

Testimony of

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On Behalf of the

West Virginia Warriors and Veterans to Agriculture Program

Before the

House Agriculture Committee

Hearing on

Service in the Field: Veteran Contributions to National Food Security

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Good morning Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and Members of the Committee. My name is Eric Grandon, owner/operator of Sugar Bottom Farm in Ovapa, West Virginia. It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you today. I am testifying today on behalf of West Virginia's Warriors and Veterans to Agriculture Program.

Americans have a longstanding tradition of service in the armed forces of the United States.

Many veterans suffer from physical and emotional afflictions and are often unable to find gainful employment upon returning from combat. Exploring opportunities to engage our nations veterans in agriculture is beneficial to the health and welfare of veterans, as well as to the future of America's agricultural economy.

The mission of the West Virginia Veterans to Agriculture project is to actively recruit and train military members and Veterans in agriculture and agriculture related business. We will grow a new generation of farmers, agribusiness leaders, and develop meaningful careers through the collaboration of federal, state agencies, public and private resources in order to help veterans achieve success in agriculture.

We believe that empowering our veterans in small agribusiness opportunities will also provide more access to food for our citizens in areas that have food access issues like those found in food deserts and rural communities. We will accomplish this by connecting our Veterans to opportunities and nurture that connection for success. We believe that our veterans and members

of the National Guard and Reserves possess the unique skills, patience, leadership, and the character needed to strengthen rural communities with agribusiness opportunities plus create a natural, sustainable, and safe food system for all.

In addition, we have cases to prove that farming and agriculture offers a life with purpose and remarkable physical and psychological benefits. We work directly with organizations and programs that assist in the current physical and psychological needs of our Disabled Veterans. This program allows for access to the full benefits of agriculture therapy. Our primary goal is to grow a new generation of farmers, but we also do our part to help our veterans, and those currently serving members of the military in transition from the Battlefield to home, using the unique value that agriculture holds.

We have 8 Primary Objectives:

1. Actively recruit Veterans, and members of the National Guard and Reserves that have a sincere desire to start an agriculture related business.
2. Actively recruit Veterans, National Guard and Reserve members that are currently operating an agribusiness and assist them with growing their business through marketing, mentoring, and cooperative agreements like those found in the Minutemen Farmers' Cooperative and Farmers Veterans Coalition.
3. We maintain a list of Veteran farmers and agribusiness owners to offer a Veteran specific brand to utilize for their products and/or agribusiness related items that clearly identifies

them as a Veteran farmer or agribusiness owner. Currently, we are partnered with the Farmers Veteran Coalitions' Homegrown by Heroes program for marketing veteran's products, services, and goods.

4. Develop memorandums of understanding between local, state, and federal agencies to assist in the standup, operation, and continued growth of the Veterans to Agriculture program.
5. Designate property to offer Veteran farmers for agriculture purposes. Offer these properties to Veterans at a yearly affordable rate for the sole purpose of agribusiness development, cooperative opportunity, and Agra-therapy sites for Veterans in agriculture.
6. Coordinate and establish certified Agriculture education programs to allow veteran to utilize the GI Bill for programs that will lead to either a certificate of proficiency, diploma, apprenticeship or degree in agriculture.
7. We work closely with the West Virginia Veterans Assistance, National Guard, federal and state agencies to offer potential rehabilitation sites and technical assistance for veterans, families, and members of our armed forces to maximize the use of Agriculture based therapy programs.
8. Create a program that is duplicable and share this program with any state, territory, or agency to maximize the availability of this resource to all veteran, military members and families across the nation.

Five years ago I suffered a horrific flashback that left me totally disabled with PTSD. For 2 years I wandered my property aimlessly not looking forward to tomorrow. That is when James

McCormick, Director of West Virginia's Warrior and Veterans to Agriculture found me and recommended I give farming a try. For the first time in two years I had a mission. I tilled a meadow for three weeks and planted a crop of Sweet Sorghum for our states Molasses festival. My crop failed miserably, but I got my life back. I am now a third year farmer and have built a small commercial vegetable farm that serves four county school systems through the USDA's Farm to School program. I can honestly say that agriculture has saved my life and now I'm looking forward to tomorrow and the day after that. This program works and it can work in any state. Five years ago I could barely set in a room with my family, and today I sit here in front of you.