

**Statement of  
Gary L. LaGrange, President  
Soldier Agriculture Vocation Education  
Before the  
United States Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration,  
and Related Agencies  
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**I am deeply honored to be here today to represent our nation's veterans and transitioning military service-members, in particular the large percentage of them whom desire to enter agriculture and more specifically farming.**

**I wish to address two pressing national challenges and present a solution to them.**

- Our nation has 1,500,000 veterans and 800,000 transitioning service-members soon to become veterans. According to the Department of Labor, a significant number of them wish to find farming or farm related occupations and a significant number of them suffer with visible and invisible wounds of war. I am one of them.
- Our nation has a farm succession challenge. With the average age of our farmers approaching 60, 40% of our farms owned and operated by farmers over 65, and 63% of our farms in the last generation, there is a need for 1,000,000 new and younger farmers over the next 15 years.

**There is a gap** between the two challenges that must be bridged. How can these veterans and service-members become farmers? Given the scope and scale of the need, where can they go to learn to be farmers? How can they find the resources that will lead to farm ownership? How can they find the resources to purchase expensive land and equipment? Where do they go to learn, and since many of them possess visible and invisible wounds of war, how can they find therapy as they transition from one culture to another?

**The Service-member Agricultural Vocation Education (SAVE) program addresses the gap.** By providing transition assistance, training, therapy and succession assistance on a training farm, veterans and service members will be prepared to work on, manage and one day own a farm of their own. **Our vision and plan is to develop a model training farm that can be replicated on all land grant universities that will graduate hundreds of new farmers each year.** Veteran and Service-member students will learn a wide variety of farming skills in a relatively short period of time. Those in need of clinical care, physically or psychologically, will have an on campus clinic to assist them in their transition. The students and family members can live on the farm campus for the full training cycle. They will also be matched with a mentor farmer who is interested in hiring a farm worker or selling his farm. That will enable the graduates to move into farming upon graduation and begin farming immediately, whether as a worker or as an owner; a fully integrated transition, training, therapy and succession program.

This program offers a critical bridge from the security and comradery of the military to the serenity and immersion offered by farming, avoiding what can be a debilitating and often

dangerous period following discharge. Most importantly, it offers an opportunity for multiple government agencies to coordinate for the betterment of servicemen and women.

**That farm has been designed** and a team of professionals are in the midst of developing its programs. The Board of Directors of Service-member Agricultural Vocation Education (SAVE) Corp, a public charitable 501c3 educational organization, and professionals from Kansas State University (KSU) are well on the way to making the farm a reality. 16 graduate students from the College of Architecture with assistance from the College of Agriculture and a wide body of advisors including the Veterans Administration worked together to design a 155 acre farm contiguous to Fort Riley and a few short miles from the University. The farm is full spectrum with orchards, produce gardens, bee colonies, training and research plots of wheat, soy beans, corn, grain sorghum, and alfalfa. There will be cattle, sheep, goats, swine, horses and flocks of poultry; a shop to teach general mechanics, metal working, welding and woodworking; a chapel, residences for 100 students and family members, classrooms, a greenhouse with 3 high tunnels, a dining facility with commercial teaching kitchen, a commercial honey producing facility, and a public center where customers can pick their own produce and purchase other products of the farm. The farm includes a certified clinic staffed with clinical psychologists and physical therapists capable of caring for 100 clients a week. Clients will consist of students in the farm program and other veterans from the general population. **It is envisioned that, with your support, the first full class of 100 students and their family members could begin classes on the farm during January of 2018 and in three years this farm should be able to reach self-sufficiency.**

### **A pilot study**

As a pilot study, 50 soldiers from Fort Riley's Warrior Transition Battalion were taught beekeeping over the past three years. A niche agricultural endeavor, beekeeping is critical to the nation's food supply. Interest was high with all soldiers completing basic beekeeping and 12 becoming trained to the commercial level. Further, these soldiers produced over 6000 pounds of honey completely covering all costs and growing the operation from 12 to 58 colonies. New classes are underway.

### **Farm tours**

The soldiers engaged in the development of the SAVE business plan asked if an interim agricultural program could be developed for them. A farm tour program was arranged and beginning with Agriculture Day of 2015, 28 students began touring farms of different types. Each Friday for the following 120 days, soldiers toured 20 high value farms, 12 governmental and non-governmental farm agencies, granaries, COOPS, equipment sales and service organizations including 2 full day sessions on farm planning, soil preparation and produce operations. Each student was taken through a Guide to Business Planning for the farm. The results were so successful that the next round of tours began on 15 March 2016. The Veteran's Administration includes regional clients with this round of tours. Equipment manufacturers and

the KSU Drone facility have been added to the tour schedules as well as several additional high value farms.

## **Research**

The SAVE Farm with its integrated approach will enable research to be conducted in multiple areas. Agricultural research in that the farm is full spectrum and close to a major university. Research regarding farming for those with physical disabilities can be accomplished. Partnering with AgrAbility and equipment manufacturers, new and innovative modifications can be tested to enable those with disabilities to function as farmers. Psychological research can more closely examine the therapeutic effects of farming expanding the sparse knowledge base extant today. To date we have engaged 82 soldiers and veterans. Nearly all are now farming, actively searching for a farm, enrolled in agricultural college courses, or engaged in farming career orientation. All of them suffer from physical or psychological wounds. They are good, disciplined, intelligent, skillful men and women who want to farm. I have worked beside them, shared our home with them, laughed and cried with them, heard their stories, shared their ups and downs and they have become my friends.

The SAVE program, in building a bridge that will lead them to a full and purposeful life on the farm while addressing a critical farm succession program, is as one of our SAVE soldiers, CW4 John Ulrick, sitting beside me here today states, “just the right thing to do”.

Thousands of veterans, transitioning soldiers and farmers are aware of my testimony today. They are hopeful that you will give them hope that this project, with your support, can become a reality and become a reality soon. They await the results of this testimony. Please help me to help them realize their dreams. We owe them programs of substance as they reintegrate into our farming communities.

Thank you.

[www.thesavefarm.org](http://www.thesavefarm.org)