

Testimony

of

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Owner

**Cogdell Berry Farm
Clinch, Georgia**

Before the

**Office of the United States Trade Representative, United
States Department of Agriculture, United States Department
of Commerce**

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Good morning Ambassador Lighthizer, and thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Russ Goodman and I am a seventh generation South Georgia farmer.

Our family grows blueberries, cattle, pecans and timber in rural Clinch and Lanier Counties in South Georgia. Some of the land we have in production Agriculture has been in our family since 1822. Previous to 2000 our family concentrated on timber, pecans and beef cattle as the staple crops in our operation. 20 years ago the health benefits of blueberries were really making the news as was subsidized Canadian lumber. With the negative affects the timber business experienced from unfair trade in regards to Canadian lumber we began looking for something to diversify some of our land away from timber and into another crop. Blueberries fit the bill perfectly. Our area of Georgia with our heavy organic matter laden soils are perfect for blueberry production. We started out with our first 15 acre field in 2000 and have now grown to 650 acres. Unfortunately due to unfair trade in regards to blueberries, we have begun planting more pecans to try and further diversify our operation away from what has come to be an onslaught of Mexican blueberries. In 2010 Mexico exported 1.8 million pounds of blueberries into our country. By 2019 that number was 63 million pounds. This deluge of Mexican blueberries threatens the future of our 200-year-old family operation and the rural American community we call home.

Blueberries account for a 400-million-dollar economic impact in South Georgia. Twenty percent of the total loan portfolio of our local hometown bank is comprised of blueberry related loans. To put it bluntly our little community and many others like it across South Georgia are scared senseless as to what the future holds for us concerning where we stand in the larger juggernaut of global trade. Will our country sacrifice our families and farms? Because if nothing is done to change the current path we are on that's exactly what our country will be doing.

The biggest issue facing our farm is our inability to compete with countries like Mexico who have vastly different labor and environmental regulations. The new USMCA agreement failed families like mine in trying to create a level playing field. And in all honestly that is all we've ever asked for, a level playing field. I often tell people, it is hypocritical of us as Americans and the American government to expect the American farmer to grow our produce under certain labor and environmental regulations and then allow the free importation of foreign grown produce that isn't grown with the same set of standards. I'm a believer in free markets, the problem is we have a free market on the sales side, but not the cost. It's fairly common knowledge that on Mexican farms the average wage rate is less than \$1 per hour. Under the current American H2A regulations our wage rate is close to \$12 per hour. On our farm, and I would think most American blueberry farms, labor accounts for around 1/3 of the total costs in the operation. Given enough time it's pretty clear that the Mexican farms with a 90% advantage in a cost area that accounts for 33% of overhead will put their competition out of business. Another regulation that affects American growers and not Mexico is the Tier 4 engines emission mandate. When this regulation came into effect it added \$15,000 to the purchase price of everything with a diesel engine to the American farmer. That includes everything from tractors, to combines, forklifts, irrigation pumps, everything! We also now bear the costs of increased maintenance and purchasing all the Diesel Exhaust fluid needed to operate these new engines. Mexican farmers aren't under this regulation. This is another example of an unfair cost advantage our neighbors to the South have over us. In fact the tractors we've used to plant our pine trees with for years are still being produced ten miles across the border in Mexico and are still being shipped all over the world. We can't bring them into our country because they are equipped with Tier 3 engines. Even our diesel engines that are only used for frost

protection during cold winter nights are now under these emissions standards. A diesel engine in rural Georgia that runs only 80 hours per year is under the same emissions regulations as a semi-truck that puts 200,000 miles a year on the interstate. With production cost advantages like this, Mexican farmers will surely eventually put their competition out of business. Sadly, that competition comes in the form of the American family farm. I fear what inaction by our government will mean for American farm families like mine. But more importantly what the long term implications are for our children and grandchildren's food security? In the wake of Covid-19 are we really going to risk becoming dependent upon other countries for our food supply? I fear if nothing is done we will do just that. We will concede the fact that at least in terms of fresh fruits and vegetable our children will be less secure than we were. And shame on us if we allow that to happen.