



Iowa Food Bank
Association
Feeding Iowa



Secretary of Agriculture Candidate Q&A

The Iowa Food Bank Association, comprised of all six of Iowa's Feeding America food banks, interviewed the Secretary of Agriculture candidates via video: Mike Naig on 8.31.26 and Chris Jones on 10.16.26. Both candidates received the same questions ahead of time. Below are transcripts to the questions asked, lightly edited for readability.

1. If elected, how would you work to bolster and support the work of Iowa food banks?

Naig: I think there's a number of ways to help support: one is just a recognition of the importance of what you all do. Two is to recognize how the different pieces come together, certainly Farm Bill funded programs, federal funding, SNAP, the necessity to have certainty when it comes to those types of things in addition to appropriate budgets. But then also what can we do at the state level to try to make your lives easier as well? I think we're going to talk about Choose Iowa and some of the things that we've done there. I think that's a golden opportunity to try to better connect what we do in Iowa with agriculture and food production to what you all do in terms of supporting Iowans in need. I think there's just ample opportunities for that. We've secured some funding, not as much as we would want for connecting Choose Iowa to food banks, but I think there's opportunity actually to do even more.

I will continue to support and advocate for you all and the different ways that you need support, but also recognizing that it's the whole system, it's the whole safety net. It's everything from Double Up Food Bucks to SNAP to the network. And also if we're growing our economy and if we're creating jobs and if Iowa is a better place to live, work, and play, and raise a family, then, "a rising tide lifts all boats." We really do need to think comprehensively here about how to ultimately address the issues around food security, but you all need to play your role certainly in the midst of that.

Jones: We need to have not just the Department of Agriculture, we need to have a Department of Food and Agriculture. I think one of the best things we can do is try to change the culture of this here in Iowa. And to do that, we need to change some infrastructure. Infrastructure includes stuff like refrigeration, transportation, cooking appliances, but it also includes people. People are infrastructure. And so we need to expand our food infrastructure here in Iowa to support more than just corn and soybean. So that's one thing I would endeavor to do if I'm elected.



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2. Regarding nutrition programs, what areas of opportunity do you see for you to lean in to support enhanced access to food?

Naig: As I've gotten out into food pantries, I always run right over and I look in the freezer first, because I know the challenge around protein. And that's one of the first things I'm looking for. But then of course, the next thing is, what about fresh? And that's so challenging. If you go back to one of the founding concepts of food banks, food rescue, and the ability to connect those dots around, if we're producing more of that in Iowa, then there's more of an opportunity to connect.

I know for a fact that if you've got somebody that's growing fresh produce, they don't sell everything that they were intending to at the farmers market, or there was a bad weather event. How do you then get that into a food bank? Or just how do I have an outlet for some of the excess that I've grown when something's in season? I think that as we continue to invest in trying to diversify agriculture, and we do so through Choose Iowa, that there's just going to be more of those opportunities. We also have to be really intentional about it.

Case in point: something that we piloted last year, we secured permanent funding for it this year, and that's local food for schools. I can't think of a better group of Iowans to have the benefit of fresh, local, nutritious than our kids. But that's a way to be really intentional about doing that. I think we can do the same things with food banks. You've taught me a lot over the years about just because you're in need doesn't mean that you don't deserve or wouldn't benefit from having access to the same types of variety and diversity that anybody else would. And there's dignity in that.

And even in the experience of shopping, you could give me all the canned peas in the world, and I probably still wouldn't eat them! I don't want that. So to create those opportunities for diversity and make sure that's available is important. And again, not just in the food bank, but also I think we've got a challenge around grocery food deserts, both in the urban centers and in some of our very rural communities. There's a real linkage there that people often miss, that those two communities are actually quite similar in food desert concept, making sure we've got retailers that will provide that kind of diversity in that fresh produce. Those are all the pieces that we need to be thinking about across the board. But I believe that Choose Iowa really is an avenue for us to continue to direct these kinds of fresh produce in particular and meat, dairy and eggs and all that into food banks in a productive way.



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Jones: So there's a desperate desire here in Iowa for locally grown foods: vegetables and fruits and meat. The infrastructure issue is huge here. We don't have the infrastructure to support that. When we create that and we increase access to locally grown fruits and vegetables and meat, then that also helps people that have food insecurity. When we increase that supply of food, then we also increase access to that food for people that have food insecurity. In general, we need options here that go beyond the general produce and other options in our grocery stores. We need access to healthy fruits and vegetables here and meat. And again, if we increase the supply of those foods, I think that helps people that have food insecurity, gives them access to healthier foods.

There's lots and lots of opportunities here. We're here on the best place on earth to grow stuff, but yet we import well over 90% of our food. Food helps build community, firstly. When we recruit farmers to grow these alternative crops and produce meat in alternative ways, that helps build community. That helps reduce food insecurity. It helps build ties between people in the community, people that are not insecure when it comes to food and other things in life. It builds community between them and people that do have some interest in food insecurity. So I think there's huge opportunities here in Iowa. I think if we just put our mind to it, there's a lot we can accomplish here with not that much money. That was a little bit abstract of an answer!



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3. What do you see as your main priorities as Secretary of Agriculture? And how do Iowa food banks fit into those priorities?

Naig: Big picture, of course, is that we all benefit from a strong agriculture. Let's flip the script. It's awfully hard to imagine a strong Iowa without a strong agriculture, right? Sometimes it's a necessity to remind folks that everything from the price of food to job creation and growing our economy and all those pieces and understanding that ag manufacturing and financial services constitute main pillars of Iowa's economy.

And also, this is a political conversation and somebody in a role like mine that actually wants to support ag and wants to expand agriculture, not shrink it, not tax it and regulate it. There's a different vision here about how we see ag playing a role in Iowa's future, and certainly how does that benefit all Iowans when that's successful? Big picture priorities are always trying to create more market opportunities for the things that we grow. Again, internationally, that's through export markets, domestically, things like biofuels, E15. Locally, I created Choose Iowa three years ago and launched it at the state fair. We're building markets wherever we can.

Protecting soil and improving water quality is absolutely an important topic. Clean water is non-negotiable. Every Iowan deserves access to clean water. It's not up for debate whether we need to improve water quality. It is up for debate how best to do that - through a regulatory and taxation standpoint, or through doing it as we and every other state in the nation has done now for decades, which is in a collaborative way, using assistance and support, working with farmers and landowners in cities. That will continue to be a major focus for us. We've set records for conservation adoption the last five years in the state of Iowa. And I think that's worth noting. It's not that there's nothing happening. We are scaling up as we do this work.

Food safety and animal health is a main focus. It doesn't get talked about a lot, but it's things like the effects of high path avian influenza. Being prepared to manage a foreign animal disease like that has a direct result on food availability and price. Now apply that to African swine fever, foot and mouth disease, etc. Things we don't want to talk about. We really don't want to think about them. That's why I don't talk about them a whole lot because I hope all the planning that we've done is never used, but you have to prepare.

And then, this broader sense of how do you ensure that the next generation of Iowans, whether they farm or not, have a chance to succeed in the state, live in communities of all sizes, work, and play? And that's not one thing. It's so many things: housing, access to health care, child care, job opportunities. That's creating an environment where Iowa is an attractive place for families and for businesses and farms to grow.



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3. What do you see as your main priorities as Secretary of Agriculture? And how do Iowa food banks fit into those priorities?

Jones: We've been very forthcoming about the main priority of the campaign, and that's improved water quality. We see the quality of the water here in Iowa is really at sort of a crisis stage here. We have a million people in Iowa that are drinking water with nitrate above what's associated with various cancers. We have Des Moines restricting use of the water during the summertime. We have 7,000 private wells that are contaminated with nitrate. We have about 70 public water supplies or so that are impaired for nitrate. We also have the issue with our state park beaches. We've had a record number of closings here in 2026. Something has got to give here on water quality. That is the focus of the campaign.

We say that voters should view the campaign as a referendum on the condition of the water. The reason we have the water quality that we do is because we have no crop diversity on the landscape. And the way we cope with that is we approach this incrementally and we try to do these water quality projects on corn and soybean fields and in the corn and soybean system, and they just end up being Band-aids and diapers on the system. I would like to spend public dollars in a different way and help transition farmers to more sustainable, resilient, and humane production systems.

We need to look at diversifying the cropping system as a water quality project. We know we get much better water quality outcomes with things like fruits and vegetables, orchard fruits, small grains, with forage crops for cattle like alfalfa and clovers. We know we can do this. And we know that we can integrate some of these things that I mentioned into livestock production if we could return some animals back into pastured systems. That can coexist in many times with these alternative crops and alternative production systems. I think if we expand our acreage here that's committed to edible foods, we also improve water quality. We're no longer wasting money on these Band-aids. We're actually trying to drive the system towards something that's not going to pollute in the first place. I think that is a big win, both for Iowans in terms of water quality and people wanting food that's actually produced by Iowa farmers.



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4. We've seen strong demand for Iowa-grown food through the Choose Iowa program, both from food banks and schools. Would you support significantly increasing funding for Choose Iowa, particularly the Farms to Food Banks program?

Naig: Choose Iowa launched three years ago and now it's permanent via the Farm Act, which I introduced last year. We're building and building. And I have to tell you that it's not been easy legislatively. I've had to sell my own party at times on this. I've had to fight within the two houses. I've worked on a bipartisan basis to do this. It's that important. It just needs to get done. The Farm Act passed this year, with overwhelmingly bipartisan support. I think I've established credibility when it comes to this topic on a bipartisan basis to go and work with anybody to get that done. The funding is not where we want it to be by any means.

Look at the big picture: something like \$12 million we've delivered for Choose Iowa through grants, which is no small number, but that's over the last several years. We're delivering about \$2 million a year in grants, \$200,000 for this program and \$200,000 for schools. But doggone it, it's a long ways from zero, and especially with a permanent program. And that didn't exist before, but it does now. So I'm proud of that. And a bunch of people worked on it.

We're working with Iowa State University Extension to turn out economic numbers on this. Right now, it's a little bit too anecdotal to be candid. I want the full economic analysis done. I want to be able to sit in front of the appropriators and say, "You put a dollar in, you get X return."

So that's the strategy. Maybe the assumption in there is, yes, I will be asking for additional funding. And I think we should continue to ask aggressively for that. The other piece is the federal funding. There's been some purchasing programs that were when the administration changed, that we think there's very much a missed opportunity here for the Trump administration to restart or to inaugurate their own version of those programs. And I would tell you that that is something that there is bipartisan support for my national organization, NASDA, National Association of State Departments of Ag. I'm on the executive committee of that group. That is one of our priorities for, and this is red states, blue states, big and small, ag, non-ag. Everybody is unified in wanting to restart some sort of federal assistance, purchasing assistance, which again, I know will have a direct spillover effect to you.

I think we have just got to go and be bold. And by the way, the Ag and Natural Resources budget is less than 1/2 of 1% of the state budget.



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Jones: So the campaign put together a policy, a local foods and food for schools policy. We call it F.A.I.R.: Food, Agriculture, Infrastructure and Resiliency. There's a number of points there. I think there's nine main points. It really does focus heavily on infrastructure. Sometimes the easiest part is actually growing the food and then the hard part is getting it into the mouths of people that are going to eat it. To do that, we need infrastructure. We intend to ask the legislature for \$10 million the first year. Our objective is to have 50% of the food eaten in Iowa schools to be produced on Iowa farms within 10 years. Last year, the legislature only appropriated \$200,000, I think, to Choose Iowa. That's enough to pay the salaries at IDALS (Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship), and that's about it. I think we've got a big head start because both governor candidates seem to be in favor of this.

I intend to work with whoever's governor. It appears that it's going to be (Rob) Sand at this point. But whoever it is, they're going to want to work with the Department of Agriculture because they're both campaigning on this. I think one of the issues here over the past 25 years is Democrats have not had a Secretary of Agriculture. Democrats in the legislature haven't had someone to advocate for things like this. And this isn't something Republicans typically support in any circumstance. I think to have a Secretary of Agriculture now all of a sudden advocating for this with both the governor candidates and with legislative people, I do think this is going to happen. I think this expansion of edible food grown in Iowa, I do think it's going to happen regardless of who's governor and regardless of who controls the legislature, because there is a lot of momentum for this. A lot of people don't understand we really have a shortage of this sort of food.

And so if you talk to the food hubs, they all say we can't get enough food. We need to recruit farmers. We need to recruit farmers that want to do this. This cannot happen without policy that supports those things. And right now, our Department of Agriculture really is an advocate for the status quo in terms of the production system. We're going to change that. We need to change how the office advocates and what people want here in Iowa. We need a Secretary of Agriculture that's going to advocate for beneficial outcomes for all Iowans and not just corporate agribusiness and the largest farmers.



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5. The federal government canceled programs like the Local Food Purchase Assistance program and Local Food for Schools in 2025. From your perspective, what should the next Farm Bill do to restore and make permanent federal support for local food purchasing?

Naig: 100%, yes. And in fact, I think that must be how it's done because we all know that things change between administrations. But I do think that we're still coming off of pandemic era spending and emergency authorizations and those types of things. The fact is this should be congressionally appropriated and have permanence, as permanent as a Farm Bill is. The good news is that it takes us longer than five years to get a Farm Bill done these days. So maybe the next Farm Bill will be permanent because it may not get done.

I think there's enough support nationwide and on a bipartisan basis and regionally that I think it's possible to do. I think it can get done. It's American production, it's domestic production, it is helping small and mid-sized farms. It's all those pieces. It's economic activity and it's providing safe, nutritious, healthy foods. So yes, I think that that is actually what needs to happen is that it has the permanence that comes with congressional approval in a Farm Bill is how it should be done. But be opportunistic whenever we can. I wouldn't say we shouldn't. We actually had a choice to participate or not as the Department of Agriculture in those programs. It was discussed that we knew that there was a cliff. That that was not permanent funding that was funding those programs. And that one of two things was going to happen. It was going to end at some point, or it was going to get picked up in more of a permanent situation, I think what's obviously unfortunate is the gap in between. We should be opportunistic, but we should always be aspiring to have it in Farm Bill.



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Jones: If we want these sorts of things, we need to create certainty for farmers. And so we create tons and tons of certainty for corn and soybean farmers. That gets them into a comfort zone where they don't want to get out and they don't want to do something else. If we need more food, if we need more local food, if we need more food distribution systems and all these other types of infrastructure, we need to create certainty for the farmers. That means things like crop insurance. We have publicly supported crop insurance for corn and soy and a couple other crops, wheat and rice. Why only that? Why can't we have publicly supported crop insurance for farmers that are growing edible foods here? We need that.

We also need certainty of labor. A lot of these types of farmers need labor from people that aren't in the family or not on the farm. We need some immigration policy that's going to enable that. Right now, only the largest farmers can access these H2A workers very easily. A small vegetable farmer that might need two or three people for two or three weeks, they can't get them through the H2A program. They all go to these big dairies and other big vegetable operations. We need immigration policy that's going to create certainty of labor for farmers.

In terms of the Farm Bill, we need a Secretary of Agriculture here that's going to try to effectuate policy with our elected representatives in Washington. We haven't had a Secretary of Agriculture for 25 years, and so we haven't had anyone do that. And Republicans, typically, this is not a natural playground for them. This isn't stuff that they advocate. We've had nobody to advocate for these things. That's what I intend to do as Secretary of Agriculture. We need Farm Bill programs that are going to support this sort of activity. And we need a Farm Bill that's not just going to focus on the big commodity crop. I think if we get that that will catalyze a change in our farming system here.



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6. Food banks want to be partners with Iowa agriculture, not just recipients of food. What do you think we should be doing together—with farmers, food banks, schools and policymakers—to build a stronger food system where more Iowa-grown food reaches Iowans?

Naig: I think we can all appreciate the philanthropic activity of ag groups, and that's a wonderful thing and connecting the dots. I know the ag industry in particular has been significant supporters, but I appreciate the idea of how do you go deeper and make sure it's more of a relationship? I think it to be supportive of Choose Iowa. I'm not saying that the local foods movement didn't exist until we showed up three years ago. That's not true. But again, this is a campaign, so I'll say it. I don't normally talk this way, but there hasn't been a secretary in the history of this state that has done more to deliver on local foods and delivered more in terms of funding and permanent programs. And I'm proud of that. And I intend to keep going.

I think to continue to support Choose Iowa, to try to do as much as we can under that umbrella, I think is a good idea. What I would ask of you is, would you continue to consider how you can support and build under the Choose Iowa umbrella? It's branding for consumers, but it's also branding for policymakers, too. They understand what Choose Iowa is. We don't have to explain that concept.

You build this whole thing out and then there's this interconnectivity here as well with meat processing grants, with dairy innovation grants, with value-added ag grants. We intend to hire a retail and distribution specialist at Choose Iowa because we need to have somebody who understands how those folks think and how they talk and what they need. How can Choose Iowa continue to connect with Casey's and Fairway and Hy-Vee, etc.? They're doing these things, but how do we go deeper? How do we go further? And I suspect that there will be opportunities even in that that starts to build out for you all.

Back to that bigger message - agriculture's got to be successful in order for these relationships to work. And there has to be profit in agriculture. And that's traditional row crop and livestock production and in this diversification effort that we've got as well. Understanding what your partners are dealing with, just like you'd like them to know what you're dealing with, I think for you all to understand and respect and give voice to some of what they're experiencing. Farmers are under pressure right now. You're seeing this across your rural network - farmers are under pressure and profitability is a real challenge. I think those pieces are all connected.



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Jones: I think what we all need to do, what we all could do better, is focus on the idea of how food builds community. We see in Iowa that we've got 70 counties that are losing population. We see so many of our small towns that have been hollowed out. They're a shell of their former selves. These towns lose their physician, they lose their attorney, they lose their school and their post office, and they lose, very importantly, they lose their grocery store. This causes a loss of a sense of community in these towns and I think we've lost that. I think we've lost the idea on how to build community with food. I think everyone in this space would do well to think about this.

These also are economic development projects. And so we forget that we had 800 small meat processors in Iowa at one time. And we forget that we could go to a grocery store and we would know that the person that grew that food in the produce section, that that person might be our neighbor.

I'm a trained scientist and so this isn't necessarily my space of authority, but I do think as I study these things that we really need to focus on how this can build community and how it can be an economic driver for small towns that have been hurt so badly by consolidation in the corn and soy system. And so when we get a diversity of crops on the landscape, when we get a diversity of economy on the landscape and we get a diversity of people involved in this space, that is a driver to repopulate some of these small towns in the Corn Belt. Can we use this as a community development project? Can we use it as an economic development project? And can we help rebuild community in our rural spaces?



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7. What can the Department do to help Iowa's local meat processors expand their customer base and get more Iowa-produced food into the marketplace? What role could the department play in modernizing regulations around custom slaughter facilities so meat could be sold to additional partners across the state?

Naig: Expansion of processing in the state of Iowa is a worthy goal and still necessary. We think that the grants to meat lockers are a worthy cause and should continue to be funded for new cooler space, freezers, equipment, and just modernizing facilities to expand capacity.

Then that gets into the regulation. Not every state has a state inspected program. We think it's important that Iowa does, and we work hard to have one of the best in the nation. We've got budget pressure at the department, too, but it's a priority to continue to support those meat lockers. You've got some that are federally inspected, you've got some that are state inspected. Our team really does work with lockers.

Meat Lockers came to us in 2019 and said they wanted us to look into pursuing cooperative interstate shipping or CIS. And what that program allows you to do is you can be state inspected, and just like being federally inspected, you can sell across state lines. We got enrolled in that program spring of 2020. Timing's everything, right? I think we have 33 CIS plants. One might just ask, so what's the difference between CIS and just being a state official plant? Not a whole heck of a lot. It's a lot of paperwork and it's an official designation. The obvious thing to start with is we should allow state official inspected lockers to sell across state lines. Okay, that's one piece.

The other is, our state program has to be the same as the federal program. So if it's the same as the federal program, then why are we putting in these regulations? And it turns out that most of these regulations or laws, date back to the 1950s. And it's time to be modernized. You don't just completely open up custom lockers to sell wherever they want, but do you need to have a full official regulatory approach? I'm supportive of certainly official state inspected being able to go across state lines. But I think we can in fact unlock this custom plant for certain activities. You don't want it to be a free for all.

You have to ensure food safety. I've heard it loud and clear from you all that just because somebody's in need doesn't mean that we should think less of them in terms of providing them with safe food. So that is a necessity.

We need to be smart about it, but I think there's a way to do it and open that up. That was a long way of saying I agree with you. There's opportunity here.



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Jones: So I know that rules around food safety are an obstacle here. There's no doubt about that. On the other hand, this is not exactly a high point in time for food safety in this country, right? We've seen a lot of things here that demonstrate that we do need some rules around it, and so I think what we need to do is have the department, the agency, interact with people in this space to review the existing regulations and how we can modernize them, if you will, and maybe make them more friendly towards food insecurity and development of new food processing capacity in these small towns.

I'm not an authority on the specific regulations, but I do hear this a lot, that this is an obstacle. I think it's fair to have people in this capacity in the agency to work with people such as yourself to look at what needs to be done in terms of the rules, and then we need to engage the legislature on it and engage whoever the governor is on this. I think, again, it's clear that both governor candidates are interested in this. I think we're very fortunate to have Zach Lahn be interested in this because we really perceive a lot of this to be a liberal sort of space here. But to have the Republican governor candidate be interested in these issues, I think the opportunity is really ripe right now to get what we want and what we need to get this food into the mouths of people. So, I'm very, very open and eager to work with people such as yourselves to overcome these regulatory obstacles.



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8. We will give you the last word, is there anything we missed, or anything you would like to mention?

Naig: I appreciate kind of the bigger picture of what am I thinking about in this race. I always appreciate the opportunity to share that. I think we've dug in certainly around Choose Iowa probably more ways than anyone. And I just want you to know, I appreciate what you do. I hope you've seen that we've worked, I've worked hard to try to deliver where we can. We've unfortunately had to work within the confines of a state budget that frankly has not allowed us to do things at a level that we want to do. I have to be realistic, pragmatic, just like you all do, in your approaches to things.

So I don't want you all to leave thinking that I think \$200,000 is enough or is adequately hitting the mark in terms of what we could do or should do. I also think that there's a tremendous opportunity to continue to move this in the right direction. I'm so encouraged by it. I'm inspired by the people that I meet who are doing these things. And they want to help. And they need more buyers. They need more institutional buyers for their products and that they can plan around.

So you all buying more and schools buying more and retailers and distributors buying more only helps then with an expansion of even more production, which will give you more opportunity and everybody wins in that. So I really do think that we're on to something here. We just need to continue to do the hard work. As always, let me know what we can do to be helpful for you all and certainly appreciate the chance to visit. If you've got any questions or you've got an idea or a criticism or whatever, you know how to get a hold of me and I welcome it.



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8. We will give you the last word, is there anything we missed, or anything you would like to mention?

Jones: I think food insecurity is a big issue here. One of the things in my original policy plan that I put together way back in January, I had a 28 point plan. A couple things I'll just mention is that we have these food deserts in Iowa. This affects people with food insecurity and people that maybe aren't insecure. I think this lack of access to grocery stores is a bad, bad problem, and we have people in rural Iowa that are eating food and buying groceries at gas stations.

What I'm proposing here is these food mobiles, and I've since found out that other people have this idea where we perhaps try to catalyze grocery stores on wheels where they would travel to a food desert once a week and hit one or two food deserts per day to try to alleviate this lack of access to food. These are not only in the cities, like Northeast Waterloo. Waterloo, in general, has had a terrible time getting grocery stores, the entire city, but especially Northeast Waterloo. But this is also a terrible problem in rural areas. When you travel around the state to these small towns, a lot of people have to travel a long ways to a grocery store. I think these food mobiles - I'd like to explore this idea how the department can figure out how to deal with this lack of access to groceries.

The second thing in there that I'll just mention I propose is the department buy a fruit tree for any Iowan that wants one. One of the best ways to get access to local foods is to grow it yourself. I think a lot of people lack an understanding of how much food you can actually grow at your own home or your own dwelling. A fruit tree is a good way to get people started in this, get them interested in food. You can over 20 years, save a lot of money if you have one fruit tree in your yard.

Those are a couple of ideas I've had around local foods and food insecurity. And I just want you to know that you will have an advocate in the Department of Agriculture if I'm elected. This is going to be a big focus of, if I'm elected, we want Iowa to be the local foods capital of the world, of the country anyway. We want to have food access be better here than any other state. As I said, we've got the best place on earth to grow things. I think the state's residents deserve this. They're thirsty for something here other than corn and soy and CAFO meat and ethanol. And I think this is the path. This is the pathway to diversify Iowa agriculture and to get better environmental outcomes.