

Statement by
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Agency
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Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to discuss Title XII of the Farm Bill with a specific focus on the Department's equity and outreach efforts. As the Under Secretary for the United States Department of Agriculture's Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area and the Administrator of the Farm Service Agency, we have seen the commitment of our staff across the nation, from our employees who work directly with Indian Country to our staff working in the Deep South, each coast, and many places in between. We have witnessed, firsthand, our employees' commitment to providing equitable access to and delivery of USDA programs and services including our farm loan programs, standing and ad-hoc disaster assistance programs, partnerships with Minority-Serving Institutions, and commitment to developing a diverse workforce.

Production agriculture requires constant innovation and adaptation as farmers and ranchers pursue climate-smart solutions to extreme weather, rural businesses seek new markets, and underserved communities seek trusted partners to tackle systemic issues. Access to information and outreach underpins each of these objectives, and REE and FSA are well-positioned to be partners in providing timely research, tools, extension, and technical support producers need.

We know that family farms and ranchers want to stay on their land, like they often have for generations. That's why we are pleased that President Biden and Secretary Vilsack are strongly committed to supporting equitable outreach to producers, which we believe will define agriculture for coming decades. In August, the Department announced availability of up to \$550 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding to support projects that enable underserved producers to access land, capital, and markets, and train the next diverse generation of agricultural professionals. These provisions aim to help ensure underserved producers have the resources, tools, programs, and technical support that they need to succeed.

National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)

The challenges facing agriculture, human and animal health, food supply and conservation are immense, and helping producers tackle these issues is critical. We must meet those challenges head on and need a robust and diverse agricultural workforce to do so and leverage existing partnerships to help achieve that outcome.

First, this means ensuring that the REE workforce feels supported and able to carry out their mission to provide outreach to producers. REE faced significant staff losses over the past five years, and rebuilding that capacity is a key priority for the mission area. Rebuilding capacity will improve our ability to support the nation's farmers, producers, and consumers from the farm to the dinner table. It's never been more critical to restore our employees' voices and support their

efforts to advance the Agency's mission. The President and Secretary have both been very clear – this new workforce must look like America, particularly to ensure that we are conducting equitable outreach to producers. Investing in inclusion, diversity, and inspiring future generations through formal and informal learning is critical for the future. As an agricultural scientist myself, I know that talent must be inspired, nurtured, and advanced across the country if the United States is to maintain its global leadership in science and technology. That's why Secretary Vilsack recently announced \$250 million for Minority-Serving Institutions that create career development opportunities in agriculture for the From Learning to Leading: Cultivating the Next Generation of Diverse Food and Agriculture Professionals (NEXTGEN) program. This competitive funding opportunity, made possible through investments provided in the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Section 1006, as amended by Section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act, is aimed at attracting, inspiring, and retaining diverse and talented students at minority-serving institutions for careers in food, agriculture, and related disciplines, with an emphasis on federal government sector employment. USDA is dedicated to ensuring equity across its agencies and developing a diverse workforce at all levels.

At NIFA, we know that supporting 1890 Land-grant Universities is vital to making strong, life-changing impact toward Secretary Vilsack's vision. In Fiscal Year 2021, NIFA administered 16 programs specifically for Minority Serving Institutions with over \$250 million in funding; and over \$974 million in total grant awards to 1890 Institutions in the past 5 years. Our 1890 Scholarship program has also invested over \$19 million to support undergraduates majoring in food and agriculture-related degree programs to increase the Next Gen Workforce in food and agriculture. In addition to the scholarships, NIFA also provided \$6 million in support of four Centers of Excellence and more than \$20 million in recent capacity-building grants, ensuring our 1890 Institutions will continue to make major advancements in research, education and Extension. In May, we announced another \$4 million investment in two additional 1890 Centers of Excellence.

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program is also a key component of NIFA's Title XII outreach. This program provides unique educational, training assistance and outreach opportunities to help ensure there will be a new generation of farmers and ranchers — regardless of age or production choice. During Fiscal Year 2021, NIFA awarded over \$50 million for 85 newly funded grants and 55 continuation Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program projects. NIFA is also home to the Enhancing Agricultural Opportunities for Military Veterans Program, which provides grants to non-profit organizations to increase the number of military veterans gaining knowledge and skills through comprehensive, hands-on and immersive model farm and ranch programs. The program encourages the development of training opportunities specifically designed for military veterans. AgVets projects offer onsite, hands-on training and classroom education leading to a comprehensive understanding of successful farm and ranch operations and management practices. Projects may also offer workforce readiness and employment prospects for service-disabled veterans as well.

Farm Service Agency

As we continue to increase and improve access to programs and services, FSA has identified and taken advantage of opportunities to advance equity through our programs and services. We

began by establishing an Equity Officer position which sits in the Administrator's Office. This position provides guidance and the equitable review of the Agency's overall programs and services, including farm program and farm loan program implementation, along with agency efforts focused on supporting and uplifting urban agriculture, beginning farmer and ranchers, heirs' property and fractionated land issues, and Justice 40. The Justice40 Initiative aims to ensure that Federal investments benefit communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by the effects of climate change and underinvestment. The Equity Officer also helps guide the Administrator in ensuring our County Committees approach their work with an equity lens; supporting diverse hiring, recruitment, and retention; and improving the customer experience of all producers who seek assistance from the FSA. In addition to the Equity Officer, FSA will have six equity analysts working in our Outreach Office. These individuals will also work with the Equity Officer and FSA Outreach Director as they work to integrate into their respective Deputy Administrator areas at FSA. Collectively they will:

- conduct data analysis to ensure programs are administered equitably;
- participate in the development of programmatic policies and procedures to avoid unintended consequences in program outreach and delivery; and
- provide detailed analyses of recruitment and retention efforts to ensure the continuation of the best work force in the Federal government.

We've already mentioned FSA's Outreach Office. This office plays a crucial role in coordinating and implementing our Agency-wide activities. These include not just our outreach efforts but also our technical assistance, education, and producer engagement efforts. The FSA Outreach Office also administers millions of dollars in cooperative agreements and partnerships with stakeholders. Our goal is to increase producer participation in FSA programs, with targeted outreach to underserved producers and communities including minority, young, and beginning farmers, ranchers, landowners, and operators who have not participated in or have received limited, and sometimes, zero benefits from FSA programs. This level of targeted outreach will improve and increase access to and participation in FSA, and even other USDA agencies' programs.

One of the many ways we have implemented targeted outreach is through our work across FSA to support beginning farmers and ranchers. At FSA, and throughout USDA, we understand that ensuring the success of beginning farmers and ranchers is critical to the future of the agriculture industry. USDA has a long history of recruiting and supporting the next generation of farmers and ranchers, especially the viability of beginning farmers and ranchers. FSA supports this work by providing dedicated staff to support field employees in reaching new farmers, providing ongoing trainings to employees, creating educational materials targeting beginning farmers, and by collaborating with agencies to reduce barriers to program participation.

This work is underscored by the announcement of our most recent land access program – the Increasing Land, Capital, and Market Access program, through which FSA will administer up to \$300 million in grants and cooperative agreements as authorized by the American Rescue Plan Act Section 1006, as amended by Section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act. Through this program FSA will fund land access projects that help underserved producers by increasing their land access, capital access, and/or market access.

We'll conclude with this: what we have provided is only a brief look into the work we are doing at FSA to ensure equity and increase and improve outreach. We have a full suite of projects and programs that are either currently in the works or will soon be established to meet the diverse needs of our producers and stakeholders. Whether we are addressing Taxpayer Education, utilizing Limited English Proficiency tools to connect with producers, or expanding our programs to meet the needs of urban and suburban producers, FSA is excited about the incredible work our dedicated staff at headquarters and across the nation conduct daily to reach current and future FSA and USDA customers.

Conclusion

In our time leading our respective agencies, we have had the opportunity to travel across the country and meet with many of the people we serve. We have visited states in every region of the country—including in many of your districts—and met with the producers and communities you represent. They are optimistic about the future of agriculture, and so are we. President Biden, Secretary Vilsack, our mission areas, and the rest of the team at USDA are all poised to support a transformation in agriculture—through which we can meet and expand our commitment to leveling the playing field for farmers and ranchers as they work to feed the world. I look forward to working with the Subcommittee and full Committee to support this mission.