

Testimony of Roxanne Wolf, Program Director of Shore Gourmet
U.S. Senate Hearing on Small Business

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Senator Cardin and members of the Committee, it is an honor to be asked to discuss the projects Shore Gourmet has worked on for the economic development of small businesses on the Eastern Shore and state of Maryland. As Governor Wes Moore has said, Maryland is “asset rich and strategy poor.” I hope to address some of that in this discussion of Maryland’s two economic drivers, agriculture and seafood.

When I first took on the role of Project Manager for Shore Gourmet, the research in looking for value added products and economic development drivers was eye opening. At my first board meeting of Shore Gourmet with Beth Brewster, Executive Director of Chesapeake Culinary Center (my sister too!) and with Scott Warner, MSRC, there were a few things that stood out:

- **Farmers want to Farm. Watermen want to fish.**
- Processing, aggregation and adequate storage through freezing, dehydration and freeze drying were not sufficient for the demands.
- There was a systemic void from harvester to end user in the private sector and government entities.
- Domestic products were few and far between in profitable products like specialty mushrooms, herbs and other nutraceutical crops. An onslaught of products were coming from Asia or South America. Consumers prefer domestic and local!
- There was not a central internet platform for large business, Maryland’s Best is now being remodeled to address this issue.
- There was not a group of farmers that worked together to brand a niche crop for the state. Maine blueberries or Wisconsin cheese are examples of a state branding an industry that consumers look to purchase.

Threats to farmers, waterman and small businesses include:

- Some farmers were losing their contracts or they were being minimized with the poultry and nursery industries.
- Farmers need help in changing their business model to diversify and bring innovation and technology into their farms.
- Climate change.
- Invasive species consuming traditional Chesapeake seafood.
- During COVID, lack of regional fresh and stored produce and protein came to a crescendo.
- The cost of farming has increased with shortages and transporting of farm staples like equipment, feed and fertilizer.
- Siloes exist between sectors of the system to get profitable, diversified harvest to market both domestically and internationally.

Several projects that Shore Gourmet is working on highlight the need for developing a strategy rich in a systems approach to developing and expanding small business. Today we will talk about vacant poultry houses.

Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA) is a wave of the future for farmers to diversify, utilize vacant space in both rural and urban settings and a way to diversify crops while providing produce for regional resiliency. Upon hearing that farmers were losing their contracts with the poultry aggregators and there was no protocol for bacterial abatement or profitable use of these structures, our group decided it was a worthwhile endeavor.

With over 1,000+ vacant poultry houses in Maryland, aside from the environmental impact, farmers need to make them profit centers to maintain their farms. Maryland was not, at the time, certifying their uses (although through our research and working with a company that provided GAP and GMP certifications-we established that was possible). With a grant from RMC, developing a bacterial abatement protocol with Gordon Johnson, University of Delaware, and VerLina in Ridgley, MD was established. After that success, a pilot for CEA to address developing different growing modalities and, potentially, developing a nutraceutical market was developed with a grant to Cropper's Farm through TEDCO. This type of "food is medicine" is in high demand and consumers are looking for non-Rx supplements and nutritionally rich foods to address their health and compliment traditional medicine. By piloting aeroponics, hydroponics, raised bed produce and aquacultural crops then farmers would be able to choose a variety of crops for CEA. Help is needed for these small businesses to help make profitable CEA a reality by:

- Developing aggregation/processing centers with drying capabilities and adequate temperature-controlled storage through either government facilities or the private sector.
- Financing, rebates, and avenues to pay for these conversions.
- Energy conservation programs that address the high energy costs that farmers are experiencing in these buildings in both urban and rural environments.
- Providing plans for these vacant structures that include innovation and business guidance to get the products to market. This will help the process and build new products for businesses.
- Aligning producers with government and institutional buyers with contracts to secure both buyer and seller.
- Developing a system to brand certain crops and products as "Maryland made or grown" like specialty mushrooms, algae and nutraceutical herbs that are primarily coming from overseas with questionable growing practices.

Shore Gourmet has worked with VerLina to execute the bacterial abatement and the growing modalities for different crops and introduced them to a local marketing group to establish a website and branding for spirulina. By getting VerLina connected to CAIC, they were accepted into a 6 week start up business course with where a mentor worked one on one to develop a business plan. Networking VerLina with a spirulina developer of "micro farms" and with a potential buyer of specialty herbs has been established (if processing can be developed). Shore

Gourmet has been a catalyst for getting Maryland Agriculture to begin looking at pulling farmers together to build a brand with locally grown nutraceutical crops to market as a group. Maryland Agriculture, Maryland Emergency Management, The Maryland Food Resiliency working group, University of Maryland, No Kid Hungry and other private and government sectors have had tours of VerLina to discuss economic development, nutraceuticals, malnutrition and food resiliency to name a few conversations. As a matter of fact, The Blue Atlas Project came to tour the farm and is now developing and studying spirulina in Uganda!

We are working with the farmer to begin addressing the energy output and looking into lighting firms that may be able to reduce costs by addressing the light waves each crop needs to minimize energy output and the resources available to add energy saving measures to these controlled environments. Spirulina is being sold on both the retail and wholesale level. More outreach is being developed to target the audiences that will buy nutraceuticals since the pilot is now a success in establishing bacterial abatement and the potential of crops being grown. A mushroom chamber will be installed by the end of 2023 and sold to CSAs and local markets for distribution. This crop will be another choice that farmers can judge if it is a good opportunity for their farms.

In conclusion, Maryland has a wealth of products and produce that can be an economic driver for small and start-up businesses. Being proactive with solutions to problems like vacant space, salt water infiltration of farms (crops can be grown!) and invasive species can turn into profit centers. Federal and State agencies can be part of the solution in developing strategies between small business, the private sector and state and federal government to develop a systems approach to developing and expanding entrepreneurs in profitable harvests on land and sea, increase jobs with skilled labor to address innovation and automation. In addition, address food resiliency in a profitable way to create jobs, new businesses and provide consumers with the products they need.

Invasive species like Blue Catfish have been a project of Shore Gourmet and the systems approach model is beginning to work. Value added products like a Seafood Cake that is USDA approved is in review for the school system and outlets, both domestically and internationally, have been established by the private sector. Getting this on the formulary for military bases and other government entities would be helpful and it is being looked at as part of the plan to distribute Blue Catfish. Having established USDA processing sites as the farm raised catfish industry has established is necessary and will create jobs and profits for many. I will leave the details to Nick Hargrove in his testimony.