

C-Suite Crisis: Why Finding the Right Leaders is Agriculture's Biggest Challenge

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Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am honored to testify on a challenge that is rapidly reshaping the future of American agriculture. I appreciate your time and your dedication to the future of the American agriculture industry. My name is Aaron Locker, after growing up on a small farm in Ohio, this is my 36th year of serving US agriculture. I am now a Managing Director at Kincannon & Reed, the world's largest executive search and leadership development firm identifying and recruiting leaders exclusively for organizations that feed the world.

For over 40 years, we've partnered with organizations across the food and agricultural value chain—from producers and processors to biotech startups and global food brands. Our mission is simple: to help organizations that feed the world find and develop the leadership they need to thrive.

Today, I'm here to sound the alarm on a crisis that is unfolding quietly, but rapidly, across the heart of our industries. And the consequences for our food supply, our rural communities, and our national security are serious.

The Leadership Vacuum

We are moving from a forty-year period of stable senior leadership in farms, agribusiness, and agricultural organizations into a period where the pipeline of "farm-grown" leadership is scarce. More and more, organizations will be required to look to younger leaders or outside the traditional talent channels. In 2025, we will reach a global record for the number of people turning 65. For every potential leader aged 35–50, two are preparing to retire. In agriculture, where many senior leaders have been in place for decades, this creates an acute succession challenge.

What is more concerning is that the next generation of leaders, especially those from rural and farm backgrounds, is significantly smaller. That is not by accident.

A Shrinking Talent Pool and the Legacy of the Farm Crisis

The 1980s farm crisis didn't just damage balance sheets. It changed the outlook for talent across the agriculture industry and the outlook for entire communities. Many parents, understandably, discouraged their children from returning to the land or pursuing careers in agriculture. While college attendance overall rose nearly 7 percent between 1980 and 1990, enrollment in land grant colleges of agriculture- like Texas A&M, the University of Nebraska, University of Minnesota, and Iowa State University and others dropped by nearly 37 percent.

Despite the continued strength of land-grant institutions, the share of students in agricultural programs has remained small and, in some cases, has declined or stagnated over the past decade. That gap is now showing up in boardrooms, field offices, agronomy teams, management and executive benches across the food and agriculture sector.

Complexity Is Rising, But Leadership Is Lagging

At the same time, the business of agriculture is growing more complex. Today's operations require fluency in data analytics, automation, sustainability metrics, and global trade. Precision Ag and automation are growing at over 12 percent annually, but the leadership capable of connecting new technologies with practical farm and business applications is in short supply.

Fewer than one-third of the agribusinesses we work with have a formal succession plan in place. That is not just a statistic—it is a systemic risk.

Job growth in agriculture is steady at 3 percent annually, but industries like tech and finance are growing three times faster and are drawing top talent away from the food system. We are not just competing for attention—we are competing for leadership.

No other sector blends health, nutrition, energy, and technology like agriculture. We have built the safest, most abundant food supply in the world, but that system will not sustain itself without the people who lead it. Food security is national security.

Profitability and Regulatory Certainty Are Essential

Attracting and retaining the next generation of farmers and agribusiness leaders also depends on ensuring that agriculture remains a profitable, sustainable career path. That means reducing unnecessary regulatory burdens, improving clarity across agencies, and providing a policy environment that rewards innovation and risk-taking. When producers and agribusinesses are buried under duplicative regulations or face constantly shifting standards, it creates uncertainty that discourages investment and succession. We must ensure that those working in agriculture see a viable economic future, one that supports reinvestment, transition planning, and long-term commitment to the land.

What Congress Can Do

This is not a challenge that the private sector can address alone. It will take bold, coordinated public-private leadership. Congress has a vital role to play. I respectfully offer four recommendations:

1. **Pass a Strong, Fully Funded Farm Bill**

A comprehensive Farm Bill is the foundation of long-term stability for the agriculture industry. It empowers rural development, research institutions, and workforce training programs to invest in the future with confidence.

2. **Promote Agriculture as a Purpose-Driven, Modern Career Path**

We must reposition agriculture as a high-tech, mission-focused sector. Congress should support a national campaign to highlight agriculture as a high-tech, purpose-driven career path—one that welcomes diverse and forward-thinking talent from all backgrounds.

3. **Invest in Agricultural Leadership Development**

Support USDA-backed scholarships, fellowships, and executive leadership training in partnership with land-grant universities, community colleges, and agricultural nonprofits. The next generation of ag CEOs, researchers, sustainability officers, and policy experts must be equipped and empowered to lead.

4. **Expand Rural Workforce Development and Urban-Rural Talent Pathways**

Congress should strengthen community college ag programs, fund apprenticeships, veteran transitions, provide relocation and retraining support to professionals entering agriculture from nontraditional backgrounds. We must build bridges that connect talent to opportunity in rural America.

Conclusion

The industries of food and agriculture are changing faster than ever, but our leadership pipeline is not keeping pace. This is not just a workforce issue. It is a threat to the resilience of the most essential system in the country—our food supply.

If we want a competitive, sustainable future for American agriculture, we need a serious, sustained investment in people. That means identifying and supporting leaders early, removing the barriers that discourage their entry, and creating an environment where they can grow and succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I commend the Committee for its focus on this issue and welcome your questions.

Respectfully submitted,

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