

**Written Statement of Mrs. Anna Murphree Rhinewalt**

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**Senatobia, Mississippi**

**To the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry**

**U.S. Senator John Boozman, Chair  
U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, Ranking Member**

**Perspectives from the Field:  
Farmer and Rancher Views on the Agricultural Economy  
Part II**

**February 26, 2025**

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Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and other distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for calling this hearing today to discuss this important topic and for allowing me to testify. I operate Sandy Ridge Farms, Inc. in Senatobia, Mississippi with my father, husband and brother. We raise 500 acres of sweet potatoes and 1,000 acres of row crops in the Northwest part of the state. I am an active member of the Mississippi Farm Bureau ® Federation and the Mississippi Sweet Potato Council.

I would like to share a bit about how I find myself here today. Fifty years ago, my 16-year-old father petitioned his parents first, and then the court to sign away his rights as a minor so that he could start farming. He had a passion that superseded any thoughts of long-term success or financial security. Whether or not he recognized it then, he'll tell you he was responding to God's will for his life. And an entire generation later, here I am today asking for you to help me persevere in what is now our family's call to grow food for others.

Today, my dad is 65 years old and is naturally looking ahead and assessing serious decisions surrounding transition and succession. As my husband, brother, and I cast a hopeful eye towards our future, it's impossible to not feel trepidation having endured several years under a sobering cloud of runaway input costs, soaring interest rates, uncooperative weather, and stagnant market prices. It has not been an experience that has produced great anticipation and excitement. Older farmers all over our country are assessing what their exit strategies look like. It is an unenviable position to be in, making hard, permanent decisions that sometimes bring an end the livelihoods of multiple generations. But the grim reality is – the risk may simply be too great to gamble everything once again on a new generation who, despite all earnest efforts, may be faced with factors so insurmountable their fate in farming is determined before they ever take up the mantle.

It is a sobering task communicating the years-long plight of specialty-crop farmers in our country. I hope this testimony adequately impresses upon you, the serious state we are in.

**Record Production Costs:** First and foremost, general production costs are at an all-time high. As you have heard from previous panels, inflated costs for seed, fertilizer, fuel, technology, equipment, and parts/repair continue to erode the profit for our farms. As shown in Figure 1 below, Mississippi's sweet potato industry has seen a steady increase in production costs over the last several years. Costs have continued to rise beyond 2023 and had we data to show from last year, it would certainly confirm the verbal reports that revenue is now slipping below the point of profitability. Many of our farms' larger line-item expenses have increased 20% and beyond between 2019 and 2024 – the most staggering being that of H-2A labor.

Per-acre Averages: H2A Labor Costs, Production Expenses and Revenue of Mississippi Sweetpotato Producers, 2020-2023

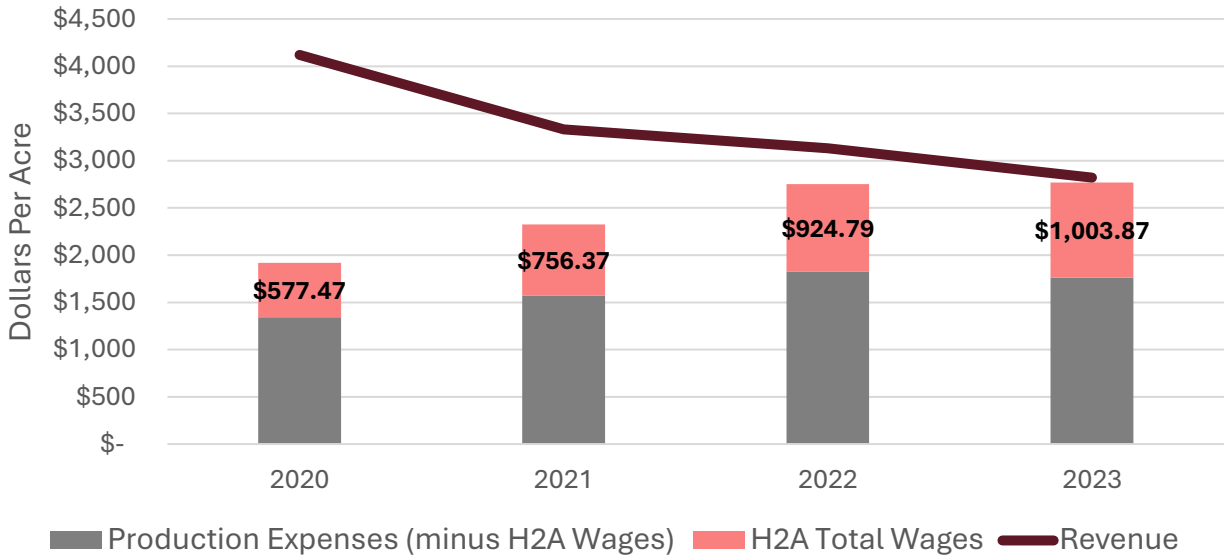


Figure 1. Per-acre averages: H2A labor costs, production expenses, and revenue of Mississippi sweet potato producers from 2020-2023. Data courtesy of Mississippi State University.

**Drastic Labor Cost Increases:** Like many specialty crops, labor is the lifeline of sweet potato farming. Figure 2 illustrates the current labor costs associated with sweet potatoes compared to other crops grown in Mississippi.

Per-Acre Labor Costs of Commonly Crops Grown in Mississippi

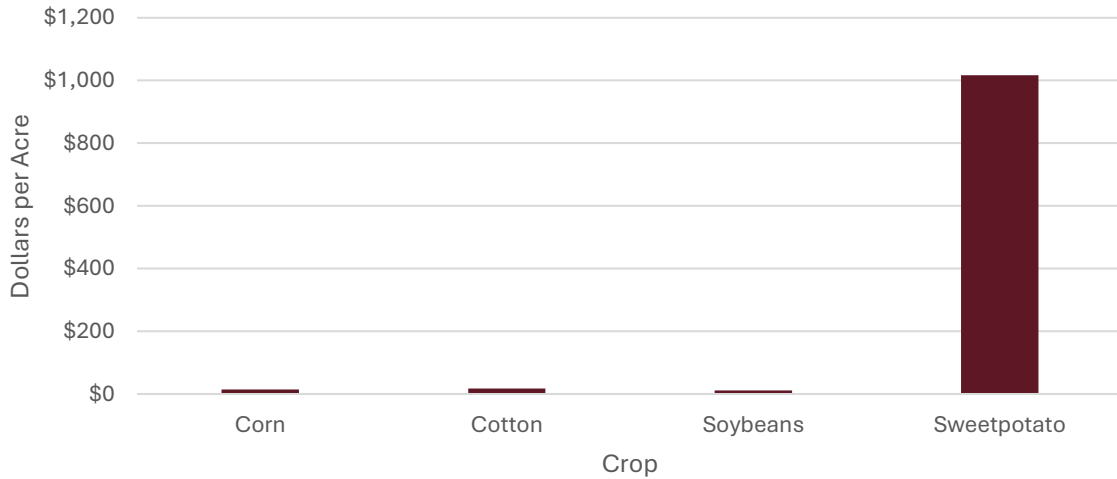


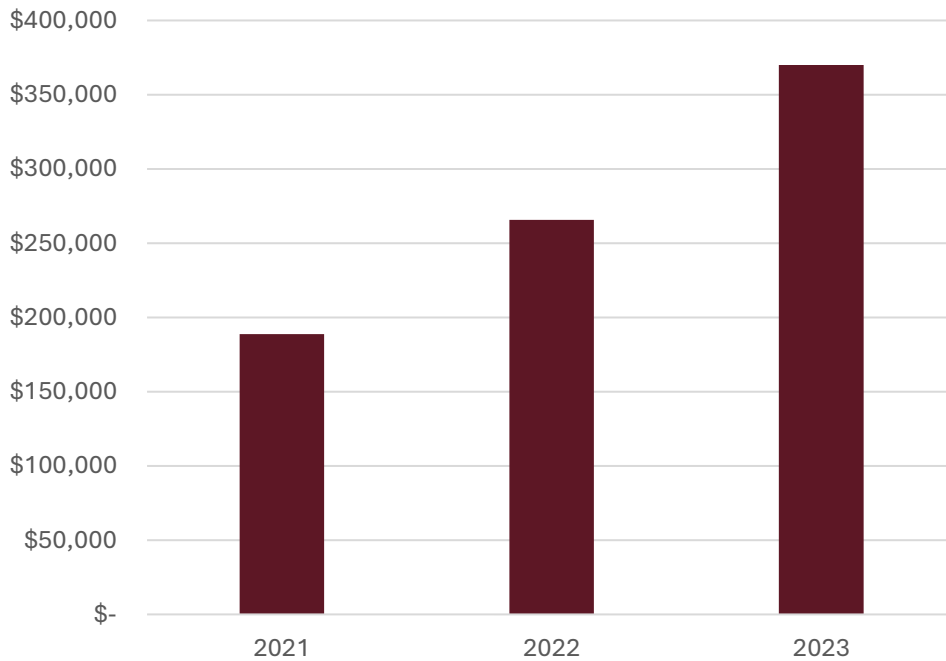
Figure 2. Per-acre labor costs of several common crops in Mississippi. Data courtesy of Mississippi State University.

Throughout various seasons, it takes between 12 and 40 workers to plant, harvest and pack our crop. There are 4 distinct jobs requiring H-2A labor to get our sweet potatoes from their seed state to the grocery store shelf. Seed-bedding occurs for 1 week in early March and utilizes 12 workers. Then, planting occurs during 3 weeks from mid-May into June utilizing up to 32 workers. Third, is harvest which takes place from September to November or as long as the weather holds. For our acreage, harvest requires 40 workers. Planting and harvest are peak seasons where work-weeks average 56 hours, but actually range from 30 to 75 or more, depending on crop-readiness and weather events. The final job is packing, which occurs year-round, but unfortunately does not require a full-time workforce – many weeks, offering only 24 hours of work. These seasonal swings in hours-offered leaves our farm at a terrible disadvantage to attract a reliable, domestic workforce.

The work required to plant and harvest specialty crops is inconsistent and grueling. The vast majority of American workers do not desire to sign on to a job that promises no benefits and no hour guarantees. We are wholly at the mercy of weather and from week-to-week cannot promise what reality the next week holds. Where our farm is located in the Southeast, it is not unusual to endure sporadic, torrential rain, hail storms, sweltering heat and drought and the collateral effects of hurricanes rising off the Gulf Coast. In the past 6 years, we have offered approximately 300 unique job positions. Before receiving assurance that we can employ H-2A workers, we are required to advertise in up to 4 states and hire domestically first. During that 6-year timeframe, we have received 50 domestic applicants. Most applied through state workforce agencies and never returned our initial call to schedule an interview. Not one ultimately pursued employment with our company.

To put this into a national perspective, according to the November 2024 report, “Debunking H-2A Myths” issued by the American Farm Bureau Federation, in 2023 alone, less than 10,000 domestic applications were received for 380,000 positions offered. That is a less than 3% application rate. It is outrageous to suggest that domestic workers are ever going to be the primary source of labor for American agriculture.

### Average Total H2A Labor Cost Increase Per Farm from 2020 for Mississippi Sweet Potato Producers



*Figure 3. Average total H-2A labor cost increases per farm from 2020 for sweet potato production. Data courtesy of Mississippi State University.*

As represented in Figure 3 above, Mississippi sweet potato producers have seen an alarming increase in costs associated with H-2A labor since at least 2020. The increase is largely due to higher wage rates and increased hours needed from the H-2A program. The average producer spent over \$350,000 more in 2023 on H-2A wages compared to 2020, resulting in an annual industry impact of over \$12 million! On our farm, H-2A wages alone have risen more than \$70,000.00 using same-acre totals from 2019 to 2024. That is an almost 20% increase, meaning we have worked more efficiently trying to counter-act the almost 31% Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) increases during the same timeframe. However, those efforts have not been enough to outrun financial loss.

Figure 4 below, provided by the American Farm Bureau Federation, highlights the drastic increases H-2A program users in the U.S. Department of Labor-established Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR).

## National Average AEWR and Year-over-Year Change, 2006-2025

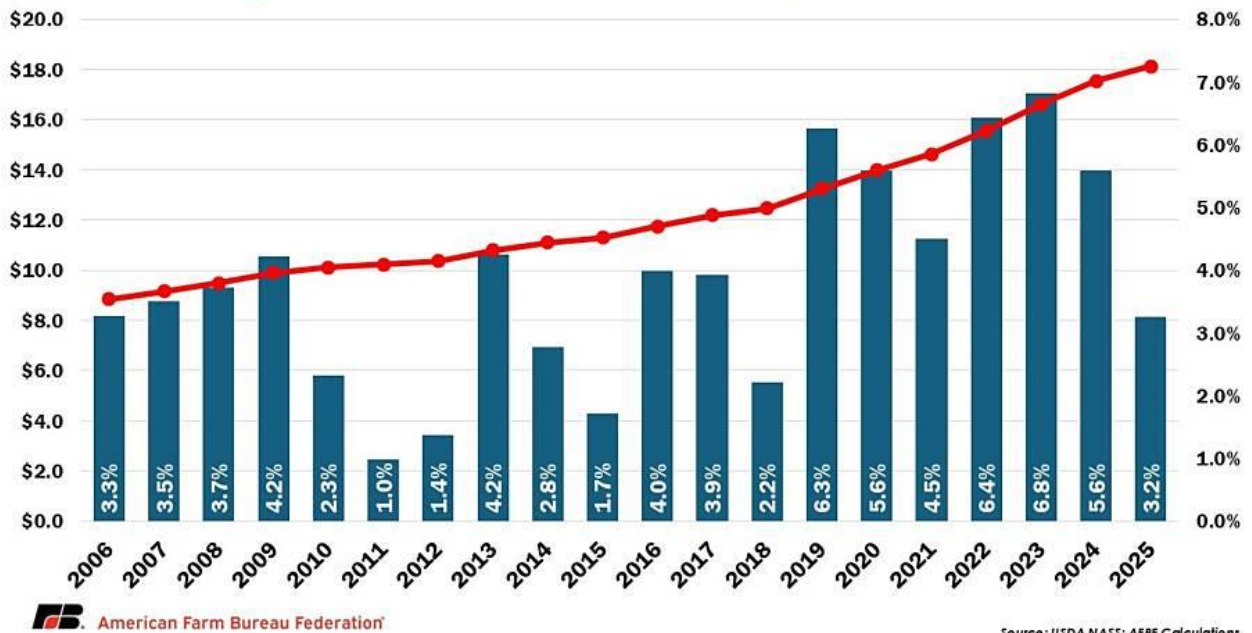


Figure 4: Graph courtesy of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

## 2025 Adverse Effect Wage Rate

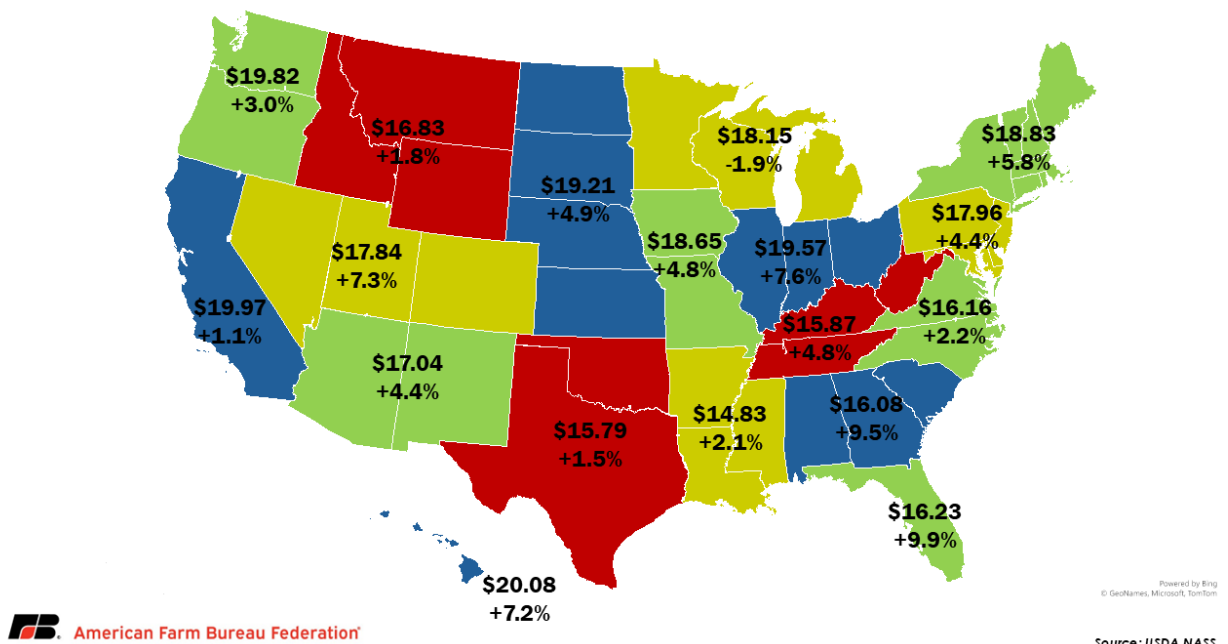


Figure 5: Graph courtesy of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Figure 5, shows that although states within our region sustained a 2.1% increase for 2025, my fellow farmers in Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida are now responding to yet another sharp increase in their AEWR in excess of a 9.5% over 2024.

**Costs associated with the labor required to grow our product have now reached a point that is simply unsustainable for our farm.**

**Regulatory Burdens:** Paired with the excessive costs of crop production, is a now an overreaching regulatory environment in the United States. Expectations of near-immediate compliance upon release coupled with ever-changing and ill-communicated benchmarks has us questioning whether or not it's even worth it. Our own government is watching our farmers drown in a sea of regulation.

**U.S. Department of Labor:** In February of 2023, the DOL finalized a rule that requires farmers to compensate H-2A workers equivalent to professional commercial truck driver rates if the worker drives one load of soybeans from the field to the grain bin on the farm at any point during their contract, doubling the wage costs for the entire period of the contract. The rule fails to acknowledge, however, that farmers' exemptions permit non-commercially-licensed drivers to haul off-farm products seasonally which allows farmers to hire at rates more commensurate with farm labor as opposed to full-time commercial driver wages. In April of 2024, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) released a rule called the "*Farmworker Protection Final Rule*" outlining a series of sweeping new regulations on agricultural employers that hire workers through the H-2A program. It took effect on June 28, giving farmers less than 63 days in the height of growing season to read, interpret and come into compliance with 600 pages of new rules. In the last 24 months, the DOL has issued over 3,000 pages of new rulings, setting itself apart as the agency most committed to burying H-2A employers under a mountain of regulatory action.

**U.S. EPA:** For the past several years, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has found itself adding unprecedented new regulations on pesticide use for most every major herbicide or insecticide that farmers use. These new regulations are a temporary strategy to be able to defend these products from legal challenges in court by environmental activist groups until a more effective system is developed for pesticide approval. While I understand the need to develop measures that protect the availability of the products, many of these new mitigations are simply impractical and unachievable for any working farm to attain and still operate. We must continue to maintain a predictable regulatory framework based on science and the risk/benefit model here in the U.S., and not fold to environmental activism by restructuring a sound, regulatory framework based on a precautionary principle.

**Considerations / Recommendations:**

As the Committee reviews the comments and statements from these hearings, I would submit the following items for consideration:

1. Review of the AEWR Wage Rate Methodology: Every year, the Department of Labor (DOL) uses the "field and livestock workers' combined" wage rate reported in the November Farm Labor report (based on the Farm Labor Survey or FLS) to establish the

Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR). DOL's methodology of directly using the average wage rates from the FLS to establish the AEWR has raised concerns among all users of the H-2A program. Not only because the base rate itself is prohibitive, but because it does not account for the substantial additional costs of transportation and housing and the proportionate increases to both indirect and direct administrative costs of using the program when AEWR rates are perpetually raised. I would urge the committee to direct USDA and DOL to work towards a methodology in establishing an AEWR that is more transparent and considers the excessive, added costs (housing, transportation, etc.) required to hire H-2A workers.

2. Address the Seasonality of the H-2A Program: I understand this Committee is not the Committee of jurisdiction that oversees reforms to the H-2A program. However, I am urging you to make your colleagues aware of the statistics shared today that validate domestic agricultural labor in the United States barely exists. Farmer constituents in each of your states are desperate to identify a willing, reliable, legal, year-round workforce. The bi-partisan Agricultural Labor Working Group within the House Committee on Agriculture issued a comprehensive report in March of 2024 on proposed policy recommendations to the H-2A program. One of the recommendations, which received bipartisan, unanimous support of the working group, calls for addressing the seasonality issue by allowing many year-round ag industries access to the H-2A program. I am encouraged at the thorough effort made to critically identify many areas of improvement where the H-2A program is not serving the needs of program participants.
3. Exercise Congressional Oversight: Due to the delicate nature of the farm economy right now, I would urge the Committee to exercise more of its oversight authority and duty as federal agencies promulgate and implement rules making sure that they are reasonable and don't do more damage than good to farmers like myself during this extremely difficult time.
4. Provide True, Meaningful Assistance from USDA: In December 2024, USDA announced \$2.65 billion of aid to the specialty crop industry in a program called the "*Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crops (MASC)*" program. The program was established to help specialty crop producers offset higher marketing costs. The sweet potato industry is very small compared to many other specialty crops and we are grateful for any support provided by Congress or the USDA. However, we recently were notified that the program will only provide support equal to 2% of our annual sales. For most producers in my industry, this level of support will provide very little relief to the excessive increase in marketing costs sustained over the last few years; to the point that many producers will not even fill out an application. I would urge the Committee to direct USDA to review this program to determine if more meaningful assistance can be provided.
5. Expand the U.S. Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Block Grant Program: The USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program administered by the state departments of agriculture is a key tool used by many specialty crop industries across the country in growing their market. In our state alone, the program has provided over \$200,000 in research and market development needs to Mississippi State University specifically for the



Mississippi sweet potato industry. These types of programs foster an essential partnership between local land grant universities and many commodities which are traditionally underrepresented by the private sector. Because of the small size of our industry, these federal investments are key to the programs that help us grow and sell our product. I would encourage the Committee to consider expanding funding for this key program.

6. Review of Section 32 Food Purchasing Program: The Section 32 Food Purchasing Program at USDA has benefited the sweet potato industry greatly in the past. Due to prior complexities affecting utilization of the program, I would ask the Committee to encourage USDA to conduct a review of the purchasing procedures for "Perishable Crops." The current 90-to-120 day review and approval time frame does little to impact the immediate market assistance needed for our industry.

**Conclusion:**

I hope my testimony today has provoked a sense of urgency among you. My story is not unique. It is playing out all over the country. Farmers are, by nature, fiercely resilient and they spend most of their lives risking everything they own year after year to wield a harvest from the ground.

I ask that you assess the ramifications of the loss of food production within our borders. Food grown and raised domestically is of a higher quality, it is safer, and it is a matter of national security. If you believe that as well – it should alarm you how close we are to the demise of the American farm. Farmers honor their country by feeding it. You have an authority that we do not possess to pave a way forward, to remove some our obstacles and to lead our country into a renewed awareness that without food, nothing else matters.

In closing, thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today. I stand ready to answer any questions that you may have for me.