA Veterans Initiatives are key to providing access, education, and help to veterans who want to be in the farming and ranching business. The agricultural industry will continue to grow, and with veterans skills, discipline and desire to continue to serve their country, it is an industry where they will be welcomed with open arms.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you. Ms. Perry, you mentioned several elements of how the farming or ranching experience is relevant to our veterans in terms of the structure. You mentioned outdoors

work, physical work, completion of concrete tasks, caring for living things.

I am imagining that another element might be that you are also in the proximity of other veterans who have shared your experience. Have you seen these items—do those observations come out of the experience of on the ground observations of working with veterans or has the ranch confirmed the theory that those things are important in the healing process? Let me put it that way.

Ms. PERRY. Absolutely. We are seeing it on the ground. I feel like we are just at the tip of the iceberg as well because as I mentioned, agriculture is a vehicle. We send an e-mail every week to veterans in the community. My particular passion is combat veterans, so we actually are working on outreach to those difficult to engage veterans.

So, we identify projects that we are working on and tasks that need to be done on the property. They come out together every week. On St. Patrick's Day, we had 17 vets out, and they are spreading seed in the pasture, they are building shelters for the animals, trimming the trees for safety, fireproofing the property.

So, it is coming through anecdotally right now. As Mr. Baccam mentioned earlier, I think there is a rich area for research to be done on how this is actually benefitting the vets. Right now, we are seeing it and hearing it.

As I mentioned in my testimony, I have had several vets say the ranch has saved their lives. They have a reason to get up and get out of their house and get out of their head. We are starting to see more and more glue, so to speak, among vets with each other.

Senator MERKLEY. Mr. LaGrange, as he described his operation, I think you are training veterans to be farmers. Ms. Perry, I think your operation has a little bit of a different angle and is providing an immediate kind of productive engagement, healing engagement for veterans.

Are those two things closely associated or are they kind of different ways of being of assistance to veterans?

Ms. PERRY. Thank you. I would say we have short-term goals and long-term goals. I think our long-term goal would be to provide more actual vocational opportunities. We are working very closely with the Extension Service, so we have had members of the Extension Service come out, do classes and tutorials. It has been rather informal.

We are a start-up, so our big effort right now is building capacity. That is where we could most use assistance. We would like to see a more formalized vocational aspect. I am not sure if you have heard of Archi's Acres down in California that is run by a Marine combat veteran. We are also in communication with Growing Veterans, which is an organic farm up in Bellingham, Washington, that is a functional, and I believe profitable, organic farm that is also doing a peer support program.

Our goal is to increase the vocational component, but right now, in our start-up phase, what we are focused on and what we are seeing results with is the therapeutic component.

Senator MERKLEY. Great. Mr. Chairman, again, thank you very much for holding this hearing. I think it raises interesting issues

for this subcommittee to work on. I applaud all of you for your work.

I have felt that it is so hard for veterans to come back, they have been engaged with high responsibility and high risk, high adrenalin, they come back home and if they do not have kind of a job structure to fit into, that transition can become enormously difficult, and there are many ways to provide opportunity, and I think particularly you all are involved in an element that has quite a few very, very positive features for engagement and healing, and well done, and thank you.

Senator MORAN. Senator Merkley, thank you for your cooperation in being able to have this hearing today. I now turn to the Senator from Montana, Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Merkley. Thank you for a very thoughtful and heartfelt discussion today, the testimony was excellent. I want to thank you for the service. There is a lot of years serving in the military here on this panel.

Colonel Kanning, it is great to have Montanans here. I had a chance to go to a lot of these hearings as one of my proud Montanan moments to hear your story, see what you do with F-15s, F-16s, F-22s, F-117s, and my only correction would be you are still a somebody when you are back as a farmer in Flaxville, Montana.

To quote your witness to your left, Mr. Ulrick, I think you are doing God's work now back in Montana. You protected our country in the United States Air Force for 20 years. You are securing our country now by feeding it, and I thank you for that.

Agriculture is our number one industry in Montana, and I am saying this to another Bobcat here, Bobcat to Bobcat. We are also home to 100,000 veterans. Typically, when we look at surveys, Montana has one of the highest per capita vet population in the United States. We are usually in the top two to four.

One of our challenges is veteran unemployment, which has been a persistent issue in Montana and around the country. It is a top priority of mine to ensure that those who have served our country are able to effectively transition to civilian life and continue to apply the skills and the traits that are learned in the military so they can then benefit their communities.

That is why I strongly believe that agriculture can provide significant opportunities for vets who bring invaluable leadership and knowledge to the workforce.

Mr. Baccam, I am going to start with you. I was pleased to see the USDA reached an agreement with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation earlier this year to provide more opportunities and tools for veterans to seek employment in ag or start their own farms by connecting the USDA's Bridges to Opportunity Program with the Chamber's Hiring Our Heroes Initiative. I think that is a great bridge.

Unfortunately, this Bridges to Opportunity, which currently operates in 20 States, is not active in Montana. I sent a letter to Secretary Vilsack earlier this year urging the USDA to expand this program into Montana to ensure that Montana vets interested in ag have access to every tool available, including Bridges to Opportunity.

What would it take to expand this program into Montana and perhaps other States across the country?

Mr. BACCAM. Senator, thank you for that question. At the USDA, we were very excited to sign the memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Hiring Our Heroes. That allowed us access to military bases to talk directly with veterans, to encourage them to get into farming or ranching. I will be looking forward to engaging with them moving forward.

The Bridges to Opportunity Program is a very interesting way in which we can help veterans find resources, not just in the Farm Service Agency, but across the USDA as well. We are implementing this initiative, this service. We want it to be effective. We want to phase it in properly. I know we should expect a nationwide expansion hopefully by the end of this year.

Senator DAINES. Is that saying we could expect that in Montana by the end of the calendar year?

Mr. BACCAM. Senator, I believe we are working towards launching this nationwide very soon.

Senator DAINES. Okay. I look forward to working further on that, I would love to add Montana as the 21st State if that is possible this year. Thanks for supporting that program. I would like to see it certainly expanded in our State as well.

I want to switch over to Colonel Kanning. In your testimony, you highlight several programs within the USDA that were helpful in your own personal transition as a fourth generation farmer to civilian life after your time in the Air Force, 20 years outside of Montana coming home.

How did you learn of these programs and what in your view could be done to ensure that other veterans in Montana and around the country are aware of the opportunities that agriculture can provide?

Mr. KANNING. Thank you, Senator. I had a lot of training and education I needed when I went back to the farm because I did not intend to be a farmer as a young man. I did not get any farming education in college. I had no experience in farm management.

One of the first places that I went to, Senator, was the local Farm Service Agency office in Daniels County. As Mr. Baccam has previously said, they are a great resource to any beginning farmer, whether they be a veteran or not. They have great programs that they will talk anybody through.

I do want to highlight one organization that has helped me immensely, the Farmer Veteran Coalition. I am here today with a few other members of the Farmer Veteran Coalition who made trips from West Virginia and Virginia to sit in on this hearing.

The Farmer Veteran Coalition gains funding through the 2501 Program, and they do miracles with it, Senator. They really spread the word on all of the resources that are available to veterans, whether they be USDA programs or commercially available programs. It is an outstanding organization that really carries the banner for all veterans who are getting established in agriculture.

I would encourage this body to continue to support the 2501 Program and I would encourage this body to fully fund and provide more funding to that program because it has made a big difference for me and thousands of veterans across the United States.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Colonel Kanning.

Senator MORAN. The Senator from Montana, Senator Tester.

Senator TESTER. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks for plugging our bill. Hopefully, we can get some more co-sponsors on that bad boy.

I want to thank you all for being here, thank you for your testimony. Ms. Perry, I would love to have just a separate hearing with you, we could talk about PTSD and what we can do utilizing agriculture to help those folks because it is curable. It is like a broken arm. We just have to make sure the resources are out there.

Mr. LaGrange, it is very good to have you here, especially considering you were a University of Montana student at one point in time in your life.

Mr. LAGRANGE. Right now.

Senator TESTER. Right now. That is good. The other thing is I would love to visit with you about pollinators and what is going on in that world. There are some pretty alarming statistics out there. I would be interested to know if you share the same.

Mr. Kanning, thank you for being here. You talked about the 2501 Program, Mr. Kanning. I guess the question is since that is a program that works, that you endorse, are there other programs out there that you endorse? Are there programs out there that do not work that we are putting money into that we should not be?

Mr. KANNING. Senator, Mr. Baccam mentioned the Beginning Farmer/Rancher Development Program. That is a fantastic program also. Montana State University used some of that money to put together a program for beginning farmers. They delivered it during the Montana Grain Growers Convention, and it is absolutely fantastic.

The benefits to all beginning farmers under the crop insurance title are fantastic also, and I think they are great.

Are there programs that do not work? I believe there is a program that is rapidly and very soon will not work, and that is the Direct Operating Loan Program through USDA. I, personally, did not qualify for that. You have to get rejected twice by commercial lenders. I will tell you, in the military, it is very hard to develop bad credit in some aspects because the military flat out will not let you do it. They are not going to let you run around town bouncing checks.

When you get out, you are going to have some kind of decent credit. I did not qualify for direct operating loans through USDA. The reason I say I think it is at risk is because as commodity prices drop, more and more banks are no longer approving loans for people like me, and there is going to be more and more of us who are now back into the direct operating loan bucket, and I believe USDA is going to run out of money pretty soon here on funds available for direct operating loans.

Senator TESTER. In your written testimony, Mr. Kanning, you talked about the importance of rural development in making vibrant rural communities and attracting veterans back home. You talked a little bit about staffing, not only of the FSA office but also in Rural Development offices.

Can you just talk to me about your experience? We as appropriators on this subcommittee on agriculture, and we are the ones

that see what that budget is going to be like, whether it is for that FSA office or whether it is for Rural Development, can you talk about what your experience has been in that regard?

Mr. KANNING. Yes, Senator. Thank you. I am very passionate about rural America, rural Montana. In rural Montana, we provide a lot of great resources to Americans. Ranking Member Merkley mentioned, about 40 percent of military veterans are from rural America.

Unfortunately, we send all these great assets out into the world and we get very little back. I believe one of the greatest ways for us to recruit talent back into our small rural communities is by focusing on the families.

I believe spouses and children and servicemembers themselves want to come back to a community that has a strong, healthy school system. They want to come back to a community that has accessible healthcare in their town.

We want to have a business. I am concerned about who is going to bury me when I die in the community I live in because there are not people coming back in to take over those businesses.

We need to invest in some infrastructure in rural communities, and we need to have some type of recreation. I think having resources available to us through the Rural Development Grant Program are critical to recruiting talent back.

For me, my local office is in Billings, Montana. It is 350 miles away. That is my closest office. We are currently trying to get a grant through them on a project at our fairgrounds, but it is 350 miles away, my chances of getting somebody up to look at it are very difficult.

I know that is not directly tangible, tying into why I farm and why I enjoy farming and why I am there farming, but it is something that factors into recruiting talent back into rural America.

Senator TESTER. I agree with you 100 percent. I appreciate that perspective. Mr. Chairman, I have a statement that I want to make on Armed to Farm that the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) does. I will put it in as written, if you would do that.

Senator MORAN. Without objection, so ordered.

Senator TESTER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank you all for your testimony. I wish I had an opportunity to visit with you all, but I do not.

Just one correction, and I can say this because I farm about the same as Mr. Kanning does in Montana, I would love to say Mr. Kanning and I have big operations, but they are not by Montana standards, not at all. So, 1,700 acres is a lot in Central Illinois. It is not all that big in Montana, but that does not mean that it cannot be successful and an economic unit that supports a family, and sometimes even more than that.

So, thank you all very much.

Senator MORAN. Senator Tester, thank you very much. We will have another round of questions. I would like to direct this to Mr. LaGrange. I know you worked closely with the VA in Kansas, and I know you are working hard to get your SAVE Program well on its way to meet the needs of veterans with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries.

What is the estimate by the VA for people that could be served by your program, and what is your sense of how many people are now not receiving the care and treatment they need as a result of having those injuries?

Mr. LAGRANGE. Well, as I mentioned, we have had several VA representatives working with us to design this farm. We have designed it for 100 students and their family members. I guess the short answer is they believe our farm is about 25 percent of the need. Their recommendation is that we expand the clinic and the farm to handle at least four times the number of members that we have designed it for.

Again, I would like to express the numbers, 1,500,000 vets, 800,000 transitioning military, the need for a million new farmers. It is going to take a pretty bold program to address that need. Therefore, we have designed this again as one farm on one land grant university.

This Nation has a beautiful array of, I think, 78 land grant universities, and ideally, if every one of those farms had such a program, we could begin to address those numbers.

At large, bold efforts like that will only make marginal differences until such time as we deal with the big numbers, and the fact that our farm probably only meets 25 percent of the need in a small area in Kansas is symptomatic of the fact that we probably are going to have to look to other land grants to adopt programs like this in order to take on the huge demand for new and younger farmers in the future.

What a beautiful body to take them from, young, disciplined folks that can fly F-16s or F-17s or M-1 tanks. Last year, when we visited an equipment sales facility, the manufacturer was telling us how difficult it was to drive a combine today because it is so sophisticated. So, said one of our soldiers, let me give it a try. Within 10 minutes, he drove that combine around that facility, because he had the skills to do so.

Furthermore, most of these soldiers come with a retirement of some sort, disability or otherwise. They come with medical care. So, they have a leg up on others who would start farming because they have those resources that others might not have. They have real desire, firm desire, to farm.

So, it is a tremendous opportunity but to deal with the kinds of numbers that are demanded here, it is going to take a large, bold effort in order to meet them.

Senator MORAN. Tell me the role that the land grant colleges play, will you re-describe that for me?

Mr. LAGRANGE. Yes. Programmatically, in our case, the Office of Extension develops the programs for this farm. Incremental programs that are all encompassing, so in addition to the hands on cattle and crops, it will learn farm economics, it will learn the role of FSA and NRCS, EQIP, and all the governmental and non-governmental organizations and how they come knit together as a quilt of agriculture. So, extension will be the primary program driver.

The instructors will come from extension also, a full spectrum view of farming. The College of Architecture is most interested in making sure that this design is functional, innovative, and can

teach these farmers the best ways to build things and make things work. The College of Agriculture is quite interested in teaching the most modern methods.

So, the number of 63 percent of our farms in the last generation is every type of farm, it is a 2,000 or 5,000 wheat farm and it is a 35-acre self-sustaining farm. No matter what type of farm it is, they are in their last generation. Beekeepers of the country cannot find folks to take over their large operations.

So, the scope and scale of this problem is significant, and requires bold action.

Senator MORAN. Thank you. Mr. Ulrick, why were you able to access this program? Was it just happenstance that you met Mr. LaGrange, and what does that mean to other servicemen and women, veterans, in the circumstance that you found yourself in? What is your sense of the demand for the kind of opportunity that you were provided?

Mr. ULRICK. Senator, to answer your question, I met Gary LaGrange through the farm program they were trying to put together during the Wounded Warrior unit that was at Fort Riley, Kansas, which I was a part of the unit.

I have to kind of confess one thing, I missed one page of my testimony which explained all of that.

Senator MORAN. I am glad I asked the question.

Mr. ULRICK. Yes. If you would like me to read my page, I will answer your questions for you.

Senator MORAN. That would be just fine. There is no member of the Senate who does not understand the opportunity to speak a little longer. You are doing it well.

Mr. ULRICK. All right. What I did is I missed the second page of my first part. This is my first chance here, so I am actually really kind of excited. I am not quite as nervous as I was before.

As you know, many soldiers come back from deployments seeing the world in a different way. Many have deep depressions that keep them from entering back into society and fitting in well and adjusted. We can see that many take their lives because of the adjustment issues, just like the one we had at Kent State just the other night.

I believe we can restore the basic thoughts and the goals of the American dream, freedom includes the opportunity of prosperity, success, and achieving through hard work in a society with few barriers. Many soldiers do not make the change from being a soldier to being a civilian very well. Many have struggles because they have been in positions of leadership, being in charge of many operational needs of the military that do not directly transfer to the civilian jobs or lifestyle.

It has been proven that working with livestock is like having a service dog as a companion. People taking a course at the SAVE farm will be able to learn a new way of life that uses the things they have been taught about scheduling, planning, managing, and being in charge of their lives. Basically, all that stuff that we have been taught in the military about doing operational things, doing different mission accomplishment stuff, will come back and can fit some of that stuff directly back into the farm programs where you cannot in normal civilian jobs at factories and that type of thing.

So, actually, it still leaves them in those positions of leadership. It is actually a family value thing. Farming is actually a family way of life. That is the only way I can explain it, and that is why I was talking about God's work.

I have owned a farm since I was 18 years old. I went in the military to fly helicopters after a bad divorce. People have been there. The thing is I have always kept my farm. I was in a special operations unit and then I came back and I bought another farm when I got married. My wife and I raised 10 kids. There is not a better place to raise children than on a farm. I am speaking from the hip.

The thing is if we do not help these soldiers become farmers, pretty soon there is going to be big corporate farms and pretty soon we will be punching a timecard going to work, and it is not going to be owned by families. It is going to be owned by large corporations.

If we can get it back to the lower levels where the families can own these, this is what we really need to push for.

Anyway, thank you for letting me testify, and I hope I answered your questions, and I welcome more of them.

Senator MORAN. Thank you very much.

Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just have a couple of follow up questions for Colonel Kanning. You mentioned the similarities between the characteristics that are common among both veterans as well as farmers, including the critical importance of being dedicated, disciplined, and willing to sacrifice.

How can ag assist veterans in transitioning to civilian life even for those where farming may not have been something they grew up with or a life long dream as it was for you?

Mr. KANNING. Thank you, Senator. For me, personally, ag has helped out because he gave me a mission again, and in the military, we get used to having missions all the time, going out to accomplish a specific task, and then look back and de-brief and see what we did right and what we did wrong.

We can do that with agriculture. At the end, we produce a tangible result. We are not sitting in an office answering a phone every single day. We are producing a result. I think that is very helpful to a veteran.

I think the risks and rewards are fantastic also. It gives you a sense of adventure again. It gives you a reason to get going in the morning, because you do not know what the risks are going to be or what the rewards are going to be each and every day. There are new challenges.

I think the team work and comradery that we get in the military is also very apparent every single day. It is on my farm. I am a farmer of one. I get the team work and comradery from working with my neighbors, working with my community on projects. When my neighbor has a problem with a tractor or needs some help pulling a calf, he calls me.

So, we develop great team work and comradery out there.

So, I think there are a lot of ways that ag can benefit veterans. I believe there are a lot of ways that veterans can benefit ag as well, and ag communities.

Senator DAINES. Kind of following up on that, as you look back at your own 20 years of service in the Air Force, what has been particularly useful from the skills learned or valuable to you as you transitioned from military service to farming?

Mr. KANNING. Senator, we spend a lot of time in training in the military. I mean I got trained one time how to walk up and walk down a ladder. It does not matter what it is you think you are going to do, you are going to get training for it, whether you want it or need it or not.

I think that was instilled in me over and over in the military and it has really been beneficial to me in my transition because it forced me to go seek training and education opportunities, like those you can get through the Farmer Veteran Coalition, like all the great programs that Farm Credit puts on all across America, training and education programs.

Leadership development is very important also in my transition. Obviously, it does not matter whether you are an E-3 or an O-10, the military is always going to continue to develop your leadership skills. That is something that we greatly need out in rural America. There is fantastic leadership opportunities out there, and there are plenty of opportunities to use those leadership skills that are developed in the military.

So, I think those are some of the primary ones, Senator.

Senator DAINES. We met earlier today. You brought up the steep learning curve that you dealt with when you returned back to the farm, and such challenges can be obstacles to veterans or other individuals who have an interest in starting up a farm or perhaps a ranch.

We talked about the declining rural communities. They are facing declining populations, changing the demographics. Flaxville used to have a high school. They do not any more. It is now Scobey.

What can be done to reverse or mitigate that trend and reduce the number of obstacles that younger generations face in trying to start in agriculture?

Mr. KANNING. Well, Senator, I think there are a lot of great programs out there. To get young, out of high school, young 20-year-olds, maybe straight out of college families back into agriculture, there are a lot of great programs to get older folks back into agriculture after a career in the military or any other business sector, to draw them back in.

I do strongly believe we need to invest in rural America through rural development programs because if the family does not want to come back to a place like Scobey, Montana, then you are never going to get a farmer like me back there. We have to entice them through having good healthcare and strong schools and a vibrant business community, great economy.

I think it is important for us to invest in programs like I mentioned previously, the 2501 Program, and the Beginning Farmer/Rancher Development Grants, so that we can help spread the word among veterans, so we can provide them training and education, so they can find—if we give them a list or knowledge or awareness of the programs that are out there, Senator, the veterans will find a way to overcome the challenges they face.

That is what we do. That is what we did for however long we served. We came into a challenge and we figured out how to solve it. If we invest in training and education, the veterans will figure out how to overcome those challenges.

Senator DAINES. Thanks, Colonel Kanning.

Senator MORAN. Mr. LaGrange, Senator Merkley asked Ms. Perry about whether her program was accessing the programs described by the Secretary. I would ask you the same question. Is there something at the Department of Agriculture that is advantageous to you and your mission?

Mr. LAGRANGE. I have been working with Lanon Baccam now for some while, and he has been most supportive of what we are doing. I think he is right along beside us as we move along. I cannot speak for him, of course.

We are finding ways that can work. USDA is engaged with us in our farm tour program. We spend a day with them, as I mentioned earlier, on each farm tour. We are exploring opportunities through the rural initiatives to help us out. As of today, we have not taken advantage of any, but we are working together to figure that out.

One of the hurdles, I guess you could say, is that again with numbers this big, it is going to take the Veterans Administration and the Department of Defense and others working side by side to solve a problem of this magnitude.

So, we are exploring ways to try to bring them into this. I met with leaders of the Army for Life Program and others, too, and there are some hurdles for us to get through.

It is difficult for a young soldier transitioning to find the time or be given the time to participate in programs like SAVE or any of the others that have been talked about here because during the last 180 days, they must engage in apprenticeships that are only governmental in nature. They cannot participate in a program like Kansas State University, they cannot participate with SAVE. They would like to be able to, but they are prohibited from doing so by DOD regulation and by different acts.

Given the number of folks that we have that want to engage in agriculture, that is a stumbling block. We would have many more in our program if we could figure out ways to get beyond those bureaucratic hurdles.

So, Secretary Baccam is working with us to try to figure out how we can do that. After all, this program is for all services. So far, we have worked with the United States Army and regional Veterans Administration. We have not been able to touch any of the other services yet because of some of the DOD hurdles we cannot get over.

So, a coalition of sorts or some sort of interagency approach to solving a problem of this magnitude is really necessary if any of these programs are going to work.

Senator MORAN. Secretary Baccam or Colonel LaGrange, do you have any sense that somebody at the Department of Defense is the right person, the right office, in which these issues could be resolved or at least attempted to be resolved? Is there somebody at DOD that cares about this and is working on it?

Mr. BACCAM. Absolutely, Mr. Chairman. The Transition to Veterans Program office in the Office of the Secretary of Defense is a close partner with us at the USDA. We have been working with them to make sure that USDA is at the table when we discuss agriculture as an option for veterans.

As Mr. LaGrange has noted, we can with our connections now, with the Military Veterans Agriculture Liaison position at the USDA, put Mr. LaGrange in contact with the right folks at DOD or SBA or Department of Labor, or VA, as we hear things. I have done that in the past, as I have met with folks.

With our partnership with SAVE, I believe we can work together a lot stronger, because there are ways, I believe, in which we can take a look at the Rural Development Office and see if there are programs that can help with Mr. LaGrange's program, and the rest of the programs at the USDA will be beneficial when these veterans complete these courses, when they start to become farmers or ranchers, we can be there to help them and catch them on their way out to assist them with purchasing farm land and getting homes and helping revitalize these rural communities, as Mr. Kanning has focused on as well.

Senator MORAN. Thank you. Let me see if any of you have anything you would like to make certain is said today that you have not been given the opportunity to say.

Ms. Perry.

Ms. PERRY. Thank you, Senator. This is coming from the voice of some veterans back home. I have not met one veteran in my community, and as I mentioned, we have 20,000 veterans in Central Oregon, who was aware of USDA resources or knew where to go to find anything out about farming and ranching programs. It was sort of like completely novel and new to them.

So, I think you mentioned, Mr. Baccam mentioned outreach programs. I think it is important to assist the USDA in getting the word out to more veterans, increasing the awareness in education, and that might look like more communication between USDA and VA, and more information in vet centers and VA clinics for veterans to become more aware.

Also, I think there is a challenge with veterans having difficulty particularly if they are struggling with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury and different conditions in navigating bureaucracy. So, I had a vet in my office last week making phone calls for him with the VA to help him out because it was completely overwhelming to him and he ends up getting frustrated and hanging up the phone.

So, to streamline or simplify some of those entry level access to USDA programs for vets so that they are going from one system where they are completely overwhelmed. I think the VA has done a good job of trying with the Transitions Program, the OAF Program, of implementing programs that help take the veteran by the hand and guide them through the bureaucracy, so perhaps the USDA might have something similar where there is a very specific, hey, I am the veterans' outreach person, I am here to help you navigate all these programs and find which one is a fit for you.

Senator MORAN. That is a good point, and I would say the USDA has an FSA office in nearly every county in the country where it

is accessible. I do not know if those offices would be promoting or finding ways to have a veterans' fair, for example, to tell veterans in the area about those opportunities.

I would guess that normally we think that falls to the VA, which does not have an office in every county in the country, and while we have traveling veteran representatives, there are lots of issues that our veterans face that the VA is involved in. This may not be something that is highlighted in those conversations.

Mr. LaGrange, in response to what Ms. Perry said, the individuals that are participating in your SAVE program, they know about it because?

Mr. LAGRANGE. We are changing our culture, I think. When I first began this program over 3 years ago, I met with counselors on the Department of Defense side, the Veterans Administration side, the Tuition Assistance Program folks. I went to job fairs.

Not once was agriculture ever mentioned. It was not in the vocabulary of VA or DOD. It clearly was not. There just was not a program there. In fact, in the initial meetings that I went to, the myth that exists out there that farming is a dead end career was brought up on several occasions.

I was asked in the midst of a bunch of veterans who wanted to get into farming why on earth I would ever want to lead them into farming because it is a dead end career. I debunked that right away by asking her, in this case, a her, and in another case, a him, whether there was a business plan for the farm that they grew up on.

I told them that our tours were to high value farms where they could learn how to farm properly and correctly. It was not easy but they would be shown farms where success was the byword.

So, I think we began to change and still have to change that myth out there. It was hard to get the word out. The VA folks we worked with finally saw the virtues of this program, the merits of it, and began to put the word out to veterans in their area that we had this program. The Wounded Warrior Battalion Commander saw it at Fort Riley and others, occupational specialists saw this as having merit, and began to grow the program.

There is still a lot of work that has to be done in getting the word out that this is a viable way to pursue life, and a good rich way to pursue life.

That is the part of it that I mentioned before, getting the upper levels of those stovepipes to understand that there is value in this, and to take a coalition, an interagency approach to making sure that agriculture is properly represented as a viable career choice, lifestyle choice.

It was mostly found out about through word of mouth through a few counselors at Fort Riley that wished to investigate this, so it is growing, I think. I think the word is getting out. Advocacy at all levels is clearly required to represent agriculture as something good and wholesome and valuable.

Senator MORAN. My guess is the answer to that question is your tenacity is what caused people to learn about the program.

Mr. Secretary, I asked you about the Department of Defense and you indicated who there would be most responsible for helping address some of the issues that were talked about. What would be the

companion at the Department of Veterans Affairs? Where in the VA is this highlighted and focused on?

Mr. BACCAM. Mr. Chairman, thank you for the question. There is an Office of Training and Employment that we work with closely at the VA to make sure the programs that we have are available to veterans.

I would like to real quickly touch on some of the challenges that Ms. Perry and Mr. LaGrange have highlighted. It is true, USDA has not had a chance to really sell agriculture at the national level with veterans. Just late last year, our former Deputy Secretary Krysta Harden, signed an agreement with DOD to incorporate information about USDA and agriculture into the packet of information all veterans or all servicemembers are required to take at the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

This is really key because it is really difficult to find veterans who are interested in farming after they get out, in the sense that if they are in the military currently and they are still a servicemember, they have a commanding officer who can compel them, you need to go take this training, or you need to go through this course.

So, with TAP and with USDA being incorporated into the information packet, that is a first touch. With our recent signing of the memorandum of understanding with Hiring Our Heroes, this is huge for us because we now have an opportunity to introduce agriculture face to face with veterans all across the country.

The transition summits that Hiring Our Heroes coordinates on with DOD, they put on these, what I think, are the premiere employment summits for veterans, and we can talk to them when they are still in the service so they can start thinking about what they are going to do when they get out.

We launched an ag workshop just two weeks ago in Fort Bliss, in El Paso, Texas, the first time we ever had a chance to do this. We had no idea how many people would show up. It was standing room only in a room like this. People were lined up outside the door trying to get in to see our presentation.

Our workshop was the second most well attended workshop only to law enforcement. That tells me there is huge interest, huge opportunity here for us to continue to talk about the opportunities in farming or ranching, in agriculture, in rural America, because veterans really want it, and we are going to continue work over the next several months this year to make sure we attend more of these transition summits, launch more of these workshops, and talk to as many veterans as possible.

Senator MORAN. Mr. Secretary, you seem very committed, and I appreciate that attitude and approach. Thank you very much. Perhaps our hearing today will be of assistance in informing and getting attention to an opportunity that we hope exists for many, many veterans.

Therefore, unless anybody else has—

Mr. Ulrick.

Mr. ULRICK. I would like to comment on what Gary was talking about, people being negative and saying they cannot do it. We were told the sound barrier could not be broke. Years ago when I was a kid, everybody said, oh, it cannot be done, you cannot start farm-

ing, you just cannot do it. It can be done and I have proved it. I got 280 acres in Minnesota, and I do not have a big monster mansion I live in or anything like that, and I piecemealed it together, and I worked a couple of jobs and I supported it and did those kinds of things.

These young guys and gals need to learn, and I believe they will learn this at the SAVE farm, how to manage money, how to keep their values in check, also how to keep their vision in check. It is part of that American dream, if they overspend, they are going to put themselves in a burden where they are not going to be happy.

I think we can also help them learn how to be happy, manage their lives, and be productive and do what they need to do. Thank you, Senator.

Senator MORAN. Thank you very much. I appreciate each and every one of you being here today and thank you for spending the time you have spent with me and my colleagues on this subcommittee, and the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee will have a budget to work and an appropriation bill to work that will include the potential of dealing with the issues in the President's budget or issues that members of the subcommittee want to raise in regard to appropriations to USDA.

I again thank you all for being here. I thank you for your service. There is no group of people I hold in higher regard than those who served our country with perhaps the exception of those who served our country who now serve others who served our country. Many of you are certainly in that circumstance, and I am grateful for that.

Thanks for caring. I am of the view we change the world one soul, one person at a time, and your programs, your own lives, and your own families had the opportunity to do that.

SUBCOMMITTEE RECESS

Senator MORAN. I thank again everyone for their attendance, and our hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:11 p.m., Tuesday, April 5, the subcommittee was recessed, to reconvene subject to the call of the chair.]