



STATE OF MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE
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COMMISSIONER

Opinion Column

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Mississippi Must Prioritize the Preservation of Farmland

By: Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson

Mississippi is - and has always been - an agricultural state. Agriculture with its related agribusiness, forestry and manufacturing processes constitutes the top industry in Mississippi, as well as our State's top employer. More than that, farming, conservation and the rural way of life are inextricably woven into the very fabric of who we are as Mississippians. Whether it's the Mississippi Delta, home of the most productive soil on planet Earth, or the beautiful rolling farms of the Hills, the pastures and farms of central Mississippi, the vast woodlands of southwest Mississippi or the produce farms and nurseries of south Mississippi, the family farm represents nothing less than our way of life. It's a way of life that includes respect for the land, conservation practices, hunting and fishing and raising our families to love the great Mississippi outdoors.

But I hear a recurring theme from the People: the farm as a way of life is at risk in Mississippi.

Generational changes, retiring farmers, foreign investors, corporate conglomerates, a global trade imbalance, solar and wind farms and other land use developments have resulted in the constant loss of farmland to other uses. The downturn in global commodity prices has placed our row crop producers in particular risk of loss.

Once lost, that farmland can never be regained. And God isn't making any more land.

As Mississippi's Agriculture and Commerce Commissioner, I have the privilege to represent our farmers, ranchers and landowners across Mississippi and seek to support their ongoing positive agricultural contributions for our State. Land use is a strategic area that is primarily the jurisdiction of local counties and cities, accomplished through the local zoning process. As land use and zoning decisions are made by our local elected officials, we all recognize the critical importance for good planning, and I encourage consideration of the agriculture and food supply implications of zoning decisions.

But it's more than a local land use issue, because as I've said for years, Food Security is National Security. Recently, I attended a national conference and heard experts tell us that over the next twenty years, the food production of the United States of America is going to shift to the southeastern United States. The reason for that shift is primarily due to the lack of water resources in California and western and midwestern states. The southeast - including Mississippi - currently have abundant water resources that will be necessary to grow the food, fiber and shelter our Nation will desperately need for the future. We must maintain our food independence.

But if we are not careful, and if we are not strategic, Mississippi risks losing our farmland and our water resources, and therein, we will lose the opportunity to preserve our way of life, to maintain the food

production we must have for future generations of Americans. It's been proven we cannot rely on other nations to feed us. We must first feed ourselves - Americans First, Mississippians First. Now more than ever, we must maintain and preserve our farms and farmland and bring back domestic food production, a goal supported by myself and President Trump. But if we don't have farmland, we can't have domestic production. So, what can Mississippi do to help our farmers?

Well, just this year, our neighbor to the north -Tennessee - passed a series of legislative bills that supported farmers and recognized this growing need of farmland preservation. Recognizing the priority of agriculture, the Tennessee Legislature has previously approved an Agricultural Enterprise Fund, and a cost-sharing Ag Enhancement Program. More recently, in adopting a Farmland Preservation Act, the Tennessee Legislature established conservation easements for agricultural production recognizing these efforts "will provide food and fiber security for generations to come." These kinds of initiatives can provide opportunities for more young farmers to get involved, and they are also designed to help current farmers grow and expand their operations to increase food production and profitability. Additional tax relief should be passed to provide additional relief for our struggling Mississippi farmers and others.

We need to make these issues priorities in Mississippi, for our farmers and our future generations. Working together we can preserve our farmland, we can reignite the family farm through a domestic local food economy, and we can rebuild Mississippi's food processing, storage and distribution infrastructure. And we will be healthier People as a result.

I promise you this, I will never stop fighting to preserve agriculture as our way of life right here in Mississippi, and I welcome the involvement of any policymakers who want to join in this effort. Beginning this December, we will be touring Mississippi farm country with a laser focus on the Future of Agricultural Resiliency for Mississippi, and I welcome your insight and ideas.

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