

February 19, 2020

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USDA Representatives
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Latrice Hill

Dear Secretary Perdue,

On behalf of the Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, we are pleased to share some preliminary committee recommendations for your consideration. The Committee formally convened on October 31 - November 1, 2019 in Indianapolis, Indiana. Our members brought a variety of perspectives, experience and passion to the meeting, and two issues emerged as paramount starting points from our initial discussion. While we look forward to providing more detailed policy recommendations in the coming months, we feel it is important and timely to share a few initial recommendations for how USDA can more fully increase opportunities for the next generation.

Beginning Farmer Coordinators

As you are aware, Section 12304 of the 2018 Farm Bill establishes Beginning Farmer and Rancher (BFR) Coordinators both at the national and state level to provide outreach and technical assistance to assist BFRs to participate in USDA programs. The Committee recognizes the importance of these new positions and are excited about getting these new positions up and running.

It is also our understanding that the State Coordinators will be a collateral duty placed on current USDA employees who will continue to hold other responsibilities, outside of the duties assigned to them as the newly appointed State Coordinator. However, in order, for these positions to be successful, they will need to carry a significant burden in helping USDA develop state plans on how best to identify the challenges new farmers face and how best to improve outreach and targeted assistance to BFRs.

The Committee offers the following recommendations to increase the customer service offered to BFRs within the Department and to ensure the success of USDA State Coordinators. We urge USDA to:

- 1) Expand the capacity of each State Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coordinator to ensure that the position is a full-time position (1 FTE) rather than a collateral duty.** We feel this is necessary given the broad scope of these positions as directed in the farm bill. Specific responsibilities include: a) coordinating technical assistance at the State level to assist beginning farmers in accessing USDA programs; b) developing a State Plan to improve coordination, delivery, and efficacy of USDA programs to BFRs; c) overseeing implementation of the State Plan; d) working with USDA outreach coordinators to coordinate outreach efforts to BFRs throughout the state; and e) coordinating partnerships and joint outreach efforts with other organizations serving BFRs.
- 2) Develop a directive on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers to guide agencies toward action.** The directive should establish coordinated policy for BFR outreach initiatives. It should state the duties of the National BFR Coordinator, State BFR Coordinators and Agency members of the USDA. If applicable, require agencies to formalize the working group representative. Through the working group each agency would identify key program performance indicators to be included in a USDA annual plan.

Beginning Farmer Definition

We also recommend developing a standard definition for a beginning farmer and rancher (BFR) that can be applied consistently across USDA programs and agencies. We recognize that some definitions are statutory and may require changes in the next farm bill, but also feel USDA has an important role to play in developing a universal definition that can work across agencies. A standard definition is needed to ensure that USDA program eligibility is applied consistently, and results are measurable and clearly understood by both farmers and policymakers alike.

A separate but related issue that we urge USDA to look at is when the start of “10 years of consecutive farming or ranching” begins for young farmers. We recommend measuring the 10 consecutive years of farming experience post high school graduation or GRE equivalent, if applicable, to address this issue as part of a consistent definition.

Thank you for your consideration of our recommendations. Our Committee members are honored to have the opportunity to serve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jason Brand". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "J" and "B".

Jason Brand

Chairman

Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers