

Senator Jerry Moran
Questions for the Record
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, Insurance & Data Security
“Technology in Agriculture: Data-Driven Farming”
November 14, 2017

Question 1. As administrator of the Ag Data Transparency Evaluator, you are familiar with the lack of trust and confusion that many farmers experience in identifying what exactly is done with data collected from their land. Can you please describe considerations among industry stakeholders that led to publishing the “Core Principles” that are incorporated into the Evaluator?

Answer: The main drivers behind the “Core Principles” for ag data were the concerns from farmer-members of national farm organizations, such as American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union, National Corn Growers, National Association of Wheat Growers, American Soybean Association, and National Sorghum Producers. These organization spearheaded the effort to develop the Core Principles because their members wanted a basic framework around how ag data is collected and shared.

Question 2. Your testimony states that only nine companies (including Farmobile) are currently approved as “Ag Data Transparent” according to the Ag Data Transparency Evaluator’s formal process. Why have not more companies voluntarily completed the evaluation, especially given the fact that nearly 40 companies participated in drafting the “Core Principles?”

Answer: This is a question best addressed to those companies that have not participated. I can only speculate as to their delay in participation. My belief is that these companies want more control over farmers’ data than they are willing to publicly admit. Therefore, it is easier to remain quiet and say nothing than subject themselves to the Ag Data Transparent process.

Question 3. How can we incentivize more active participation by industry stakeholders to complete this evaluation?

Answer: I think the fear that Congress might step in and regulate the privacy and collection of ag data is something that will drive more companies to participate. As the value of the Ag Data Transparent brand increases over time, that will drive more participation as well.

Question 4. As agricultural data becomes more valuable to entities outside of the farmers that collect it, data security concerns are likely to grow exponentially while criminals with all types of motives seek to illegally gain access to and capture privately-owned data. How do you foresee data security practices in the agricultural industry evolving as a result?

Answer: Data security in the ag data space must progress at the same rate as data security in the non-agricultural space. Ag tech companies should not think that they are immune to security challenges.

Question 5. Are there any specific security traits to agricultural data that need to be accounted for steps going forward?

Answer: Ag data can contain proprietary information, which makes it different than other types of consumer-type data that may not be proprietary.

Question 6. In a 2016 poll conducted by the American Farm Bureau Federation, regarding the loss of control over downstream uses of data, sixty-six percent of the farmers polled expressed concern about not being compensated for the potential benefits from the use of their data beyond the direct value they may realize on their farm. Meanwhile, sixty-one percent of the farmers were concerned that agricultural technology providers (ATPs) could use their data to influence market decisions. Which of the two concerns do you believe is the greatest threat to farmer profitability and well-being, and what should be done to alleviate these concerns?

Answer: I believe the greatest threat to the farmer is that ATPs will be able to influence the ag markets by using ag data, but without making that same ag data available to farmers. That would put certain holders of information in a superior position to the average farmer.

Question 7. As more and more firms enter the agriculture-technology space and interact with data used by and/or generated by farmers, the need for clarity and consistency on privacy principles is growing. For these new entrants, can you suggest any best practices these firms should engage upon to ensure their data privacy procedures properly convey the data's expected use?

Answer: New firms in the ag data space should do two things when they begin to collect data. First, they should determine their guiding principles for how they intent to treat ag data. Second, they should develop easy to understand data use policies that they can share with farmers that explain how the firm intends to use the farmer's data.

Question 8. As more and more firms enter the agriculture-technology space and interact with data used by and/or generated by farmers, the need for clarity and consistency on privacy principles is growing. For these new entrants, can you suggest any best practices these firms should engage upon to ensure their data privacy procedures properly convey the data's expected use?

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Question 9. While much of the data we discussed in the hearing is generated on farm and captured by farmers or their equipment, significant quantities of data is publicly available and critically important to inform risk modeling, yield prediction, etc. in both the public and private sector. How can we encourage the continued use of this type of data, and even grow our sources, while ensuring that farmers understand their role in this process?