



**STATE OF MISSISSIPPI**  
**DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE**  
ANDY GIPSON  
COMMISSIONER

## Opinion Column

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**The Time is Now to Strengthen Mississippi's Food Supply Chain**  
*Rebuilding Mississippi's Agriculture Infrastructure through the S.A.F.E. Plan*

By: Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson

Growing up on our small farm, I remember days that started out with bright sunshine, not a cloud in the sky. And I remember that sometimes before the day's work was done, I could look across the pasture and see dark storm clouds suddenly appear on the horizon. The time to prepare, to tend to the livestock and to seek shelter was before that thunderstorm or tornado rolled across our farm.

Today, looking across the global landscape, I see storm clouds on the horizon that are threatening our food security, not only in Mississippi but across America. Fluctuating weather patterns, the global pandemic scare, an international supply chain crisis, record inflation, the Russia/Ukraine war, the Mississippi River's successive flooding and going dry, radical federal and international environmental regulations, and increasing foreign control of our farmland are all converging to create global food supply challenges worldwide, for our farmers, and ranchers, and ultimately, for all consumers.

While the storm is coming, the time to prepare is now. That is why I have announced the Mississippi Strategic Agriculture Facilities Expansion (S.A.F.E.) Plan. The Mississippi S.A.F.E. Plan is a generational plan to rebuild Mississippi's agriculture and food supply chain infrastructure to strengthen our food security, at the same time as expanding local market opportunities for agricultural products, increasing capacity for value-added processing, and spurring economic development for rural Mississippi.

Today, Mississippi agriculture is strong with a record value of production in 2022 of \$9.72 billion dollars. In Mississippi alone, agriculture and food has a \$29.72 billion direct economic output. What we are missing is statewide food processing and value-added infrastructure - the capacity to process and store food locally for extended periods. The S.A.F.E. Plan encompasses a statewide approach to rebuilding Mississippi's agriculture infrastructure at the regional and local levels with three focal areas:

- 1) The S.A.F.E. Plan will create strategically placed local food hubs in the three regions of the state. These food hubs will provide a centralized location for farmers to bring food products for public sale, wholesale and retail, and for aggregation, packaging, storage, cold storage and distribution in preparation for being sold into commerce through markets such as retail, food service, and direct to consumer sales.
- 2) The S.A.F.E. Plan will provide infrastructure funds to counties for the expansion of local farmers market facilities in each county, and upgrades to our 56 existing county agri-centers and multipurpose centers. This includes development of cold storage, transportation, packing, and storage infrastructure at farmers markets and the roll out of mobile farmers markets to

- address food deserts in urban areas. The S.A.F.E. Plan would upgrade Mississippi's agri-center/multipurpose facilities including replacing our State Fairgrounds livestock facilities to enhance and expand ag-related events and to allow for these facilities to serve a role in food supply aggregation and storage.
- 3) The Mississippi S.A.F.E. Plan would make infrastructure funds available to producers, cooperatives and private and public sectors to strengthen our State's middle food supply chain. Funds would be invested for value-added processing equipment on-farm, distribution, wholesale or retail locations.

If implemented wisely, the S.A.F.E. Plan will double our agriculture value and transform Mississippi into a key food supply and distribution hub for the entire Southeastern United States. It will strategically modernize cold storage and infrastructure capacity at our key transportation hubs and by partnering with private industry, it will pay for itself. In Mississippi, access to local healthy foods would be readily available year-round regardless of the global challenges ahead. This S.A.F.E. Plan represents an investment not just in agriculture, but an investment in our State and the future and wellbeing of our people.

In the Bible, Joseph had the vision to plan today for coming food scarcity challenges in Egypt, and many people were saved. Mississippi can do the same in modern times. On behalf of Mississippi families, I urge our Mississippi Legislature and legislative leaders to get behind the S.A.F.E. Plan, support it, and fund it as a top priority in 2024. Catch the vision of Joseph. The most important infrastructure we can invest in is Mississippi's agriculture and food supply infrastructure, because every single Mississippian deserves reliable access to food on a daily basis.

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**Photo Attached:**

