

RYAN A. BIZZARRO, CHAIRMAN

116 MAIN CAPITOL BUILDING
P.O. BOX 202003
HARRISBURG, PA 17120-2003
(717) 772-2297



HOUSE MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE

PAHOUSE.COM/POLICY
POLICY@PAHOUSE.NET
✕ f @ @PADEMPOLICY

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

Why Agriculture Matters to Everyone
Wednesday, July 31, 2024 | 10:00 a.m.

Representative Emily Kinkead

OPENING REMARKS

10:00 a.m. Rep. Emily Kinkead, D-Allegheny

PANEL ONE

10:05 a.m. Russell Thorsen, Farmer Outreach Specialist
PASA Sustainable Agriculture

Chuck Turner, President
Turner Dairy Farms, Inc.

Amy McChesney, Owner
McChesney Farms

Q & A with Legislators

PANEL TWO

10:45 a.m. Dr. Jeff Cohen Chief Physician Executive, Community Health & Innovation
Allegheny Health Network

Dr. Chris Caton, Director of Curriculum
Northgate School District

Dr. Jeffrey Evancho, Director of Partnerships and Equity
Northgate School District

Colleen Young, Director of Government Affairs
Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank

Stephen O'Brion, Advocacy Coordinator
Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank



Full Testimony of
Stephen O’Brion
Advocacy Coordinator

Submitted to the
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Democratic Policy Committee

Good morning, Chairman Ryan Bizzarro and members of the Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify about the critical relationship between Pennsylvania agriculture and the charitable food networks that assist our neighbors in need.

My name is Stephen O’Brion and I am the Advocacy Coordinator at the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank (the Food Bank). Founded in 1980 to address high rates of unemployment, the Food Bank has a nearly 45-year history of providing access to food and resources to meet immediate needs while also supporting our neighbors' longer-term goals. The Food Bank works with over 1000 partners across 11 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania. We are members of Feeding America, the leading domestic hunger-relief charity in the United States, and of Feeding Pennsylvania, our state-wide association.

Demand for Food Assistance

Since the end of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency and termination of most temporary assistance programs, including SNAP Emergency Allotments, food insecurity rates and demand for food assistance from food banks and pantries across the country remain elevated. In the last fiscal year, our Food Bank distributed nearly 48 million meals, an increase of 5 million meals over the prior year. Both years outpaced demand even during the height of the pandemic and we expect demand to continue to rise.

The most recent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report on household food security found that 44 million individuals, including 13 million children, were food insecure in 2022 – the highest rate since 2014 and largest one-year jump since the 2008 Great Recession. These data are a cornerstone of Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap study which localizes key measurements of food insecurity. It provides in-depth data on food insecurity levels and the cost of meals at the local level, allowing the organization to analyze the data for individual counties and the entire service area. The meal gap represents the meals missing from the homes of families and individuals struggling to put food on the table – that is, when household food budgets fall too short to secure adequate, nutritious food year-round. According to Feeding America’s most recent Map the Meal Gap study, 1 in 8 people, including 1 in 6 children, in the Food Bank’s 11 county service area are food insecure. That means more than 292,670 individuals living in Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Lawrence, Somerset and Washington counties may not know where their next meal is coming from.¹ The Food Bank’s data on the increased demand for food assistance across the region since the USDA food insecurity rates were gathered may suggest that the current food insecurity numbers are even higher.

In addition to these food insecurity metrics, the Food Bank uses the Center for Disease Control’s Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) to identify areas of need. The SVI is a composite index that combines 15 social factors into four themes: Socioeconomic Status—which includes households at or below 150% poverty, Household Composition & Disability, Minority Status & Language, and Housing Type & Transportation. The SVI is a mapping tool that expresses the level of social vulnerability in each census tract, indicating the potential for adverse health outcomes based on external stressors. GPCFB applied the SVI to each census tract in all 11 counties along a 1-10 score, with 10 being the most vulnerable. Any tract with a score between 6-10 is considered an area of high need. Using this method, GPCFB identified 362 of the 739 census tracts in the service area, or 49%, to be in high need. Of these tracts, 62% have at least one Food Bank program or partner located within the tract. The remaining census tracts indicate potential service gaps for the organization and its partners to explore - an effort that is currently underway through

¹ Dewey, A., Harris, V., Hake, M., & Engelhard, E. (2024). “Map the Meal Gap 2024: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2022.” Feeding America.

GPCFB's FY2023-FY2026 strategic plan with an intentional focus on increasing food access for both rural and Black populations.

Like the SVI, food insecurity is affected by a person's income, employment status, race/ethnicity, disability status and more. After a sustained period of record-high inflation, thousands of families are unable to afford all the nourishing food they need to live active and healthy lives. While year-over-year price increases for basic goods and services have slowed in recent months, at-home food prices remain elevated, often forcing neighbors in need – working individuals, families, and seniors on fixed incomes – to make impossible choices to make ends meet. The Food Bank and our partner agencies regularly hear about parents skipping meals so their children can eat and seniors stretching, or outright forgoing, their prescription medications so they can afford food. Our neighbors have shared that buying food alongside higher costs of housing, utilities, and other basic needs has become harder and harder. Even Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are inadequate to meet their needs as more than half of all SNAP participants use their entire monthly benefit within two weeks, leaving food pantries as a sole source of support for half or more of their monthly food needs. Their experiences are borne out in our organization's data. In fiscal year 2024, the Food Bank and our partners provided over 48 million meals to our neighbors in need – the highest amount in the history of the organization.

To meet demand for food assistance, the Food Bank combines federal, state, and local government support alongside retail food donations and private giving. Government support includes federal commodities purchased by the USDA and direct funding that the Food Bank can use to purchase food from both wholesale vendors and Pennsylvania farmers. Food purchased by the Food Bank through government dollars at all levels makes up an average of 15% of our total food sourcing. Two primary sources of funding from the state are the State Food Purchase Program and the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System. Both programs provide essential, but inadequate resources to meet the needs of Pennsylvanians experiencing food insecurity.

State Food Purchase Program

The Pennsylvania State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) has a significant history of supporting food security for low-income individuals and families in the state. Established in 1983, the program supports the wholesale purchase of food at competitively bid prices or better for distribution through local food banks and related networks. SFPP is administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA). Funds are allocated to counties using a specialized formula based on factors such as unemployment rates, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medical Assistance (MA) participation rates, and federal income poverty guidelines. Individual counties award their SFPP funds to a lead agency, allowing local officials to meet local needs. Examples of lead agencies involved in SFPP include regional food banks, collective action organizations, and other non-profits. SFPP funds can be used to support food purchases and program administration.

Since its inception, the State Food Purchase Program has been a critical source of food as demand from our neighbors has increased year over year. However, in the most recent PA Budget, SFPP was flat-funded, which is essentially a cut given the rising cost of food prices and the increased demand from our neighbors.

While we are thankful for the level of support the Commonwealth has provided through SFPP, it is important to recognize that the program has to date been underfunded, challenging economic conditions, and evolving demographics. Given the increasing levels of food insecurity in our communities, it is a fair assessment to say we are in the midst of a hunger epidemic and now is the time for the state to solidify its support for this important program. In 2006-2007 budget, SFPP received \$18.75 million and now

receives \$20.18 million in the 2024-2025 budget – a mere \$1.43 million increase in almost 20 years. If this program had kept pace with inflation, it would be currently be funded at over \$29 million.²

Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System

Our Commonwealth is home to tens of thousands of farmers covering millions of acres in every region, providing abundant resources to our communities to address food insecurity in a collaborative way with our agricultural partners. The Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS), established in 2010, was designed to support Pennsylvania’s agricultural industry statewide – to reduce waste of surplus product, support local farms, and provide Pennsylvanians experiencing food insecurity with fresh and nutritious local foods.³ This program quickly developed into a scalable model for the country and is the basis for the federal Farm to Food Bank Project Grants.

Through PASS, PDA provides funding to Feeding Pennsylvania as the lead administrator to reimburse the costs associated with harvesting, processing, packaging, and transporting surplus products from Pennsylvania’s agricultural community. Funding is used to procure and distribute several dozen different types of PA produce, such as: apples, broccoli, cabbage, cheese, corn, eggs, ground beef, milk, peaches, strawberries, tomatoes, yogurt, and zucchini.⁴ Significant portions of the product obtained through PASS are perfectly nutritious and edible foods that might otherwise become waste.

Since 2015, PASS program highlights include:

- Sourced 27 million pounds of Pennsylvania food products: fresh fruits and vegetables, potatoes, fluid milk, cheese, yogurt, butter, eggs, chicken, beef, pork, and value-added foods.
- Served 5.3 million households with PASS food products distributed to all 67 counties.
- 212 Pennsylvania vendors have sold and/or donated local food products into the charitable food network through the PASS Program.⁵

PASS products are currently distributed by thirteen charitable food organizations and, working with more than 2,700 local partners, items are received by our neighbors in every single county. It is also a positive economic generator for our communities. According to a study conducted by the Pennsylvania State University, \$1 in PASS spending stimulates an additional \$2 in economic activity.⁶ This is a winning situation for Pennsylvania’s farmers and hungry families.

² “Inflation Calculator.” Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis: Pursuing an Economy That Works for All of Us., www.minneapolisfed.org/about-us/monetary-policy/inflation-calculator.

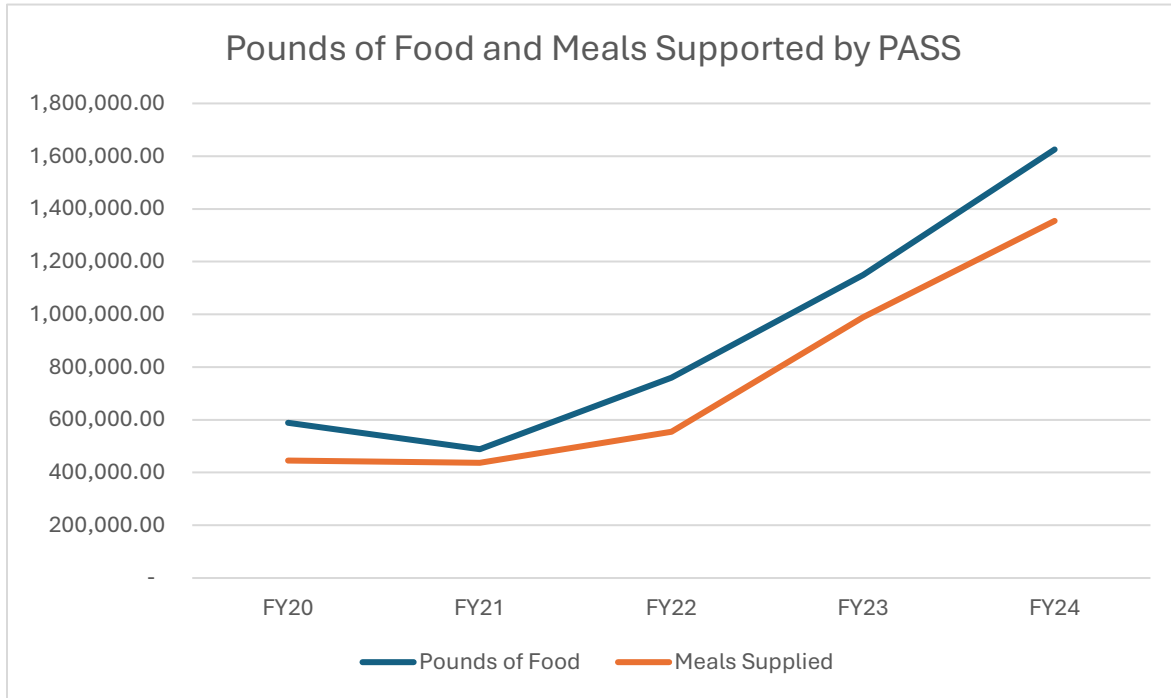
³ “Agricultural Partnerships.” Feeding Pennsylvania, April 25, 2024. <https://www.feedingpa.org/our-programs/agricultural-partnerships/>.

⁴ “PA Agricultural Surplus System.” Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. https://www.agriculture.pa.gov/Food/food_assistance/Pages/Pennsylvania-Agricultural-Surplus-Program.aspx/.

⁵ “Agricultural Partnerships.”

⁶ King, Garret, and Erin McDermott. “The Economic Impact of the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System.” Feeding Pennsylvania, December 10, 2021. <https://www.feedingpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-Economic-Impact-of-PASS-report.pdf/>.

Like SFPP, the impact of the program can be seen in our internal statistics. Below is a chart tracking the pounds of food and number of meals supported by PASS in our service are for the last five fiscal years:



In his 2023 House Appropriations Committee budget hearing, PDA Secretary Russell Redding provided positive remarks about the growth of PASS as it has found its own identity as a relatively new program. I could not agree with him more and acknowledge the important role this program can play as efforts to strengthen local and regional food systems continue to progress across the state. This can continue to be a critical outlet for our farmers, ranchers, and producers to receive financial support while ensuring that our neighbors can put food on the table. While we are disappointed that PASS is flat-funded in the current year’s budget, we look forward to opportunities to work with members of the Legislature and Department of Agriculture to bolster this critical program and our special relationship.

Conclusion

I appreciate the committee’s interest in the relationship between Pennsylvania’s agricultural economy and the charitable food networks and for the opportunity to testify. Thank you for holding this hearing. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Agriculture Needs You Too



**Amy McChesney
McChesney Farms
Derry Twp., Westmoreland
County**

Who We Are

McChesney Farms

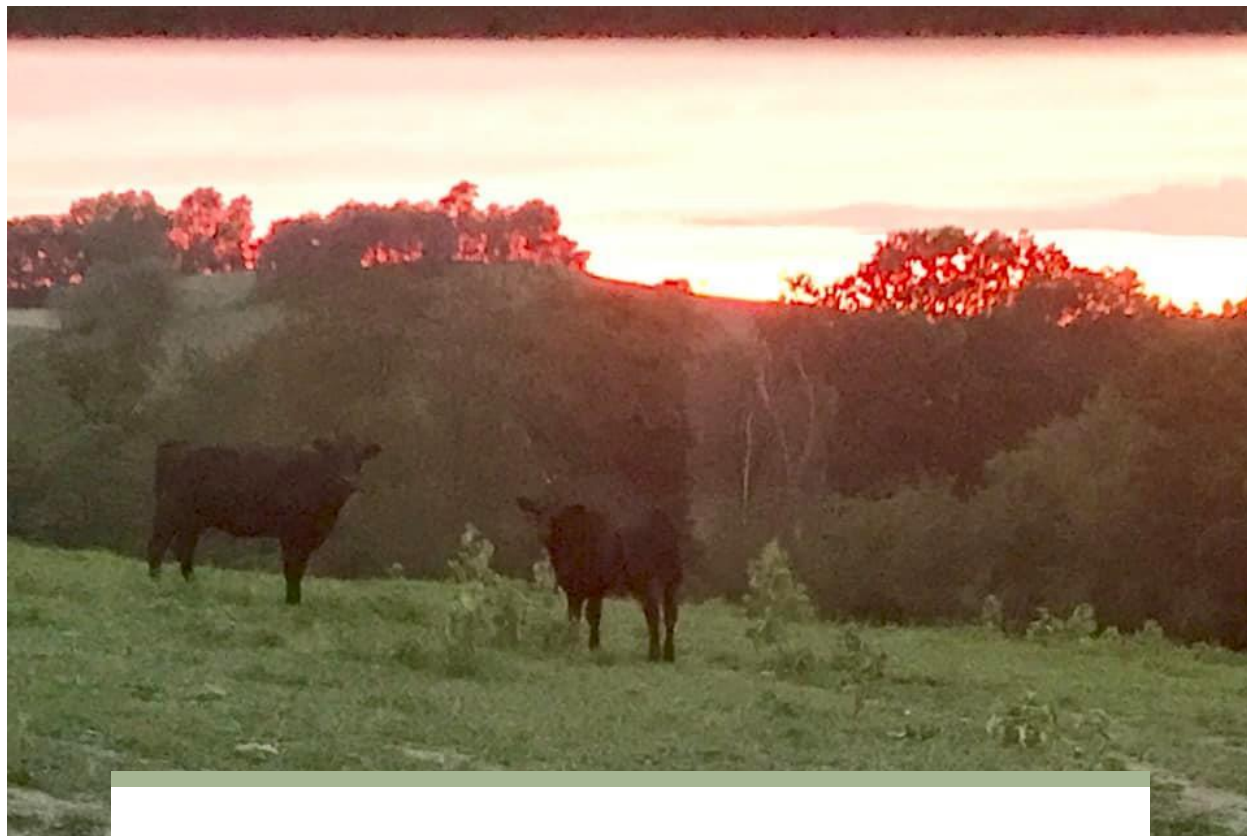
On March 14, 1836 Andrew McChesney purchased the original farm in Derry Township and built the home we now live in. Generation after generation have farmed this land, while raising their family here. On March 14, 2008 the farm was deeded to Andrew's great-great-grandson and great-great-great-grandson and their wives.

Today, Andrew's great-great-grandson, Leonard, and great-great-great-grandson, Clint and Clint's wife, Amy, bear the responsibility of maintaining the farm for Clint and Amy's children as they see the farm through its bicentennial anniversary in just a little over a decade. Today specifically, Clint will meet with a team of conservationists and contractors as we prepare to expand.

Photo credit: Clint McChesney 2023 hay season in the 12 acre field.

Hay Season





Progress

Today the Conservation District and the NRCS and the various contractors will visit the farm and prepare to submit bids in keeping with the ACAP guidelines. We are very thankful for programs like EQUIP and ACAP that help us improve our management practices so that we can be better conservationists. At the start of this process, almost two years ago, we ran soil and manure samples to Penn State and Harrisburg for testing to get some kind of guidance on how best to feed our soil and our crops. The implementation of a Western Testing Center could have made this testing much more accessible.

What does our project look like? When will it be completed? We wish we knew. Technical training and support still need some work. The offices that facilitate EQUIP and similar programs seem to be understaffed. Of course that doesn't mean that just anyone can be hired. But maybe we all can make a concerted effort to make these careers more visible. How often do you hear a high school senior say, "I'm going to be a soil analyst and assist the Conservation District in...?" Yeah, me neither. When students think of agriculture, they immediately think of a farmer on a tractor. And that image only comes true for 1.5% of the entire population. However agricultural careers aren't just that farmer. There's so much more that goes into farming, so many support people that we need to continue to feed everyone. Have you ever seen laser guided herbicide application? It is amazing. Or the programs for veterinary care and record keeping that utilize augmented reality? Brilliant.

Our project requires so many different people to design and construct water development and control systems and dry manure storage so that we can implement other good soil conservation practices. Like fencing the cattle out of the spring and stream so that water downstream is clearer instead of the water washing away all of our soil a little at a time. So that we see better, more stable pastures with less erosion. So that our cows are more comfortable for not having to walk through mud to get a drink. To do that we need planners, drafters, soil scientists, excavators, heavy equipment operators, carpenters, masons, and the list goes on.

What makes Amy qualified to talk to you about agriculture? Amy married into McChesney Farms when she married the eighth generation on this farm. She isn't sure if or even how to count her own farm history though. Amy's mother and father both descended from farming families going back to the revolutionary war. However, like most people, she had been a few to several generations removed from farming.

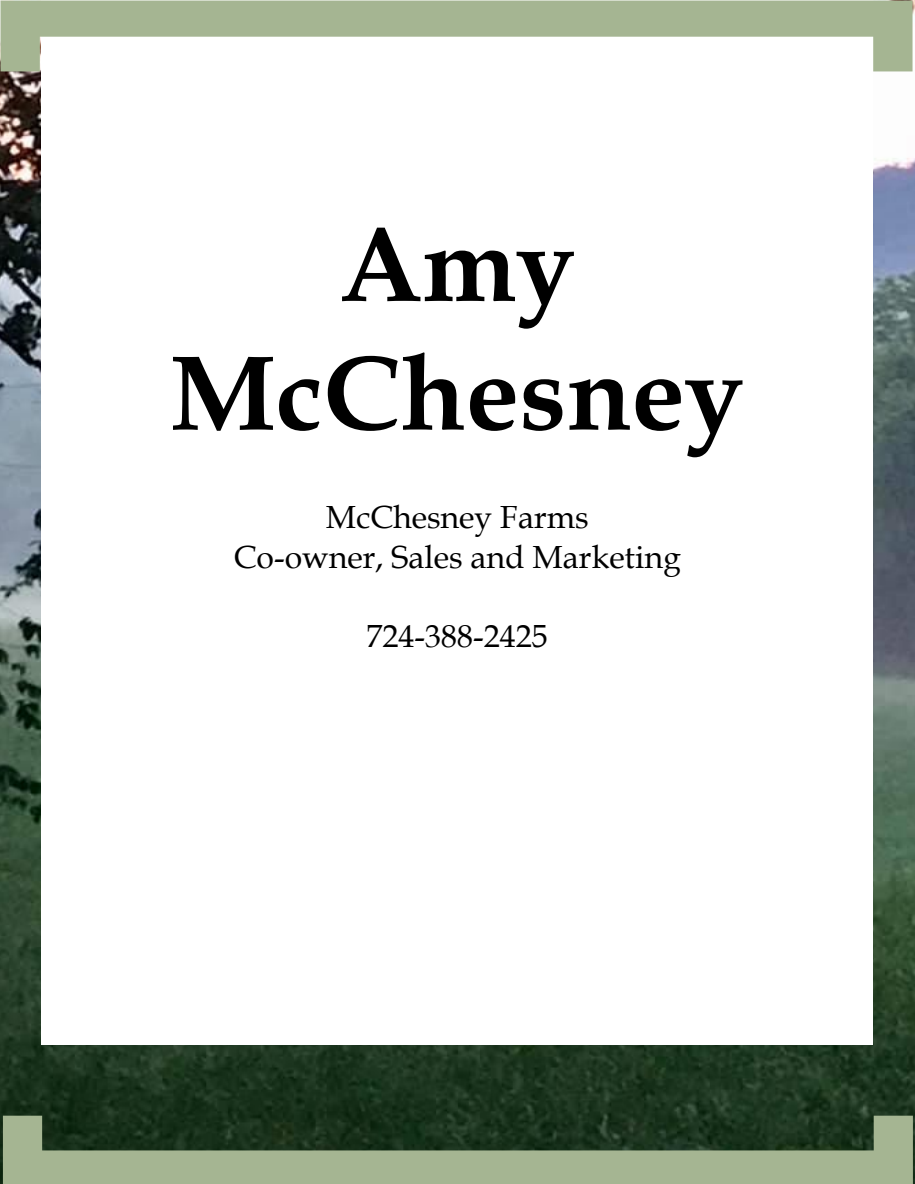
Amy learned what she knows by working alongside her husband and in-laws. And asking questions. So many questions. Probably the same questions a lot of people who have been removed from farming a few generations would ask.

In 2008 or 2009 she became active with the Women's Leadership Committee of the Westmoreland County Farm Bureau, where the women focused on educating young people about agriculture.

On the farm and in her home county, Amy is the face of McChesney Farms. Before Covid-19, McChesney Farms was a cow/calf operation focused on breeding quality calves for other farms to finish out and take to the auctions as fat cattle. As Covid developed and the food supply chain problems emerged, Amy and Clint and their children answered their neighbor's needs and shifted their operation to a full life cycle situation. While their classmates binge watched TV waiting for schoolwork, their three younger daughters focused on high level applicable math and creative art as they worked out yield percentages and feed costs and business logos and social media promotion. Meat was made available for pick up or delivery depending on each situation. And once farmers markets were available again, Amy and the girls were there, meeting the community and feeding them.

Three years ago, Amy was asked to serve as a director for the county Farm Bureau and to assist the governmental relations director whose term was due to end the following year. The following year, she became the county GRD and the District 16 Women's Leadership Committee Representative, serving Westmoreland, Washington, Greene, Fayette and Allegheny Counties. This past year, Amy became the secretary for the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau Women's Leadership Committee and the Vice President of the Westmoreland County Farm Bureau. In the past year, Amy has represented agriculture in our area during trips to Washington DC and Harrisburg and served as a women's delegate to the American Farm Bureau Federation Conference in Salt Lake City.

Amy, Clint and their family welcome your interaction, questions and input. Agriculture should never be something divisive. Instead, it should be something we can all agree needs to be protected in all of its forms. After all, we all eat.



Amy McChesney

McChesney Farms
Co-owner, Sales and Marketing

724-388-2425