

Testimony for the Committee on Agriculture 18 May 2016

Service in the Field: Veteran Contributions to National Food Security

By John Lemondes, COL (Ret), USA

I am honored to appear before you to provide my testimony on this topic and thank you wholeheartedly for the opportunity on behalf of my state, our country, all veterans (past, present and future) and most importantly, my family. Above all, I view it as another extension of service to our country through a means that impacts everyone. Food itself is something few Americans think about, yet require 3x/day while food security is a vulnerability we are exposed to with virtually no means or infrastructure to protect.

Background: Please see attached article I wrote for Cornell University (Small Farms Quarterly)

Our Farm: 436 acres located in Onondaga County, NY

Qualifications: See attached resume

Service in the Field: Veteran Contributions to National Food Security

Current Situation & Challenges:

1. If the USDA were to expand their efforts to collaborate with other departments and organizations to better serve veteran farmers, they should first appoint veteran farmer liaisons to the pertinent organizations similar to what they have done at the national headquarters. This may be viewed negatively as federal government growth, but food security is our number two national priority, preceded by physical security and followed by economic security. They are all interrelated. Next, there should be national effort to educate the public on food security, and food and fiber production and it should start in elementary schools. Most Americans have absolutely no idea where their food and clothing comes from (simple examples are cotton, wool, meat, poultry, etc) and what it takes to get the end item to them.
2. I have beneficially utilized the GRP and EQIP programs. Neither is without challenges, but both are beneficial.
3. Skills gained as a Soldier that are transferrable to farming are essentially the same as those transferrable to any vocation. Some of the more important are: professional discipline, leadership and organization skills, and the ability to see something through and not quit. Additionally, veterans gain a much deeper understanding of human emotion and capability and can lead others to accomplish things they never thought possible. Most veterans have had their limits tested, whereas most civilians would not even know what that means. However, I caution lumping veterans into any particular category as most of the experience gained can be transferred to any endeavor or profession. This is a major misunderstanding

today, in my opinion, due to the fact there are relatively few veterans in comparison to the population at large, therefore as a cohort, they are stereotyped and misunderstood.

4. I don't know if the distinction of being a veteran farmer is of any help yet. My operation is only two years old and we are still fighting an uphill battle to simply get off the ground. My greatest concern is that it may hurt business because of the subtle contempt that is displayed toward our military, constitution and traditional way of life by some. The simple fact that so few people bear the herculean burden of protecting the "American Dream" and understanding its costs, leaves the vast majority to pursue life, liberty and happiness without ever meaningfully contributing to its sanctity.
5. I have utilized no USDA operating loans because I simply do not have the time or bandwidth to explore these opportunities. I applied for multiple grants in 2014 and got little back for the time invested. This was a hard lesson learned.
6. I think the only way agriculture can obtain and maintain the confidence of the American people is to have greater emphasis on food production (again starting w/ young children, especially in urban schools and centers) and the people who do it. Additionally greater emphasis on local food production to include federal infrastructure improvements (ie mobile USDA slaughter facilities for rural communities, perhaps subsidized slaughter facilities in rural areas and in general , simply raising the profile of what farmers do. Note that as a veteran being highlighted in agriculture, many may experience 'push back' in subtle ways because they may be new entrants to agricultural production in the communities they settle in. This is a challenge that each individual veteran has to manage.
7. My experiences working with my local FSA and NRCS offices have been mixed. At the county or what I call the execution level of these large federal programs, it all boils down to the ability of the local personnel to make sensible judgement calls on the implementation of program guidelines. I have worked with some that are incapable of doing this while others are perfectly able to professionally synthesize what needs to be done to satisfy legal requirements, yet still provide benefit to that local farm. USDA must emplace people that have the temperament, skill and judgement to do this effectively and require managers at all levels to take actions to either train or remove those that can't. This requires leadership.
8. Impediments to farming are numerous and ever present. At the macro economic level, agricultural production is one of the last (if not the last) industry in our country to industrialize. This simple fact over the last hundred years has had two unmistakable impacts. First, the number of family owned and operated farms has decreased and will continue to do so; and, secondly, the average farm size has continually increased enabling operations to leverage economies of scale while simultaneously driving out smaller producers. Depending on source, the size of the average farm today is slightly over 400 acres. These trends are irreversible which gives me concern over all of the current emphasis on small farms. Are we setting people up for success or failure?
 - a. Entry barriers to farming are immense, ranging from the difficulty of land capture to equipment financing and depending on which state you live in, tax burdens, minimum wage challenges, energy prices, regulations and labor.
 - b. Additionally, although veterans demonstrate a higher success rate in most post military endeavors when compared to the population at large, they face discriminatory hiring practices which impact those (famer and or spouse) who need off farm income to finance their start up or simply to mitigate its risk.
 - c. Specific to veterans, simply being able to have the time to search for farm land prior to military transition is daunting. During my transition (I retired in 1 Feb 2014), there were no known or recognizable sources that could help a veteran find information. I

did it solely on my own. I also found that the USDA was promoting many veteran “programs’ but I was totally unable to find any applicable benefits. By benefits, I don’t mean from a dependency perspective, I mean it more so from a how to, who to see, and where to go for answers point of view.

- d. Additional impediments from a market perspective are the militancy of the anti farming and agricultural groups sponsoring activities like “Meatless Mondays,” and all of the various methods used to portray agriculture as cruelty to animals. This point alone is directly counter to national food security through protein diversity (type, location, processing methods, etc) and should be considered as a national priority. Crop and protein diversity should be given a higher priority with respect to their integration into the National Security and National Military Strategies.
9. National food security can also be enhanced (in my opinion) by leveraging the VA system as a means of surveillance of rural America for detection of domestic or foreign bio-terrorist activity. I think the more means of detection and monitoring we have for food born illness, the safer we and our food supply are. Additionally, some sources cite as high as 9 of the top 10 bio terrorist sources as risks that can come to us through the targeting of our farms. Since we don’t enough veterinarians, I think a logical use of federal training and support funding would be to the VA and rural American farmers which, together, would be the vanguard in mitigating or at least identifying exposure to these risks.