



Statement of the New York Farm Bureau

**To the House Committee on Small Business
Subcommittee on Health and Technology**

*“Room to Grow: The Benefits of Partnerships
in Small Agriculture Business Development”*

Presented by Linda Hamilton

Tuesday, May 13, 2014

Thank you to the Committee on Small Business and to Subcommittee Chairman Chris Collins for inviting me to testify before you today on how our family farm benefits from larger processing businesses. My name is Linda Hamilton and my husband, Roger, and his brother, Randy, own Triple H Farms, a vegetable and crop farm based half in Leicester and half in Geneseo, approximately four miles apart. We are third generation farmers. While I also have worked off the farm as a registered nurse, my own parents were involved in full-time farming and I myself am the third generation in agriculture. I am also speaking on behalf of New York Farm Bureau, the largest general farm organization in the state with 25,000 members representing all commodities, all production methods and living in all corners of the state.

We have 1,100 acres of farmland in the Genesee River Valley and grow some field corn and soybeans, but we are really proud of the vegetables we grow for processing on 200 of those acres. This year we are planting peas, beets, green snap beans and possibly yellow wax beans. These vegetables will eventually be canned or frozen at one of the local processing plants. We are lucky to have four nearby plants owned by two different companies. This year half of our product will go to Seneca Foods, which is represented here today, and half to Farm Fresh First-Bonduelle.

As much as consumer awareness of fresh local vegetables, and farmers markets have grown in recent years, New York does have a limited growing season. This is why preserving the vegetables we grow, so people can eat them year-round is still important—and it's the only way you're going to eat local green beans in February!

We work very closely with the processing companies each year to decide what we will plant and how much and then we negotiate a contract early in the year. These decisions are based on consumer demand, what the plants can handle, and even which vegetables we are best at growing on our farmland. Over the course of many years, this can change significantly as consumer demand shifts or the company may change the types of vegetables it can process at a specific plant. So the relationship between our farm and the processing company must be closely coordinated.

Processing vegetables for the consumer market is not something that our small business could do on our own. The huge investment in processing equipment and marketing costs alone are not something a farm of our size could profitably take on. So we are integrally dependent on the processing companies, as much as they are dependent on the quality product that we deliver to their doors.

My husband's family has been selling vegetables to the nearby processing plants for nearly 60 years and it is key for our business to have a variety of these plants nearby that can accept a diversity of fresh vegetable crops. In farming, it's very risky to grow just one thing, and it is very expensive to transport vegetables and keep them fresh over long distances. Thus we need a healthy local processing sector to continue doing what we do best.

Not only is my family very experienced and skilled in growing vegetables, but our farm is uniquely suited to grow these crops. Our farmland sits in the Genesee Valley and is bordered by the Genesee River. This valley, where you are right now, contains about 7% of the top vegetable and crop farming soil in the United States. For thousands of years the river flooded this area over and over again, depositing a deep layer of topsoil that is nutrient rich and free of stones. That's what makes this land so great for growing vegetables. My husband and his brother call it "a gift from nature."

Here in New York, we have access to markets that other farmers would envy. Our farm is located between the cities of Buffalo and Rochester, but we are also located within 500 miles of one-third of the U.S. population with New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Pittsburg, and Cleveland all areas hungry for what we grow.

Without access to processing plants for our vegetables, we would be forced to grow more row crops like corn and soybeans and we wouldn't be taking advantage of our expertise, our wonderful soil resources, or the consumers that are so close. This area is a huge vegetable growing region and if we weren't able to do that here anymore, the price of vegetables would go up on the East Coast!

As I mentioned before, we are a third-generation farm, but we are very excited to have the fourth generation, our daughter, Leslie Hamilton, on Triple H Farms. She graduated two years ago from Cornell University and chose to come back to our family farm. Leslie is on a tractor as we speak with a 25-foot vertical tiller preparing land to plant field corn.

Young farmers are so discouraged by challenges they will have to face by making a career in agriculture—the expense of land, labor, fuel, energy, machinery, taxes, rules and regulations, the list goes on and on. It is no secret that New York is a high-cost state with a difficult regulatory environment for family businesses and farms. And despite all this, we are so proud she has decided to carry on our farming tradition.

However, Leslie also understands that diversification is important in today's farming environment. She has a plan with a cousin and is in the beginning stages of developing a grass-fed beef business. They are starting out small and will grow slowly, but they plan to cater to a high-end niche market and this is a great value-added business venture.

This is a new way for our farm to continue to grow and bring in the next generation, but without the certainty of our processing vegetables and other crops, it would be hard to take this kind of risk on the farm. Our daughter's entrepreneurial spirit has the potential for a big payoff at the end of the road, but in the meantime, the longstanding relationships we have developed with our processing companies and where we sell our grain means we will still have income to support the farm operation while this new venture is in its formative years.

We Hamiltons hope that vegetables will always be grown on our land, but just as we have diversified the crops we have grown, it is wonderful to see the next generation diversifying even further into a new value-added market. This helps minimize the risks of fluctuating market prices and weather that farmers have to deal with year in and year out.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share a little about my family's farm and how our small business benefits from larger processing businesses here in Western New York. I would be glad to take any questions you may have.

###