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The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA)
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Administration, and Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations
Testimony Addressing the Foreign Agricultural Service

I wanted to bring funding concerns to your attention that are negatively affecting Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) members. The Department of Agriculture's smallest agency plays an outsized role in connecting U.S. farmers, ranchers, and agribusinesses to overseas consumers and bolstering food security worldwide. The output of only 150 FAS Foreign Service officers and their Civil Service partners directly impacts our industry partners' livelihoods, especially for commodities whose export shares exceed 40 percent (e.g., almonds, oilseeds, and wheat). From tackling thorny trade barriers to sharing critical market intelligence and beyond, our members open doors for U.S. agricultural exports – and prevent those doors from slamming shut. U.S. agriculture's reliance on exports, the political complexities inherent to agricultural trade, and uncertainty due to rising geopolitical tensions worldwide underscore FAS' importance.

AFSA is concerned that FAS' \$10 million cut for fiscal year (FY) 2024 will put our members' ability to meet this important mission in jeopardy. AFSA was surprised to see this 4.2 percent cut, especially since we believe that appropriators value FAS' role in facilitating agricultural exports, as evidenced by flat funding in both Senate and House Agriculture Subcommittee appropriations bills. Since FY24 appropriations arrived more than halfway through the fiscal year and FAS' budget has a significant portion of non-discretionary line items, the FY24 appropriations will reportedly force significant cuts in the following categories:

Information technology (IT): Planned budget cuts would exacerbate AFSA's long-held concerns about inadequate IT equipment, systems, and services at FAS. Our overseas members are currently relegated to using outdated desktop computers which often fail to perform basic tasks via systems in dire need of modernization and with limited IT support. To mitigate years of underfunding and prevent falling further behind, AFSA requests that FAS receive a predictable and sufficient IT allocation in FY25. This would allow our members to receive mobile equipment and other necessary IT enhancements so they can meet the needs of their stakeholders more efficiently.

Regional Agricultural Promotion Program (RAPP) support: AFSA is very supportive of the Administration's \$1.2 billion RAPP investment to help exporters open and develop new markets. However, as RAPP is funded by the Commodity Credit Corporation, FAS cannot use the funds to implement the program (i.e., provide additional staff, IT support, or travel funds). For RAPP to truly serve U.S. exporters seeking to benefit from it, our members must be able to physically join them in the trenches, providing introductions, market intelligence, and other foundational support. AFSA is concerned that the FY24 cuts will reduce rather than increase overseas travel

budgets, will hamper our members' ability to deliver wins for U.S. industry more broadly, and may ultimately undercut RAPP's success.

Viability of the FAS Foreign Service: From the early 1990s to 2016, due to insufficient hiring restricted to internal candidates, the size of FAS' Foreign Service plummeted by more than 25 percent. FAS took an important step forward by hiring robust classes of Foreign Service trainees from all sources, which largely reversed this alarming trend. However, onboarding has still not kept pace with attrition. The FY24 cuts will be a big step backward and effectively result in a hiring freeze, which will prevent bringing on enough high-caliber Foreign Service trainees from all sources. AFSA is concerned these cuts will again threaten the long-term viability of FAS' Foreign Service. AFSA also worries the lack of funding will at least pause the fledgling International Agricultural Education Fellowship program, which is a vital tool to help the Foreign Service mirror American diversity.

While we certainly recognize this is a challenging year for all agencies, we urge Congress to prioritize the above funding requests via all possible means so that FAS can continue to meet U.S. industry's high expectations in FY25 and beyond. Thank you very much for your leadership on this important and time-sensitive topic.

Sincerely,

Tom Yazdgerdi, AFSA President