

Testimony of Mr. Michael Walton

Urban Farmer and Owner, Tunnel Vision Hoops

Chairman Fortenberry, Ranking Member Fudge and committee members, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

I am Michael Walton from Cleveland, Ohio. I am a trainer, facilitator, counselor and urban farmer. I am the co-founder, with my wife Veronica, of NEO Restoration Alliance, an Environmental Justice and Education organization. I am also a founding partner of Tunnel Vision Hoops, a local Hoop House, design, fabrication and installation company.

I am the son of a steelworker, and I remember growing up in the 60s when Greater Cleveland had over a million residents, and my father and all of our neighbors had jobs. Now our population is less than half a million and many are unemployed or under-employed. We have more than 15,000 vacant parcels or abandoned houses in our county.

To address these issues, Veronica and I hosted a "Green Jobs Now!" event, a nationwide call to action spearheaded by Van Jones. During that time we explored job creation in the Green Industry. Jobs that required people, not machines, sustainability, and those that could not be shipped overseas or across the border. Urban agriculture and storm-water management became our focus.

I completed a Market Gardner training course at The Ohio State Extension and attended workshops with Will Allen of Growing Power in Milwaukee. While attending, I learned aquaponics and intensive growing techniques, and in the spring of 2009, we began our first urban agriculture venture, ClearLake Farm.

We have financed our farm business with grants we received because we focus on job training, social justice, and community building. We see urban agriculture as an effective way to restore lives and land in our community. These funding sources are appreciated and needed; however, they are not enough. We invested much of our time and money, farming before work, at lunch time, evenings and weekends. Our family has suffered great hardship because we need to work other jobs for 20 to 40 hours a week to survive. We must support the agriculture business until it produces enough to be self-sustaining. We measure our success by a triple bottom line in which sustainability of people, planet and profit are indicators to determine success. We have been successful with job training programs for women living in a

drug treatment center, urban youth summer jobs programs, and community building and beautification. This hard work has yet to produce a profit.

A major obstacle for Cleveland farmers is land ownership. Current policies are not beneficial for urban agriculture. Many farmers, myself included, are not land owners. Most have non-binding arrangements or five year leases. Because of the lack of ownership, general infrastructure needs become high risk and sometimes a poor investment. For example, our initial farm, Clearlake Farm was located on the private property of the drug treatment center where I work. The Board for the organization initially agreed to support the development of a farm on their property as part of a green initiative. The first two years of farming yielded bountiful crops, bigger than the demand for the product. This scenario of high yield with little distribution created a low income farm. The property owners found it unreasonable to keep the farm because they did not see the value in the triple bottom line. As a result, a hoop house with a rain harvesting system was removed, along with raised beds, compost bins, irrigation systems, herb gardens, rain gardens and dozens of crops. This non-binding agreement was a great loss to the community and the land.

Another roadblock is insurance, because the insurance companies lack information and policies for insuring urban farmers. We called a national leader in farm insurance, and their agent called back to tell us we would be pioneers, because her company was not prepared to insure small plot urban agriculture, farms without buildings or substantial equipment for them to insure, or without purchase agreements to bank on. Many restaurants and chain grocery stores require product liability insurance from their vendors. Without this insurance, we can't go to lenders or insurance agents with purchase agreements as collateral.

Obtaining USDA loans and benefiting from credit programs would be useful to urban farmers with sufficient land and crop value. Being able to grow and sell enough produce to secure and repay a loan is another major obstacle for small urban farms. Urban farmers in Greater Cleveland have benefitted more from federal grant programs that have been managed by local land management organizations and The Ohio State Extension. These programs have granted up to \$20,000 for year one start-ups, or creating an urban agriculture incubator for urban farmers. Regrettably, none of these programs have produced individual farms of two acres or more. Farm size is still too small to reasonably use a \$30,000 40 horsepower tractor with earth moving and farming attachments like the ones used by rural farmers.

Congresswoman Fudge introduced us to the FSA and USDA loan and credit programs in March 2012. Prior to the introductory workshop, the two financing programs we had knowledge of were not suitable for the needs of new small farmers. The first, a City of Cleveland tool and equipment reimbursement program and secondly, the USDA EQUIP program. Their criteria for obtaining funds are too restrictive; requiring income in advance, or construction prior to distribution of funds.

Urban farmers also need access to larger plots of land that we can own, so that we can create the scale that will generate enough income that we could be legitimately considered a reasonable credit risk. We need simplified loan applications and programs targeted to farmers who are mostly part-time and bi-vocational.

We need loans made to farmers collectives or cooperatives so we can purchase and share large tools like tractors. To service large scale customers, we need coolers and storage space and refrigerated trucks that would be too costly for an individual but reasonable for a collective.

If these programs already exist, we need to know about them in specific detail. If not, they are what we need you to create. Please consider urban farmers and our credit needs as you develop the next Farm Bill. Urban farmers are real farmers who can create jobs and grow fresh produce to help our cities. We need and deserve the same assistance given to rural farmers so we can grow and thrive.

Thank you.

Mike Walton Bio – Urban Agriculture Focus



My primary professional endeavors for the past 30 years are as follows: Consulting and facilitating, organizational development, teambuilding and leadership development, as well as supervising court ordered community service and life skills for those on parole. In 2007 I began working part-time as a Chemical Dependency Counselor. Recognizing that individuals often transition from active addiction to sober functional members of society with the help of job training and

employment services. Employment and economic development drew me into “The Green Movement”.

I saw urban agriculture as an opportunity for employing hard to employ populations such as those recovering from addiction, or with criminal records. Will Allen, a Milwaukee urban farmer, has an effective small scale, high- income urban agriculture model. I participated in several workshops offered by his organization, Growing Power. I completed the OSU Extension’s Market Gardening Class to increase my knowledge and skill in Urban Agriculture.

In the fall of 2008 my wife Veronica and I entered into collaboration with the addiction recovery center to be green consultants. One outcome of that collaboration was ClearLake Farm a 15,000 square feet growing and stormwater management demonstration site. The grassy field and parking lot were converted into a thriving market garden, raingarden and season extension learning center. We were awarded a grant to train 15 women in urban agriculture and stormwater management by the United Black Fund. Veronica and I were attendees at the Sustainable Cleveland 2019 Conference, and we have stayed involved in the Local Food, Land re-use, and Land contamination working groups. We were awarded a Re-Imagining Cleveland Grant by the City of Cleveland as part of their neighborhood revitalization plan. A second market garden has been established, League Park Market Place to help revitalize the corner of 79th and Superior, a major intersection in Cleveland.

Twenty-five years of business experience has given me time to develop skills in the following areas: sales, marketing, customer relationship management, organizational development, large and small group facilitation, public speaking and presenting, process improvement, staff management, training and curriculum development.

Michael G. Walton



MIKE WALTON:

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM DEVELOPER & FACILITATOR

Michael has been active in experiential and adventure based educational training since the early 1980's. He is a highly skilled and sensitive facilitator, and has worked effectively with numerous client groups (corporate and community sector organizations) both locally as well as on out-of-state contracts. He has been instrumental in facilitating many client groups (over 600 organizations, 90,000+ clients served). Many of Michael's client relationships span between 5 and 25+ years, and include civic leadership, nonprofit, educational, religious, governmental, and corporate entities in our community.

Michael has worked extensively with student and staff groups over the years, from elementary school through post-graduate students. During the late 80's and early 90's he worked for the Cleveland Municipal School District in the Compensatory Education Department, and during the mid-90's through the present Michael has worked as an educational consultant for public, private and charter schools throughout Northern Ohio. Michael is also a Chemical Dependency Counselor. Certified as a Conflict Management and Mediation Trainer by Kent State University. Michael has been trained in processing skills and adventure based counseling, primarily through Project Adventure, one of the leading international trade organizations for Adventure Based Education. A lifelong learner, Michael has attended Ohio University, John Carroll University, and Trinity Theological Seminary.

A highly respected facilitator, Michael is adept at getting to the heart of the matter, surfacing key organizational issues, and designing training that meets the productive aims of his clients. His technical and interpersonal skills blend to provide training experiences which connect participants on deeply personal, intuitive, and reflective levels.

Michael also has extensive skill in High and Low Ropes Course Design, Construction and Maintenance. Over the past 20 years he has designed, constructed and maintained courses at:

- Koinonia Camp and Conference Center in Geneva, Ohio
- Hiram House Camp in Solon, Ohio
- Camp Mueller in Peninsula, Ohio
- Hines Hill Conference Center in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park
- Camp Wise (Jewish Community Center affiliate) in Geauga County, Ohio

Michael has applied Experiential Adventure Based Education to programs with The Tall Ships, Hang Gliding, Historic Re-enactments, Vintage Baseball, GPS Scavenger Hunts, Canoeing, Biking, Rock Climbing and Rappelling, and numerous other creative applications.

Michael has facilitated or consulted on programs throughout his home state of Ohio, as well as in Pennsylvania, Indiana, West Virginia, New York and Florida.

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2009.

Name: Michael Walton

Organization you represent (if any): NEO Restoration Alliance, Tunnel Vision Hoops

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2009, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: City of Cleveland Re-Imagine Cleveland Grantee Amount: \$18,000.00

Source: _____ Amount: _____

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2009, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: _____

Signature: **Michael G. Walton**

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(5) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: *Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.