



# HANNAH HIGHFILL

## Matched with

State Innovation Exchange (SiX)



## Hannah's Story

I spent a decade as an ethnographer, in villages, kitchens, and belief systems, always asking the same question: who gets left out of the systems meant to serve them?

That question followed me into AI research at Google, where I studied how people actually use technology, not how engineers imagined they would. The gap was almost always the same. A tool gets built around the world its builders assume they understand, not the world as it actually is.

I saw it most clearly in a system built to help nurses in rural India flag high-risk pregnancies. The intention was good. But already overworked nurses were handed one more task, entering data into a system that barely worked, on top of patients who couldn't wait. The predictions meant to catch high-risk cases were only as good as the broken data feeding them.

That gap, between what a system assumes and what people can actually do, is everywhere. It's in AI and it's in policy that never asks a farmer or producer what their bottlenecks to feeding their communities actually are.

I'm raising support to build an important piece of the solution: a data management tool that identifies key trends and insights to support state legislators across fifty states working to pass transformative food, agriculture, and rural policy that actually meets the needs of those most impacted.

## The Proposed Project

A lot of the U.S.'s discourse about food and agricultural policy focuses at the national level. But so much of the policy that shapes what farmers can grow, how rural economies function, and what ends up on our plates is written at the state level.

The State Innovation Exchange exists because of that gap. Their CROP network connects and support state legislators (who often work without staff) to work on transformative food, agriculture, and rural policy, but tracking what's moving in a single state, let alone across fifty statehouses, is its own challenge. This project is about giving that network real time visibility into what's coming before decisions get made.

As a Moral Ambition Fellow, I'll be building a national, real-time legislative tracking and advocacy system for SiX using Quorum to monitor food, agriculture and rural policy across all 50 states. The goal is to help SiX's CROP network of state legislators and their partners identify harmful bills early, surface strategic opportunities, and coordinate responses across state lines.

Building it is the easy part. Making it something legislators actually use is the harder, more important question.

At Google, I kept seeing a recurring pattern: when a tool didn't seem to be working well, the instinct was to assume people needed more data. But the people actually using those tools, doing expert, high pressure work, usually didn't need more. They needed the right signal at the right moment to do their job well. A legislative aide tracking bills across fifty statehouses faces the same problem at a much larger scale. AI systems like Quorum are powerful enough to solve it, but only if they are built around how legislators actually work.

That starts with listening. I'll spend time with SiX's network directly, mapping the moments in their week when a piece of information actually changes what they do, and the moments it just adds to the noise. That's what determines how the system gets structured, not a guess at what might be useful.

The result is a tool legislators and advocates will actually use: one that tells them what matters before a bill moves too far to stop, and gives SiX's network the lead time it needs to coordinate across state lines. That's how this project moves SiX's work forward, not by adding another feed to track, but by making the one that matters impossible to miss.

## **The Potential Impact**

Since 2018, the United States has lost over 150,000 farms, an 8 percent decline in less than a decade. Operations earning more than a million dollars a year now control more than a third of all farmland, while the smallest farms, the ones rooted in their communities, keep disappearing.

State legislatures help decide what happens next, through bills on land use, food safety, and who gets to farm and how. Too often, those decisions get shaped by corporate and lobbying interests rather than the rural communities they affect, and most of that legislative activity happens with little public attention and even less staff capacity to track it.

This project gives SiX's CROP network real time visibility into food and agriculture policy across all fifty states, replacing a patchwork of fragmented, after the fact tracking with one coordinated system.

Legislators who once missed harmful bills until they'd already passed will catch them in time to act. States that used to fight these battles alone will compare notes and respond together.

At a moment when small farms are closing at a rate of fifteen thousand a year and the corporate influence in our food system grows, giving the people fighting for a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system the tools to see what's coming, and to act in time, is no small thing. The reverberations of this impact will be felt on plates and in communities across the US.