



Heartland Connect for Trade & Investment Brings Together U.S. and Chinese Leaders to Forge New Partnerships in Agriculture, Food, and Healthcare

September 18, 2025 - Chicago, IL

The inaugural **Heartland Connect for Trade & Investment**, held on August 25, 2025 in Chicago, IL, convened business executives, government officials, agricultural innovators, and healthcare leaders from the United States and China for a landmark day of meaningful dialogue and actionable collaborations.

Co-organized by the U.S. Heartland China Association (USHCA) and China General Chamber of Commerce - Chicago (CGCCC), this premier bilateral gathering built on the success of the annual U.S.-China Agriculture Roundtable and expanded its focus to three critical sectors driving the economic vitality of America's Heartland: agriculture, food, and healthcare.

Over 150 attendees convened at the historic Union League Club of Chicago—many flying in from across the Heartland to participate, with 17 states and Washington D.C. represented. The event hosted a large Chinese delegation of local government leaders, policy makers, and business representatives totaling 45 from Beijing, Shanghai, Henan, Liaoning, and Shaanxi.

The program opened with keynote remarks from USHCA Vice Chair Susan Thornton, CGCCC Chairman Pin Ni, former Illinois Governor “SoyBoy” Pat Quinn, Intersect Illinois Chairman John Atkinson, and senior representatives from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), as well as Consul General Wang Baodong of the Chinese Consulate in Chicago. Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. Xie Feng also delivered video remarks, underscoring the importance of subnational cooperation during a time of global complexity.

Throughout the day, leaders from both countries participated in thought-provoking panels and roundtables:

The *Subnational Leaders Panel* brought together mayors from Illinois and Minnesota along with provincial leaders from Henan and Liaoning to share how local governments are driving trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges. Local leadership and regional collaboration are at the heart of building resilient partnerships between the U.S. and China. Through candid dialogue, panelists discussed how communities in both countries are navigating global challenges, strengthening local economies, and creating practical pathways for cooperation in agriculture, food, and healthcare.

The *Agriculture Leaders Panel* featured industry executives and trade experts who emphasized the critical role of agricultural cooperation in ensuring global food security, sustainability, and climate resilience. Agriculture remains one of the most promising areas for U.S.-China cooperation, offering complementary strengths and vital opportunities for trade, investment, and innovation. Together, panelists tackled a pressing question: *how can we, as ag leaders, work together to get trade moving forward again?* Moderated by Jim Sutter, CEO of the U.S. Soybean Export Council, panelists included Linda Jing, CEO of Genective; Drew Combs, Executive Director of the North Dakota Trade Office; President Cao Derong of the China Chamber of Commerce of Import & Export of Foodstuffs, Native Produce & Animal By-Products (CFNA); Janna Fritz, Chair of the American Soybean Association; Brian Naber, President of



North America & Australia/New Zealand for Bayer Crop Science; and Huang Xianqing, Dean of the College of Food Science and Technology at Henan Agriculture University.

The *Healthcare Leaders Panel* convened experts to discuss collaboration on shared challenges such as aging populations, digital health innovation, and improving health equity. Both the U.S. and China are struggling with similar challenges around better health outcomes for their people. This panel convened experts from both countries to explore what we can learn from each other, identify actionable initiatives going forward, and lay the groundwork for future collaboration for the mutual benefit of the U.S., China, and the world.

Sean Stein, President of the U.S. China Business Council, applauded the effort of the event organizers to rebuild the trust between the U.S. and China from the bottom up. “The U.S. business community stands ready to support trust-building efforts like this for there are extraordinary opportunities to bring much benefit to the peoples of both countries and the world if the two largest economies of the world can work together.”

Afternoon roundtables created opportunities for participants to take these conversations further, exploring practical pathways for cooperation in climate-smart agriculture, biotechnology, investment trends, and patient-centered healthcare solutions.

Throughout the day, agriculture remained a core pillar of the discussion, with a strong showing from U.S. ag leaders and the soybean community. Cao Derong, President of the China Chamber of Commerce of Import & Export of Foodstuffs, Native Produce & Animal By-Products (CFNA), joined Janna Fritz, Chair of the U.S. Soybean Export Council, in highlighting the enduring partnership between U.S. and Chinese farmers. Wang Yongzhong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, along with Wang Yingxin of Yihai Kerry and Zhang Zhixiang of TECH-BANK Food, provided valuable insights from the Chinese side of the agricultural supply chain. U.S. farmer leader Mike McCranie, Vice Chair of the U.S. Soybean Export Council, brought the grower perspective, emphasizing both the challenges and opportunities in keeping agricultural trade resilient despite global headwinds. Their presence underscored the pivotal role of agriculture—and soy in particular—as a foundation for bilateral cooperation and food security.

Jim Sutter, CEO of the U.S. Soybean Export Council, guided multiple sessions with his expertise on trade and market development. He summarized the core learnings in a set of “5 T’s”: “We want to reduce tariffs, reduce tension, increase trust, increase teamwork, and teach each other.”

The midday lunch program included remarks from Christy George, CEO of Intersect Illinois, Phil Clement, CEO of World Business Chicago, and Dr. Li Qingjuan, Director of the Shanghai NGO Network for International Exchanges. Guests also enjoyed a lively violin performance by Oklahoma Cultural Ambassador Kyle Dillingham, showcasing Chinese and American classics such as *The Moon Represents My Heart* and *Devil Went Down to Georgia*.

The evening dinner featured a highlight of the day: the premiere of the [Future Ag Leaders Delegation video](#), which documented USHCA’s recent trip bringing 20 young agricultural leaders from the U.S. Heartland to Beijing and Henan. The delegation’s journey demonstrated the next generation’s commitment to strengthening ties through agriculture, and reminded attendees of the importance of investing in youth exchange to build trust and cooperation. The Future Ag Leaders trip received vital support from the U.S. Soy industry, including the U.S. Soybean Export Council, which championed this opportunity to promote American agriculture on a global stage.



The success of Heartland Connect reflects a growing recognition that America's Heartland is central to finding solutions to address global challenges and opportunities. From ensuring food security to advancing healthcare innovation, leaders at the event reaffirmed their commitment to working together for shared prosperity.