Thank you, Secretary Perdue, I appreciate that kind welcome. I tell you what, it’s great to be back in the United States. I’ve been back a number of times to the Washington, DC area, to New York, and few other places around the country, but I’ve only been home—back home—to Indiana one time since May. We’ve got a lot of work to do. Secretary Perdue, Under Secretary McKinney, Chief Economist Johannsen, thank you for the kind invitation to share a little bit of the challenges we have in Rome. I always gotta share this –Ted always shares it about me –but you know for years—I think it’s 30 years ago, Ted came and worked on our farm and helped us out one summer. It’s hard to believe 30 years have passed in that short amount of time but sure look forward to working with you, the Secretary, Chief Economist Johannsen and everybody at USDA, as well as the American farmers that are in this room. Those involved in the supply chain, those that make agriculture in America so unique from around the world.

So, it’s great to be here with old friends as I just said. And it’s wonderful to be back at the Ag Outlook—I’ve never been on this side of the podium so it’s a little different tonight. But I want to share a little bit with you about the challenges that we face in trying to achieve the Innovation Imperative. We’re dealing with 193 countries in Rome, Italy at the Food and Agricultural Organization, and I want to share some of those challenges, because each one of them have a different way –every one of those countries has a different way of feeding the hungry world.

All of us in this room know that farming isn’t the same as it was some time back. Let’s face it, today we know we need to be a businessman. We can’t just be good at agronomy, we can’t just be good at marketing, we can’t be good at just one thing, we have to be good at a number of things. And we have to make sure that our business has the ability to scale. We have to make sure in having that ability to scale that we bring innovations along the way. And we’ve been in such a unique position in the United States to accomplish that unlike anywhere else in the world.

So, in my role as Ambassador, I have oversight of UN agencies in Rome, six of them to be exact, and it’s the first time I’ve seen international relations -- as practiced by governments -- from the inside. And I can tell you, the experience has been eye-opening.

And it relates specifically to the subject of this Forum:

THE INNOVATION IMPERATIVE.

I’m going to talk a little bit about the challenges and opportunities there are to deal with 193 nations around the world, and many that struggle with food insecurity.

As Americans, we think of innovation and progress almost as a given. It’s hardwired into our national DNA, our psyche as farmers, as an industry, because we have some of the earliest and most enthusiastic adopters of new technology. For those of us getting on in years, whose memory of summer “vacation” was pulling succotash—how many people remember pulling succotash? Raise your hand. There’s a few of us, a lot of you – for those of you who don’t know, that’s when you pull corn out of the beans. We would get up early in the morning and walk rows of beans all day long, and pull the corn out. We didn’t have the innovations to control the weeds.

Or we hopped on the tractor like I did, an H International – sorry to my John Deere friends that are in the room here—but I hopped on an H International tractor with a two row cultivator mounted on the front and without power steering, and spent my day that way removing weeds from fields because we didn’t have the technologies, we didn’t have the innovations back then. So that was our summer vacation.

And being Americans, we naturally assume that others, too, share our beliefs in progress and innovation as obvious goods. But in this, I’m afraid we would be wrong. And just how wrong I’m afraid, has been brought into stark relief in my brief time in Rome since May.

We really need to wrap our minds around the fact that many of the countries—the 193 countries we work with-- do not share the basic values and core assumptions on which we operate here in the United States.

Let me illustrate with a concrete example. Of the three UN agencies included in my responsibilities as Ambassador, the most well-known is probably the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, or FAO as we call it in Rome. Founded in 1945, it was the first UN agency ever created, and there is perhaps no UN organization with a prouder history. During the 1950s and 1960s, it helped farmers with new hybrid varieties, synthetic fertilizers, crop care products and agronomic knowledge that created the Green Revolution to get us to where we’re at today, saving billions from starvation.

But without much notice in the broader policy community, however, that approach has undergone a radical change in the most recent years. I want to emphasize that FAO still has some of the best scientists, extension workers and development specialists in the world. But they have increasingly been pushed aside in the past by high-level leadership with a much different agenda.

That agenda is best seen in the FAO’s “scaling up agroecology.” These are programs that are being held around the world, and probably many here haven’t heard the word “agroecology,” though you can barely pick up a UN development document that doesn’t talk about it. It’s very devoted to the subject. In its original meaning, the term “agroecology” is perfectly benign: it simply indicates the study of the overall ecology of farming systems.

But as embraced by some within the FAO, including the most recently retired Director-General, and increasingly by governments in the EU, it is defined very specifically to rule out the technologies that made the Green Revolution possible.

You can think of it kind of as an “organic-plus” agriculture that no synthetic fertilizers, no crop inputs, no crop care products, no GMOs or gene-edited crops. Plus a heavy overlay of anti-capitalist and anti-trade ideology.

Even more broadly, it is an explicit rejection of the very idea of progress - extolling “peasant” farming and promoting “the right to subsistence” agriculture. Mechanization, too, is frowned upon. you can have a tractor, but you may not want to get it from a multi-national company with embedded technologies within it. Science, needless to say, has been completely disavowed. Even basic facts are swept aside in the interests of ideological purity. Intensive agriculture is blamed for every environmental problem imaginable, but no one bothers to ask how doubling the amount of farmland needed to-- for low-yielding crops, pest-infested crops producing the same amount of food, could possibly be good for the environment. And that doesn’t even take into consideration the 25-70 percent more food we need to produce to feed that growing global population.

Of course, one should always take into consideration local context. There’s always a place for special diets, or maybe there’s a need for natural production in some areas around the world. But I think it needs to be appropriately placed in the local context. So, the job of the FAO and other development extension specialists is to help famers use any technologies safely. We believe that technologies need to include and be inclusive of all forms of agriculture, from organic to commercial, making sure that farmers are making the choices best matching their local context, their diets, their nutrition, and the resources they have available to them.

We need to accept, however, that this is part of a much larger trend. Every time our trade negotiators are told by their European counterparts that “agriculture is off the table,” that the EU will never accept GMO cultivation, or that our crops are banned from imports because of small levels of pesticide residues that the most rigorously scientifically controlled processes in the world have determined are safe - we’re hearing echoes of that same trend.

When those same GMOs and pesticides are demonized in this country by activist groups—even in the United States—and when lawsuits threaten to take critical technologies off the marketplace, that too is a part of the same trend.

We see all these coming together as at the “scaling up agroecology” conferences held last summer and planned for this summer in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Sponsored by the FAO, together with French, the German, and Swiss, and EU development organizations, the organic industry, along with European and U.S. activist groups, the conferences featured speakers who told their audience that GMOs would give them cancer and showed slides of lab rats and other animals convincing them that modern technologies were part of Western corporate conspiracy to make them sick and control their food systems.

I only wish I was exaggerating. But I’m not.

But the activists at these conferences were simply the tip of the iceberg. There is a vast network of such well-funded NGO organizations operating in the developing world, spreading mis-information about GMOs and pesticides and lobbying to frighten legislators and block approvals that could help fight the spreading plant pests that keep so much of the developing world in a state of chronic food insecurity. They are extraordinarily well-funded, with money flowing from U.S. non-profit foundations, EU government development agencies, and from EU taxpayer-subsidized Non-Governmental Organizations - many of the same ones that lobby so effectively to block U.S. agriculture exports to Europe and suppress the adoption of new technologies there.

They are the same groups that have fought a decades long battle to kill the Golden Rice product, the beta-carotene enriched GMO crop that could prevent hundreds of thousands of childhood blindness a year and millions of unnecessary deaths a year.

Greenpeace is the most infamous of all the groups; but there is hardly a one that will reconsider their opposition, despite a letter from150 Nobel Laureates condemning Greenpeace for what they say amounts to “crimes against humanity.”

These organizations are well-funded and they’re succeeding.

In 2002, when President of Zambia refused U.S. aid to help his starving nation - saying just because people were hungry, didn’t mean that he should have to feed them GMO “poison” – this comes from the director of the World Food Program, Jim Morris, during his days serving our country in that spot. And effectively they did not get the food to their people that were starving. These GMO food crops on their soil aren’t even allowed today, to this date, and only allowing GMO cotton in some places. There are signs that others in the region might open the door to GMOs, but so far, the activists have been able to block most of those efforts.

Compounding problems, right now, in East Africa we’re suffering the worst invasion of desert locusts in over 70 years. There’s places we know there that in late January they’re covering areas 25 miles wide by 57 miles long, blacking the sky at times not seeing the sun. One swarm was large enough to block the sun, and yet we’re trying to what we can to effectively help in controlling this pest. Because as it moves across the Sahel of Africa, an area that is already food insecure, the need will continue to get greater. In fact, there’s estimates that they could get 500 times greater. There was an estimate that also came out of the FAO today, that said they’re consuming about 1.75 million metric tons of weight in greens a day. That’s almost equal to when you look at it on a weight basis nearly three percent of the U.S. corn production this past year. Three percent of the U.S. corn production because of one pest, per day. In a little over a month they’d consume the whole U.S. corn crop. We had a meeting with USAID yesterday, we know the need may be upwards of $150 million dollars to make sure we can get the right chemistry, get people in there and treat this mess because $150 million dollars would pale in comparison to what we might have to do in a form of aid to feed people that are hungry. We did, the U.S. came to the table again yesterday and provided a little bit over $8 million dollars in more funding on top of the $800,000 they’d already funded to try to make an impact on this pest. It’s serious.

And it’s not just desert locusts—it’s Fall Armyworm. Fall Armyworm has been across Africa for four years now, and we’re doing very little about it. Upwards of 50 to 60 percent of the crop losses occur in most all areas.

I’ve been to places in the South Sudan, Rwanda, Ethiopia, that you would walk out into the farmer’s field, it may be a hectare or maybe it’s two hectares, and the guidance they were getting at that time from FAO was “you can take the worms off the plant and pinch them or squeeze them in your hands.” Or let grass grow up around the corn to keep the insects from getting into the corn or spraying sugar water on it.

That is the kind of guidance that we’ve been getting out of FAO, driven by an agenda by countries that are not aligned with policies that really want to have an impact on feeding the hungry world.

You know, we’ve got the tools here in the United States, we’re very fortunate to have tools, we can deal with Fall Armyworm. We’ve got Bt corn, we can combine that with some crop chemistries. And we can control it to provide a safe and nutritious food supply that’s affordable for all. Yet we continue to block access to these technologies across the developing nations.

Right now we know that oftentimes, there’s groups right now, some that I mentioned earlier around Europe—they’re spending a lot of time doing an end-run around what we’re trying to do there and really block legislation, keeping us from bringing some of these technologies into Africa.

But there is hope. Ethiopia has recently brought in Bt cotton, we know that they’re looking at Bt cowpeas, we’ve seen Nigeria bring in Bt cotton, Kenya is a little bit more open today. We see South Africa embracing all forms of GMOs, and using crop care products to protect their crops. But there are 54 nations across Africa, 54 nations - and many can’t feed themselves. And I can tell you they have the resources – when I was in South Sudan I happened to scrape up a little bit of a soil sample, being the farmer I am, and sent it back home for an analysis. It was nearly 40 percent organic matter, mineral content was high as well—good nutrients. They have the resources, they have the water, they have the ability that they could feed themselves, but their policy makers aren’t allowing it to happen. They’re being influenced again by these organizations that I talked about earlier.

Science-based solutions are imperative. But they will only work if we have the regulatory frameworks in place around the world that allow these technologies to reach people who need them the most. Last June, President Trump issued an Executive Order which modernized the U.S. regulatory framework and paved the way for science-based, timely, efficient, and transparent agricultural innovations to get to the marketplace. Ratcheting up pressures on leaders around the world to accomplish this will be required.

When I met with President Trump back in 2017 to discuss my nomination, he emphasized to me the importance of aligning U.S. foreign assistance to U.S. values.

It took a while for my nomination to come through - 21 months to be exact. But it gave me a lot of time to spend the time I needed to onboard here in Washington, DC, working with USDA, USTR, USAID, Treasury and the State Department making sure I was prepared. But when I got to Rome, I found out the job was much bigger than I had ever thought.

One of the first orders of business was getting to know the new Director General, Qu Dongyu, who is the Director General of FAO. We’re very optimistic about Director Qu’s leadership, his guidance, his belief in applying science in a way we can feed a hungry world. And we’re confident that he is going to work with us and other member states to have the ability to make sure we can feed that growing and hungry world.

You know, just recently we had meetings with him to discuss the Fall Armyworm issue, and you heard the guidance I talked about earlier, that had come out before from the FAO. He’s already stepped up and says he knows we need to bring the possibility of GM crops and different chemistries to make sure these people – we can feed those hungry populations.

So, we look forward to working together with Director Qu during his time at FAO.

I am also highly encouraged-and this room should be excited about this--the Deputy Director-General is also going to be coming from the United States, Beth Bechdol. She will serve in that capacity in the number two position. We’re very confident in Beth’s abilities and she understands like I do that we have to work on policy framework that allows for innovations today, tomorrow and ten years and have the ability to come help and feeding that hungry world.

In terms of support of FAO, the U.S. currently contributes about 22 percent. On top of that we give a lot of voluntary funding as well. When we look at our nearest country below us that’s contributing to FAO they’re at 12 percent. So, we have a lot of leverage there, but we need to make sure we exercise and do our fair share.

Along with FAO, I also represent IFAD. It’s spelled I-F-A-D. I don’t know why they pronounce it “IFAD,” but they do. The International Fund for Agricultural Development. There we work with billions of dollars and lending it to small holder farmers, giving them the ability to access some of the resources they need to feed themselves around the country. Very important organization, works along with the World Bank and other development banks to make sure that these small holder producers have the ability to feed themselves.

I’ll take a second to talk a little bit about the slide – the one up in the upper left corner there, was a place where they were producing silk. And they were collecting these cocoons from the silkworms from about 4500 farmers from across Rwanda. Really making a difference, this company is producing silk and really having impact, so there’s a good story there. Below that is a company we went to where IFAD supported—it was called a banana winery. You can see it’s in a beer bottle, but they’re actually buying excess bananas off the market, elevating the price of bananas, helping that small holder farmer out to have a better livelihood, better income. I can tell you they take the bananas and make the peel and everything and bring it into a puree. They ferment it for three days, they call it their wine but I can say it’s more like beer. But very good – 14 percent alcohol by the way.

But as we move around, I stayed and I talked a lot about developmental organizations and how they really haven’t been hitting on the mark. And it’s obvious when we look at the World Food Program. Many of us in this room may know Executive Director Beasley. During his time, and under the Trump administration, we’ve nearly doubled the amount of money we’ve put into the World Food Program, going from 1.7 billion dollars to nearly 3.4 billion dollars of an 8 billion dollar budget. Working with 90 countries around the world, feeding 87 million people year-round.

Yet we still have 820 million people, according to the SOFI report, hungry in the world. The number continues to climb and it has since 2015.

But my point is, we can’t continue to fund at this pace. We can’t continue to ask the American taxpayer to give more. We already give more per capita than any other nation in the world to food relief around the world. The sad part is, I’ve got to share with you—that most of this is man-made conflict. It’s not natural disasters like the World Food Program was originally set up for. It’s man-made conflict. In fact, over two-thirds of it is. It’s totally avoidable. But people are hungry because of that.

But soon, we’ve got to get to the point where we’re actually making an impact with development, to make sure we create that migration or evolution of taking people out of receiving aid for their entire lives. I can take you to Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh where we got around 890,000 people. What hope is there if you’re a child growing up in that? What hope is there for you to someday give back to your economy, get an education, and improve your life. We have got to drive some impact there.

So, my point is this: it’s not about withdrawing from these organizations. If anything, this is the time where we need to get more engaged, especially at FAO, and I think we’re going to do that with Beth Bechdol there as the Deputy Director-General, with our mission, with our work, with USDA. We will have an impact and make sure that we can improve the productivity of smallholder farmers around the world.

I can share with you most of them I’ve met with don’t want to remain in that cycle of poverty, of subsistence living, seeing their children growing up, living on aid as well. So, we need to turn the Food and Agricultural Organization around to make sure the World Food Program can address the issues that need addressed, food insecurity and natural disasters in other places.

We’re doing a lot of work right now: Yemen, got problems there. Somalia, maybe you know. And we haven’t even started in Venezuela yet. Those numbers are coming out and we’re understanding the great need that there is in Venezuela. And Colombia as well, as 4.5 million people migrate across into Colombia. So, the needs are great. We need to make sure we can help these people transition.

So back over to FAO: I can assure you that the scientists, the extension people, they’re good people at FAO. They want to get something done. And I’m encouraged by Director Qu, and as I said Beth Bechdol, and what they plan on doing there.

Ironically, a lot of this is taking place during a time when we’re an industry that’s going through a massive revolution in the way we look at innovation for agriculture. It could be data science – we had a great discussion at our table tonight. We’ve been involved in Forbes Ag Tech events and any other events around the country. It’s really encouraging to see young people all the sudden get excited about being a part of agriculture again. And I think the innovations that are coming out today are encouraging that excitement. So, it’s data science, it’s what we do with machines, it’s a way we can collect information and run analytics and actually improve productivity on our farms here in the United States. And I’d like to tell you again: you would think that other member states around the world –the 193 countries we deal with – would understand this, but many don’t.

If you come to FAO, you would soon learn of the 194 countries that are there, there’s maybe three or four of us that are not career diplomats. Three or four of us that are not bureaucrats thinking about moving on to our next job in three years. We need to make sure that we have impact and influence and help these people understand what agriculture and productivity is about and how the United States system—production agriculture—can really have an impact to helping others feed themselves around the world.

As I said, these technologies are making us more nimble, more people are interested in agriculture, and I believe we’re in some of the same revolution we saw in computer sciences back in the 80s and 90s. Now is the time to leverage those resources.

There is a good part of FAO that I like to talk about, and I know USDA likes to talk about it often too, and that’s the Codex Alimentarius.

That is an organization within FAO that delivers value to U.S. agriculture and agriculture food production systems around the world. It is instilling science in all the decisions they make. They use the data to make those decisions. They’re not doing anything because it’s a movement, not doing anything because of political bias or belief. They’re choosing science to make those decisions and that’s where we need to get FAO on the programs they develop to help small holders feed themselves.

So, I can tell you this: Our mission in Rome is dedicated to stand up for American values. To stand up for what this room represents. Stand up for what our U.S. universities and land grants provide us over the last 50-60 years improving agriculture’s productivity. We spend a lot of time at FAO, we spend a lot of time at the World Food Program, and the other agencies, but most of our focus is on FAO. We want to make sure we’re delivering value that allows for the free trade of American’s products around the world. And that other countries we align with, our allies, have the same ability to use those same technologies.

We’re dedicated to make sure our Congress knows what we’re doing, too. I spent a lot of time going across Africa, visiting sites where the FAO is working, the World Food Program is working, and IFAD is working – that’s essential. We’re running the second largest budget in international organizations, to the United States government below NATO. So, the importance to make sure that the money that’s going into these organizations is efficient, but it’s effective.

So, I urge you to join us in this active engagement, with eyes wide open, to counter the continuing politicization of food and agriculture. It is leadership from America and our allies that we need now to turn the tide.

I took this job because I strongly believe in the values of FAO, WFP and IFAD’s work. The Green Revolution wasn’t a one-off thing; innovations and their adaptations to local needs must continue to evolve. With over 500 million small holder farmers globally feeding nearly two billion people, we need to hold FAO accountable, and all its members accountable and ensure they are delivering on their mandate to increase the capacity for people to feed themselves, their communities both today and in tomorrow’s world.

In closing, in the United States as a farmer, if I choose to not use an innovation or I make a bad choice, I lose economically. And that could be devastating to a family farmer I understand that. But when you go into the developing world, where they don’t have access to technology—they don’t have that choice. They have one choice: farming with systems that my grandfather gave up on 125 years ago. But if they fail, they lose hope. They lose hope. They migrate. When they migrate they get caught up as victims in human trafficking—nearly 20 million people a year. We know that they get involved in extremism, where there’s Boko Haram, ISIS, al-Qa’ida, Al Shabaab—any one of those. We see we’re losing people to that as young as ten years old. And worse case they lose a family member to hunger.

This is where we need to go into this - eyes wide open, and make sure that we in the United States understand what we do here doesn’t just affect us here in the United States-- it has positive impact around the world. We need to make a difference. The Innovation Imperative doesn’t only apply to us here in the United States. It applies around the world. And we need your help. It’s what made our country great, it’s what made agriculture great, and it will take us to the point where we can get closer to peace and security around the world and continue to live in the greatest country in the world, the United States of America. Thank you.