

**Executive Summary of Colonel John S. Fant, US Army (Retired)  
Co-Owner/Operator, Summerfield Heritage Farm, LLC  
Grayson County, Virginia**

**Hearing on Service in the Field: Veteran Contributions to National Food Security  
US House of Representatives, Committee on Agriculture  
May 18, 2016**

**Personal Information**

- 27+ years active federal service in the US Army
- Co-Owner/Operator, Summerfield Heritage Farm, LLC
- Participates in USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and Conservation Reserve Program
- Member, Advisory Committee, Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition
- Member, Farmer Veteran Coalition
- Elected Member, Board of Supervisors, Grayson County, VA

**Recommendations**

1. Continue to support the USDA's, VA's, and DoD's efforts to educate and encourage veterans on the opportunities in Agri-business.
2. Establish Agriculture Corps, or Ag Corps, where citizens "enlist" to work on a farm for one year with pay and benefits.
3. Continue to provide funding for business planning programs.
4. Continue to fund conservation programs.
5. Support Land Access Workshops to assist in generational transition.

**Full Testimony of Colonel John S. Fant, US Army (Retired)  
Co-Owner/Operator, Summerfield Heritage Farm, LLC  
Grayson County, Virginia**

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Thank you Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and members of the Committee on Agriculture. It is a real privilege and an honor to be able to speak to you today. I have always wondered what it would be like to testify at a committee hearing and now I know. This is a special day for me but more importantly I want to thank you, Mr Chairman, and the committee members, for holding this critically important hearing on Food security and encouraging veterans to farm.

I am a Soldier. I am a Farmer. My life has been one of service to nation, service to community and service to family and not always in that order. Like previous citizen Soldiers, today many of our veterans find themselves securing our nation using shovels and tractors rather than rifles and artillery. My journey began on the farm. We are a beef cattle operation....with a sheep hobby. While our farm has been in our family for a couple of centuries, my parents are not professional farmers but we did try to farm professionally. I grew up around cows, corn and collards but left the mountains of Virginia for college and to Be All I Can Be in the US Army. My career exposed me to many cultures and climates. While I did not realize it at the time, my service also impressed on me the importance of food, the challenges in producing it and the dangers in providing it.

While stationed in South Korea, I observed the challenges of cultivating rice and livestock. While deployed to Afghanistan, I saw a beautiful almond grove along the foothills of the Hindu Kush; a cash crop inaccessible due to local threats. In Iraq, I served along the Euphrates River in Ramadi. The Fertile Crescent appeared intact but the land quickly became arid highlighting the criticality of water.

I began planning for life after the Army about three years out: reading books, attending conferences, visiting farms, taking classes, learning about conservation programs, writing a business plan. One of the earliest events was attending a training program for veterans sponsored by The Livestock Conservancy and The Farmer Veteran Coalition. It was at this conference I meet Alison Martin, The Livestock Conservancy, and Michael O’Gorman, Farmer Veteran Coalition. Both these organizations have been and continue to be instrumental in how I operate my farm and the networks in which I participate.

One of the most beneficial training programs in which I participated was the Northern Piedmont Beginning Farmer Program, a component of the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition which is largely funded by the 2014 Farm Bill through the USDA’s Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. This course taught participants about what it means to be in production agriculture and culminated with each student having to produce a business plan but, more importantly, make a decision if agriculture was what he or she really wanted as a vocation. Currently, there are four organizations in the Virginia, which teach this whole farm-planning course (Appalachian Sustainable Development, Virginia State University, Northern Piedmont Beginning Farmers, Growers Academy).

At the time of my retirement, I was the only one of my siblings able to move back and operate the farm on a long-term basis. While many young farmers are beginning farmers not all beginning farmers are young. However, I have some distinct advantages as a retired veteran: I am physically capable, I have an operational and planning background, and I have a reliable income with benefits. These advantages help mitigate several vulnerabilities which cause small businesses of any type to fail.

My assessment of the farm revealed two major issues: livestock health and infrastructure. For animal husbandry training I turned to my mentors (formal and informal), my veterinarian and neighbors to help me learn what right looked like. The main barn on our farm was built circa 1818 and many of my fences appeared to have been built before then. Therefore, I have made use of the USDA’s Conservation Reserve Program and

Virginia's Best Management Program to develop the beginnings of a pasture management system through the use of permanent and temporary fences and pressurized watering systems. As a result of these capital improvements I have seen a reduction in winter-feeding requirements and an improvement in soil and livestock health.

Therefore, based on my experience as a beginning farmer I would recommend the following for your consideration:

First, it is a fact that roughly 1% of the nation defends the other 99%. However, it is also true that roughly 1% of the nation feeds 100% of the nation. Continue to support the USDA's, VA's, and DoD's efforts to educate and encourage veterans to continue their service to the nation by "joining the other 1%." Much has been accomplished in this area since I retired, thanks largely to the efforts of the Farmer Veteran Coalition, but more work needs to be done in demonstrating to veterans the opportunities in Agri-business.

Secondly, General Stan McCrystal, among others, has written and spoken about the need for a national service requirement. This requirement could be met partially through a concept I call Agriculture Corps, or Ag Corps, where citizens "enlist" to work on a farm or farms for one year with pay and benefits. This will provide a common experience and an appreciation for how our food is produced while beginning to address the projected future farmer shortfall. If we are serious about a diverse food security network we have to begin to mobilize towards this effort.

Thirdly, continue to provide funding for business planning training like the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. A component of business planning is marketing. The Farmer Veteran Coalition has a program to demonstrate to the general public the opportunities to buy farm products produced by veterans—the Homegrown By Heroes label; celebrated by many Members of this Committee at Farm Credit's "Salute to Farmer Veterans." Therefore, I think we are on the right path in educating our citizens who want to farm; this must be sustained. Additionally, CRP has greatly assisted land-owning farmers in resolving infrastructure issues while protecting our

natural resources. I spend a lot of my time setting the conditions for future operations. These programs have helped me prepare today to farm tomorrow.

Lastly, one of the major barriers for people wanting to farm is access to land. Encourage state and local organizations, like Farm Bureau, Cooperative Extension, and Grayson Landcare, to continue to hold Land Access Workshops in order to match the willing with the means and to assist in generational transition. We must get beyond the perception that owning land is a requirement to farm.

When I began to transition and told my peers I was going to farm, I got some strange looks and a few chuckles. But if you really think about it, there are many similarities between soldiering and farming; the most obvious is both are outdoor sports. But the planning and communications ability, integrity, mission focus, personal discipline, dedication, physical fitness, operational flexibility and decision making are all skills I brought back to the farm from the Army. Our nation is blessed with natural resources, which we use to feed our citizens. The mission of the Farmer Veteran Coalition is “To mobilize veterans to feed America.” Let’s work together to encourage our veterans to “join the other 1%.” I am prepared to answer any questions you may have. Thank you again for this opportunity.