

# USDA Equity Commission

## Public Meeting #5: Written Comments

The following questions/comments were submitted via email between March 3, 2023 – July 15, 2023, in response to the Federal Register Notice for the Fifth Public Meeting of the Equity Commission held June 27, 2023, through June 29, 2023. The written comments are sorted first by date and then alphabetically by last name. All attachments provided are included at the end of the document.

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## 1. Paula Pete

**Received by Email: 03/03/2023**

Improvement needed across the Board in the following areas:

1. Slow loan processing causing families to risk losing homes
2. Loan processors refusing to explain the homeownership process, communicate with clients or advise clients on ways to qualify for a USDA Home Loan
3. Relying on loan packagers to serve as loan Originator.
4. Lack of communication with stakeholders, partners, operate as though they are on an island to themselves.
5. Communication with clients is often confusing, loan processing progresses, only after clients send email and or text messages
6. Employ, recruit qualified loan origination staff, better train seasoned staff, require staff to comply with regulations and timelines and attend fair housing trainings
7. Review number of complaints filed nationwide and demand better customer service
8. Reprimand those who continue to show racist, discriminatory behaviors
9. Consider partnering with Bank CRA Departments to qualify clients for the 502 loans
10. Fund Hud Certified Housing Counseling Agencies to recruit, inform, perform outreach, and educate Rural Families

Rural Development has always been a word-of-mouth type of program. Sometimes, word of mouth is the best form of advertisement. In our State, the old guard and political appointments have stymied progress, but we've managed to work around it to help our families access the best mortgage program for low-wealth families living in the Southeast region of the State. Hopefully, our recommendations will help to remove housing barriers that continue to plague this State.

I Trust this administration will continue to enforce equity driven laws that prevent economic discrimination.

## 2. Tameka Maxwell

**Received by Email: 03/11/2023**

Are you working on removing that barrier or looking at adding 200-300 plus to people of color specific Black Americans so that we qualify for these programs!!?!?

## 3. Sinclair Williams

**Received by Email: 04/17/2023**

Hello recently I tried to find grants for the beginning minority farmers only to find out there's no grants of that kind. Then I tried for the underprivileged program and didn't qualify, I don't quite understand why.

#### 4. David Neville

**Received by Email: 05/08/2023**

I have applied for EQIP High Tunnel (HT) cost share for multiple years. (I farm in Henry Co Kentucky). Though a FOIA I received a report on HT contracts (838 in Ky 2017 - 2021). None were reported for Henry Co.

I am rural, seasoned farmer, a senior (65+), and a veteran. While being a Veteran is listed on the application this category has no impact on scoring.

I feel effectively shut out of the opportunity to receive HT because of my demographics.

#### 5. Jean Public

**Received by Email: 05/31/2023**

The USA population never asked for this law, and it is out of order. this agency should not be funded. This is in fact a discriminatory agency trying to find ways to punish white people and never give them jobs anymore. president Biden is making law all by himself without the congress passing laws, which is where the laws should come from, and President Biden appears to be demented in his administration of the presidency so his executive orders cannot be trusted as being valid law. When tested at the court it could be shown to be unconstitutional. there is no reason for this commission or its thinking this is law when it is only an executive order. it should not be funded. this comment is for the public record.

#### 6. Hill Jack

**Received by Email: 06/02/2023**

Keep pissing away my tax money you worthless bastards.

#### 7. Hillary Goodgame

**Received by Email: 06/13/2023**

I am a BIPOC farmer. I want to take this opportunity to provide feedback regarding my experience in applying as a first-time farmer and rancher for a land purchase loan. According to USDA and FSA, processes to equitably access resources are streamlined and easy to use.

The process for BIPOC farmers to equitably access USDA resources feels fraught with a gauntlet of some agents that appear to be not well trained. Some are guided by implicit bias. Agents who we feel intentionally provided misinformation and no guidance during the application process or worse yet are feigning providing USA services while acting with malice as they delay, misguide, and deny applicants.

Specifics:

An FSA loan officer within my state scanned my personal and business credit report from the FSA records system. He sent it to himself then attached it to an email distributing identifiable information in the process to his chain of command. The FSA officer next wrote an official FSA reply regarding my FSA application for a new loan. Within the email he proceeded to discuss items on this credit report.

Another agent, my direct loan officer, contacted my lending institution to discuss information that was within the FSA reporting system. Potentially violating rules surrounding secure identifiable information. The loan officer who wrote the email was berating, dismissive and threatening in both tenor and tone

during my prior interactions with him. The impression he left me with was a thinly veiled threat that he had the ability to reject my FSA loan application at will. Also, he had implied the reach of his influence will be used to actively encourage others to dismiss my current farm loan application. Furthermore, I believe that him blatantly impugning my reputation is a threat to my future ability to equitably access resources and technical assistance from other USDA programs.

Based on the preponderance of his errant behaviors toward me as a client of UDSA, I can reasonably assume that if he has done this to me as a BIPOC farmer, there are others that have encountered such and not had the information to seek recourse. His unabashed arrogance and cavalier attitude reflect the existence of a pattern and practice of bias, abuse and disregard of the rights, dignity, and equitable availability of opportunities to BIPOC farmers. FSA and other USDA agencies profess to encourage and support our participation in programs. This should not be the experiences and treatment received.

I have complied with and completed every requested document and step associated with the FSA new farmer application checklist. The loan officer initiated a personal vendetta in writing and weaponized the office of FSA to cast a shadow of negative bias against my application.

Has my overall experience with the FSA been consistently shaded with negativity. No, however my FSA journey has been perforated by receiving partially correct information or just outright misinformation. Have there been repeated roadblocks and even now outright discouragement, stereotyping, disrespect, dismissal, and denigration? Yes.

This entire experience has provided me with invaluable insight into the importance of demonstrating that BIPOC farmers can succeed with FSA. It has also highlighted the ongoing issues faced by farmers that look like me a person who is a triple representative of the special populations historically left out of these spaces. And those who participate in USDA, FSA and other conferences for BIPOC farmers and special populations need a basic level of professionalism.

These types of interactions can convey biases. Bias that leaves clients with sentiments of distrust of the system created to serve them. Some charged with serving and supporting seem to be dismissive and reflect open disdain. How can equitable access to government resources occur in this climate? Such negative experiences and interactions can culminate in further undeserving the special populations within the conversation of equity. It is disheartening to witness let alone experience the continued barriers when we are seeking the promised help and support from the USDA, FSA, and other agriculture-related agencies.

Nevertheless, I remain committed to acting promptly and adhering to all the rules and regulations governing my loan application process. I expect to be treated fairly, with dignity, and respect throughout the remainder of this journey. Despite the challenges, I still maintain the belief that winning with FSA is possible.

Signed,

A BIPOC Farmer

## 8. Janice Smith

**Received by Email: 06/13/2023**

My comments on the issue of agriculture equity are many. The disparities began way before my birth and has cascaded to this very moment. The very reason that there is a subcommittee says that something is out of hand, so let's study it so we can fix it. At least that is my hope. My family were sharecroppers, and the system did not work for us. My dad was only able to buy 2 acres of land in 1968. After 11 of his 13 children migrated to the north with all 6 sons making a detour to military service. He farmed on the 1 acre without assistance and worked a full-time job. He grew every vegetable available and plowed for other neighbors who wanted to plant a garden. The system did not work for him. I was 23 years old when I bought my 60 acres. We pulped the wood, and we sold the timber. I met with USDA back then and there was no help for me. Recently I discovered McIntosh SEED who threw out a lifeline and I am hopeful. My local USDA has given some assistance, but they are not forthcoming with programs and information. I feel tolerated not respected. I am way behind my peer white farmers, and I won't catch up. The system did not work for me. I am a retired teacher of 72 years. I am determined to work my plan for my land.

## 9. Allison Bunyan

**Received by Email: 07/11/2023**

Hello,

I am a Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow at Bread for the World's Policy & Research Institute.

I recently conducted informational interviews with various Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) grantees and subgrantees and am currently developing recommendations for how to improve GusNIP. One recommendation relates to the USDA Equity Commission prioritizing GusNIP in their research.

I'm emailing because before I make recommendations, I'd like to check up on the status of the Equity Commission. Will the Equity Commission be made permanent in the farm bill? I could not quite tell from the Commission's website.

## 10. Vincent Warnock

**Received by Email: 07/12/2023**

Hello!

Preface:

I would like to apologize ahead of time just in case I'm not reaching the right individuals who could answer my questions and respond my concerns. If this isn't the right email to contact the Equity Commission with my inquiries, please do forward this to the right person/people. I also want to apologize for the length of the email. I understand that some of these questions might be tough to answer or have no answer. I mean well, and I'm curious person who wants to better understand how

the Commission functions and hopefully maintains its effectiveness for years to come. (Because I'm super happy it exists, and I want its impact to be far-reaching and sustained!)

#### Background:

I'm a federal employee working out of the ARS branch of the USDA. Recently, I've become aware of and more interested in the USDA's DEIA commitments and efforts. I'm non-binary, have a neurodivergence, and additional physical disabilities. I have become a lot more courageous and hopeful under Biden-Harris administration's DEI initiatives. I too want to make my own workplace as well as ARS more equitable and safer for underserved individuals in public communities as well as its employees.

#### Concerns:

In educating myself about the USDA's DEIA commitments, I came across the Equity Commissions and its Equitable Action Plan. I loved most of its goals and actions, but some were quite vague to me. To me, some goals were hard for me to understand on how they would specifically support one or more underserved communities.

The Action Plan was also pretty ambiguous to how it was going to support LGBTQ+ individuals.

Per EO14035, it requested that all governmental departments implement agency-wide commitments to provide more equitable access to programs, healthcare, insurance coverages for LGBTQ+ individuals and families. It also stressed a cultural commitment to implement more gender-inclusive language, respect for all pronouns, and gender non-conforming markers on federal forms.

While I have been happy to see some progress on the USDA's end to make these changed, I was a bit surprised that this wasn't formally addressed in the Action Plan or goals of the Commission.

#### Questions:

With that experience/perspective in mind, I have a list of questions about how the Commission is measuring its own success of reaching the USDA's Equitable Action Plan goals and genuinely meeting the requirements of EO 13985, EO 13988, and EO 14035.

1. How is the USDA Equity Commission measuring their progress in achieving their goals, and how frequently are they evaluating the impact of their actions/commitments? Where or from whom are they collecting this data?
2. Is USDA Equity Commission personally checking-in and communicating with the underserved individuals it is trying to better support, and are they verifying that their actions are both working and still equitable?
3. Ideally, equitable progress stresses a needs-based approach to better support underserved communities. Why did the USDA Equity Commission chose a five-year plan? Or rather, what flexibilities are there in the Equitable Action Plan if the current action plan becomes outdated or recognizes that its priorities need to change before its allotted five years has passed?

4. How is the USDA Equity Commission making sure that individual branches/agencies (ex. ARS, OASCAR, etc.) of the USDA are in fact enacting and enforcing the DEIA standards laid out by the USDA Equitable Action Plan?

5. Where can a person or group of folks report systematic or historic oppression that underserved employees of the USDA may be facing that the USDA Equitable Commission might not be aware of or addressing? And does the USDA Equity Commission have power to help in enacting wide-spread policy or response systems to better and more quickly address the deficits in all staffing offices that current policies may be allowing?

Conclusion:

Honestly, I have so many more questions to ask, but these are my most pressing ones. My preferred form of communication is electronically, and I understand that it might take a while to respond to my super long inquiry. I don't want to overwhelm the Commission with my questions if there are more pressing matters for them to address so take your time responding.

Thank you for your time.