Opinion Column

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AI, Agriculture and the Future of Mississippi's Economy
By Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson

I am concerned about AI and the future of Mississippi.

I am concerned about the future of agriculture.

Most of all, I am concerned about how AI will impact our children, grandchildren and all our people. I believe people are unique human beings created in the image of God, called to find meaningful, ethical work and called to steward the land which produces everything each person and family needs to live and grow and thrive in the real world.

And I believe the question we are called upon to answer in our generation is this: "How will we manage the coming artificial intelligence-driven economy in a way that preserves the human needs, goals, livelihoods and dreams of real people?"

In an AI world, how will we safeguard the distinctively human element in the real world with the need for real human creativity, real jobs, real healthcare and real food, fiber and shelter?

It begins with understanding how AI may change our world. It's commonly estimated that AI will likely result in displacement or replacement of between 20-30 percent of people's jobs in America. Every industry is going to change. Our economy is already changing. How will we respond?

This all comes at a time when commodity-based agriculture is suffering due to increasing global trade pressures, high costs of production and lower commodity prices due to global oversupply and lower demand worldwide. On top of this, much of our value-added agricultural processing was sent overseas, beginning especially in the 1970's and 80's, so the product our farmers produce is driven in large measure by foreign demand instead of local needs. Because of cheap overseas foreign labor, Mississippi is no longer home to the cotton textile mills, the fruit and vegetable canning facilities and a host of other value-added processors that used to dot our rural towns and communities all across Mississippi.

Even so, with a $9.5 billion farm gate GDP, agriculture remains Mississippi's largest industry when coupled with its food and wood processing manufacturing like the abundant poultry and catfish processors and many wood mills we still have here in our state. I recently visited a single poultry processor in Carthage, Mississippi, where 2 million chickens are being processed every week, and 60 percent of that chicken supplies the demand for Chick-Fil-A! I'm also proud that since 2020, we've been successful in tripling Mississippi's in-state local meat processing facilities to support more local beef and pork production right here at home. Agriculture also remains Mississippi's largest private sector of employment.

So, what does all this have to do with AI and preserving the good of our people, the human element?

While we cannot predict the full extent of how AI may change our economy and our world, we do know there are some economic sectors that must remain to meet our human needs. Two obvious sectors are food and healthcare, not to mention water and energy. People will always need to eat and will always need access to good healthcare. I believe we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to strengthen both these sectors while at the same time meeting the needs of real people in a real world.

Let's take advantage of modern, cutting-edge technologies to bring back to Mississippi all the food, fiber and wood processing we've lost to foreign countries in the last 60 years.

Let's process everything grown and raised right here in Mississippi. When we do, three things will happen: 1) value-added agriculture will increase values for all our farmers and reduce dependence on foreign markets; 2) reshoring our local processing, storage and distribution jobs will result in entirely new lines of businesses and jobs for many of our people; and 3) Mississippi consumers will have broader access to more local and more affordable food, fiber and shelter which will reduce costs and strengthen our state and national food security. After all, food security is national security.

To give one example, if AI can build a robot to rivet automobile parts, people can use AI to build a machine that will weave our Mississippi-grown cotton into our own clothing and other fiber products right here in Mississippi at a mill owned and operated by Mississippians with the unique human skills and training to manage these new technologies. We can direct the use of AI to process our own soybeans into more valuable products – oil, feed, even asphalt supplements that Americans need to buy on a regular basis.

New industries, reshoring new jobs, will require our workforce to develop or retrain for new skills at the highest levels of technological innovation. Our community colleges and research universities will be absolutely key in developing this plan and successfully executing it.

We can do this, and we need to do it now.

Add to that the Rural Health Transformation Funds that will allow us to leverage new technologies to help more rural Mississippians have better healthcare, and it's a win-win-win. Rural Mississippi – all of Mississippi – will benefit, regardless the trajectory AI will take elsewhere.

That is why I am proposing this as a key part of my economic plan for Mississippi that will create new, meaningful jobs for people, strengthen our local food supply, reduce dependence on foreign interests and help our farmers survive and even thrive.

We need not fear AI – we should be deeply concerned – but we need to proactively manage it with real, honest people at the helm – people like you and me concerned about our future. We need to preserve our land, our food and the human element of honest work and creativity the way God designed it. I invite you to join me as we put Our People first!

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