

USDA Equity Commission, Agriculture Subcommittee, and Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee

Public Meeting #6: Meeting Minutes

October 24-26, 2023

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Equity Commission was convened for its sixth meeting on October 24, 9:00 am Mountain Standard Time, at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona. Co-Chairs Ertharin Cousin and Arturo S. Rodriguez presided over the meeting along with Designated Federal Officer, Cecilia Hernandez.

In accordance with the provisions of Public Law 92-463, the meeting was open to the public from 10:00am to 5:00pm MST on October 24, 10:00am to 5:00pm MST on October 25, and 10:00am to 5:00pm MST on October 26.

Day One – October 24, 2023

Equity Commission Members Present:

- Co-Chair Cousin
- Co-Chair Rodriguez
- Shorlette Ammons (Virtual)
- Todd Corley
- Elizabeth Lower-Basch
- Yvonne Lee
- Dr. Mireya Loza (Virtual)
- Charlie Rawls
- Dr. Ronald Rainey
- Dr. Hazell Reed (Virtual)
- Shirley Sherrod
- Poppy Sias-Hernandez
- Rick Smith (Virtual)
- Toni Stanger-McLaughlin

Agriculture Subcommittee Members Present:

- Dr. Gina Eubanks
- Janssen Hang
- Savi Horne
- Michelle Hughes
- Erica Lomeli Corcoran
- Gary Matteson
- Dr. Alexis Racelis (Virtual)
- Russell Redding
- Shari Rogge-Fidler
- Dr. Jennie Stephens
- Sarah Vogel

Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee Members:

- Valerie (Mann) Beel
- LaTonya Keaton
- Nils Christoffersen (Virtual)

USDA Staff in Attendance:

- Cecilia Hernandez, Designated Federal Officer

- Xochitl Torres-Small, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture
- Dr. Dewayne Goldmon, Senior Advisor for Racial Equity
- Dallas Selle, Office of Budget and Program Analysis
- Gbenga Ajilore, Senior Advisor for the Office of the Undersecretary for Rural Development
- Silvia Fabela, Senior Advisor for the Office of the Secretary

1. Opening of the Meeting

- **Designated Federal Officer (DFO) Hernandez** called to order day one of the 6th Public Meeting of the Equity Commission and took attendance.

2. Introduction

- **Dr. Ronald Marx (University of Arizona Provost)** welcomed the Equity Commission to the University of Arizona in Tucson.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** thanked Provost Marx for the welcome and emphasized the importance of holding the meeting at a research-intensive land-grant Hispanic-serving institution.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** thanked the University for hosting the Equity Commission and expressed gratitude to the public for joining virtually. She reflected on the start of the Commission and the Interim Report and noted excitement for gathering to vote on the final recommendations.
- **DFO Hernandez** reviewed the agenda and provided an overview of the voting procedures for day one of the public meeting.

3. Presentation: Department's Commitment

- **Xochitl Torres Small (USDA Deputy Secretary)** shared reflections on her time as Undersecretary of Rural Development and noted her commitment to equity in her role as Deputy Secretary.
- **Member Matteson** shared that there's an idea that if customer experience at FSA is corrected or guided to be affirming then a host of problems would get solved. Matteson inquired how these problems are getting reported up to quick service requests.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** responded that one way is through the president management's council, which advises the President and Office of Management and Budget (OMB), on where there may be opportunities to improve customer experience. The other way is to improve applications and tools through customer experience research via customer surveys.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked what can be embedded into the recommendations so that they can live on past the current Administration, brought forward to Congress in the Farm Bill, and garners support from career-appointed staff.

- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** responded that USDA provides robust technical assistance for the Farm Bill in the hopes that it will result in a strong bill that helps the Department continue their work. She noted there are other avenues outside of the Farm Bill to institutionalize the work being done, such as the investments of the Inflation Reduction Act and in capturing data that backs up why programs should exist.
- **Member Lee** asked how the Deputy Secretary would instill a different culture beyond a financial commitment so that all data is aggregated for accountability.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** responded that an annual survey along with the census goes out every few years to get a better sense of where people are that need support. She also noted the social vulnerability index goes out as well that can be layered with the rural data gateway so USDA can assess where people are that need support compared with where investments have already been made.
- **DFO Hernandez** added that skilled staff members are doing evaluations on several programs based on new requirements and confirmed this will continue as part of USDA's equity efforts.
- **Member Sarah Vogel** asked if every staff office, specifically the National Appeals Division (NAD) must go through Quarterly Strategic Reviews (QSR).
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** responded that every Mission Area has a QSR, and staff offices are included as a separate Mission Area. She noted that Member Vogel raised an important question regarding how much individual attention is paid to each staff office and that there is opportunity for improvement.
- **Member Sarah Vogel** shared that her question stems from a conversation with NAD on the consideration of discrimination within their office where the Director responded he will not address discrimination issues at NAD.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** followed up that the conversation was regarding a recommendation that herself and Member Vogel have been championing where she recalled the NAD Director said he did not want to change the culture of NAD. She suggested that NAD and Civil Rights cannot be siloed if USDA wants institutional change.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** responded that within Civil Rights there have been delays and challenges and there's work to be done on the culture of accountability. To address this, she noted she's been working closely with Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds to shift the culture. She added that there's been strong coordination between the Office of Civil Rights and the new Office of Diversity for improved internal processes to produce better outcomes across the board.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** asked how we can support thinking about the tools that are in the Evidence Act to ensure that they're being applied with an equity lens.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** responded that there are some good layers of data such as the Social Vulnerability Index and the Distressed Communities Index and that this can be explored more on how to be more specific.

- **Member Racelis** asked what the full Equity Commission can do in the remaining months of their tenure to ensure that the recommendations have a great success rate in the implementation and action.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** responded that there are tools available for robust tracking along with the Equity Action Plans that have very specific commitments across Mission Areas to implement Equity Commission recommendations and provide updates regularly on progress. Additionally, she noted recommendations that require statutory change or Congressional investment that doesn't currently exist will take different types of efforts from other agencies and encouraged stakeholders to address it with those agencies.
- **Dr. Goldman (Senior Advisor for Racial Equity)** added remarks on the importance of determining the metrics of success for the implementation of the recommendations.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** thanked Dr. Goldman for his work supporting the Equity Commission and in holding USDA accountable on the implementation of the recommendations. She then began asking questions of the Equity Commission members.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** asked how can the comprehensive National metrics driven approach be balanced with a local focus on what communities define as success.
- **Member Mattesson** answered that asking communities specifically what they want is the best approach to ensure the metrics fit within their capabilities and increase likelihood of success.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** followed with a story on how solutions don't work unless they are driven by people who know their communities and use capacity that always exists.
- **Member Rainey** suggested a way to ensure things are happening at the local level is to communicate transparently down to the communities and that input comes from those customers. He asked how USDA can interact with local offices so that they know there's an expectation change and how can it be transparently communicated to customers that some options may be available that they aren't aware of.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** noted that the Rural Partners Network does this by identifying folks from rural communities with rural staff who have an Economic Development mindset and can connect them with resources.
- **Member Eubanks** echoed that it's important to share information and the work of the Equity Commission.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** responded that a way to garner information and share it widely is through round tables and connecting with federal organizations along with allowing for open-ended areas on websites to welcome input from the public on what they need for their communities.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** raised the need for somebody at USDA to help tribal communities specifically and referred to the recommendation to elevate the Office of Tribal Nations.

- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** asked the Members what they would like for her to ask at the Quarterly Strategic Review (QSR) meetings to hold Mission Areas accountable.
- **Member Rawls** responded that guidance can be provided in meetings with staff and allow for two-way conversations to provide encouragement and direction on the implementation of the recommendations and address issues raised.
- **Member Redding** responded that communication and public narrative around how Mission Areas are advancing equity is necessary as it legitimizes conversations with stakeholder communities.
- **Member Rogge-Fidler** suggested that policy is about the people, and the Deputy Secretary can ask what farmers and customers are saying at the Quarterly Strategic Reviews.
- **Member Lee** added that work should be done to rebuild trust with emerging communities who do not currently have a relationship with USDA and to expand on transparency on the work the Department is doing by making personal visits and adding a communications component in the QSRs dedicated to this.
- **Member Sherrod** echoed the need to rebuild trust as it is a major hurdle to get farmers to use the programs and services of USDA as they have distrust from historic wrongdoings and that outreach isn't being done to improve these biases of USDA that Black farmers have.
- **Member Horne** suggested that the QSRs become a broader conversation with the community that USDA serves so that the Department can hone-in on what communities need so that it can set up durable solutions for institutional change.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** followed up with noting the leveraging power USDA has and recommended utilizing it to fully implement the recommendations and incentivize the changes that need to happen so that it institutionalizes long-lasting impact.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** repeated what she heard from the Members and acknowledged her role to take in what they've suggested to drive change.
- **DFO Hernandez** closed the session.

4. Presentation: Ethan Orr, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension

- **DFO Hernandez** introduced the next presentation by Ethan Orr, Associate Director for Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Economic Development through the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension.
- **Dr. Ethan Orr** presented on Housing and Community Development, Agriculture and Irrigation of Crops, and Workforce Economic Development.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked what kind of private sector capital was accessed using federal loans.
- **Dr. Orr** responded that it was FSA loans along with farmer investments.
- **Member Racelis** inquired what the future strategy is to make sure there is prosperity for small farmers.

- **Dr. Orr** acknowledged that a way must be found for small farmers to realize economies of scale and reduce their production and conveyance cost to give them access to markets.
- **DFO Hernandez** thanked Dr. Orr for his presentation.

5. Presentation and Deliberation of New Recommendations

- **DFO Hernandez** reminded the members of the ground rules for discussing and presenting the changes to the interim recommendations and presenting new recommendations.

*(Please note: Content in red and contained within asterisks (**)) indicate changes by the Equity Commission Members during the meeting.)*

Recommendation 33: A Pathway to Citizenship

USDA should support implementation of policies that lead to pathways to access citizenship and reunify families.

- **Co-Chair Arturo and Member Lomeli-Corcoran** presented on the new recommendation that USDA should support implementation of policies that lead to pathways to access citizenship and reunify families.

Recommendation 34: Right to Access Agricultural Land

The USDA Secretary should serve as a permanent member of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS).

- a) If the proposed transaction is specifically related to agriculture, the USDA shall convene an interagency task force with its federal partners in Treasury, Homeland Security, and Defense to ensure that governmental reviews would not cause harm to certain Americans because of national origin.
- **Member Lee** presented the new recommendation for the USDA Secretary to serve as a permanent member of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS).

Recommendation 35: Equitable Compensation and Protection for Agricultural Workers

USDA should support a pathway to citizenship, equitable compensation, and adequate protections and rights for all agricultural workers.

- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** presented on the new recommendation that USDA should support a pathway to citizenship, equitable compensation, and adequate protections and rights for all agricultural workers.

Recommendation 36: Equitable Access to Housing Service Programs

Ensure equitable access to Rural Housing Service programs regardless of household immigration status.

- a) USDA should support Congressional action to remove legislative restrictions that limit access to rural housing based on immigration status.
 - b) RHS should review its regulations and sub-regulatory guidance to ensure that they are not imposing any restrictions on access to rural housing based on immigration status that exceed statutory requirements.
 - c) RHS should conduct an education campaign to ensure equitable access to rural housing programs, including outreach to immigrant communities and informing landlords of their responsibilities under fair housing laws.
- **Member Lower-Basch** presented on the new recommendation for USDA to ensure equitable access to Rural Housing Service programs regardless of household immigration status.
 - **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** inquired if there were any concerns for pushback by USDA on the new recommendations.
 - **Co-Chair Rodriguez** responded that they were encouraged to be bold and to develop recommendations that they foresee will drive institutional change and positive impact.
 - **Co-Chair Cousin** asked that the recommendation on a Pathway to Citizenship be refined to say USDA should support the ****passing**** and implementation of policies that lead to pathways to access citizenship and reunify families.
 - **Member Sias-Hernandez** inquired if that meant the only pathway to citizenship would have to go through Congress.
 - **Co-Chair Rodriguez** responded that the President could come out with a directive to address immigration and sidestep legislation on a short-term basis.
 - **Co-Chair Cousin** agreed that an Executive Order could happen but clarified that the recommendations should be written with permanence in mind.
 - **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** added that making the language change that USDA should support passage of policies does not mean it would result in Congressional adoption.
 - **Co-Chair Cousin** responded that she wants to strengthen the language of the recommendation and deferred to Co-Chair Rodriguez on the decision to add “passage” to the sentence.
 - **DFO Hernandez** noted that decisions to change the language can be made on the last day of the public meeting prior to voting.
 - **Member Sarah Vogel** suggested adding ‘creation of policies’ to the sentence as well.
 - **Dr. Goldman** inquired if there are any examples of policies that were examined in the draft of this recommendation or if USDA leadership was involved in conversation regarding what can be included in this recommendation to encourage Congressional passage of Pathways to Citizenship.

- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** noted that policies were not part of this draft, but conversations were had with USDA leadership.
- **Member Lee** added that innovative State-level initiatives were looked at in the drafting of this recommendation.
- **Member Horne** raised the new recommendation on protection of ag workers and asked if USDA could provide resources to State level Departments of Agriculture to make personal heat index devices available to measure impact of heat on farmworkers.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** responded that USDA has generated statistics and information that help determine wage rates and more and noted optimism for levels of support and resources for agricultural workers in the midst of climate change and heat exposure.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** clarified that USDA doesn't have the leverage to defer action that other federal agencies have.
- **Senior Advisor for the Office of the Secretary Silvia Fabela** chimed in that the language in the protection for agricultural workers recommendation can work and shared insight on a pilot program that is directed at improving working conditions for farm workers. She noted that the hope is Congress will examine immigration laws from the 1980s and that employers can work hand-in-hand with farm workers and that there are examples in the way USDA designs programs that can help move the needle in achieving outcomes to help folks on the Pathways to Citizenship.
- **Member Lower-Basch** asked that if the recommendation on Equitable Access to Housing Services should say "agricultural and food systems" in consideration of recent reports about meat packing plants and child labor.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** responded that it makes sense to include in the recommendation.
- **Member Redding** suggested keeping the recommendation on Pathways to Citizenship simple by removing 'implementing' and not including 'passing' and just saying 'support' of policies should suffice. He also suggested for the Equitable Compensation and Protection for Agricultural Workers recommendation to update the justification language to state 'clear and accessible' rather than 'clear and fair.' Additionally, for the Pathways to Citizenship recommendation language, he asked for the justification to refer to USDA specifically rather than 'the government.'
- **Dr. Goldmon** brought attention to the justification language of the new section for all of the new recommendations relating to immigration and noted that the Transatlantic slave trade ban in the 1800s was actually the first immigration law in the U.S. impacting federal legislation.
- **DFO Hernandez** added that revisions can be made to the justifications in the lead up to the publishing of the final report.

6. Discussion on Amendments to Recommendations Passed in June 2023

Recommendation 18: Procurement

Establish a dedicated team within the USDA Office of Procurement and Contracting. This team should concentrate on procurement and supplier diversity, specifically collaborating with the socially and economically disadvantaged agricultural businesses from underserved and underrepresented agriculture communities. To build the requisite capacity and experience for equitable access to the USDA's supplier and procurement programs:

- a. Create a federal advisory council specializing in small business and the agricultural industry.
- b. Increase 8(a) set-aside programs for qualified small agricultural businesses and partner with the SBA to explore an 8(a) category for minority, tribal, and women farm/agricultural businesses that will ease the entry criteria into the program.
- c. Partner with technical assistance programs to help socially disadvantaged small agricultural and food businesses apply for the 8(a) program.
- d. Collaborate with external stakeholder organizations to formulate a resource guide and host workshops. This aids qualifying businesses in documenting their individual social disadvantage narratives.
- e. Partner with the SBA to curate a database of minority, Tribal, and women-owned small agricultural businesses suitable for subcontracting opportunities.
 - i. USDA enters into an MOU to support professional community organizations such as the National Minority Supplier Development Council to build up a base of MBEs in agriculture for government procurement.
- f. Coordinate with the SBA to maintain an updated list of firms known to have breached workplace health and safety regulations, unfair wage practices, provided inadequate housing, and engaged in other unethical behaviors like child labor. Until these issues are addressed, these firms would be ineligible for government contracts.
- g. Release and update a roster of eligible prime and secondary contractors from the USDA, detailing past awards.
- h. The USDA Office of Inspector General should implement a tracking system ensuring prime contractors collaborate with listed subcontractors post contract awards.
- i. The USDA Office of Ombudsman should curate a resource guide focusing on the confidential reporting of potential government contract abuses. This guide should accompany all published procurement and contracting opportunities.
- j. Initiate a 3-year pilot project within the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). This project should select five municipalities based on their consumer and agricultural business diversities. These municipalities should commit that at least 25% of school meal and pantry program purchases come from local underserved agricultural businesses familiar with the cultural practices and dietary needs of their communities. By the project's conclusion, the aim is for 50% of contract funds to benefit underserved and socially disadvantaged agricultural businesses.
 - i. FNS should offer technical assistance, reimbursement flexibilities, and additional funding to address extra costs.

- ii. FNS should collaborate with local or regional stakeholders, including agricultural businesses and community organizations, to pinpoint and assist qualified vendors.
- k. Annually release a report and maintain a publicly accessible live database that shows recipients of USDA funds. This database should be transparent, user-friendly, and should detail contract awards and financial distributions (subsidies, grants, etc.). Additionally, it should incorporate award information about both prime contractors and subcontractors.
 - **Member Lee** presented on the amendments to the procurement sub-recommendations based on feedback from the June public meeting.
 - **Co-Chair Rodriguez** noted that this is a great recommendation that is specific and commends the idea of the pilot project.
 - **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** added that language is needed for Tribes wherever minorities are referenced as Tribes are not considered a minority but rather a political designation. She also suggested combining sub-recommendations g and k and requested adding ****tribal governments**** to municipalities for pilot projects. Member Stanger-McLaughlin also asked for clarity on the Office of Ombudsman as it was understood that it no longer exists.
 - **DFO Hernandez** confirmed that is correct and that the recommendation would have to add an Office of Ombudsman.
 - **Member Sarah Vogel** added that if an Ombudsman person is selected, care would have to be taken to ensure they will actually take action and have authority.
 - **Member Reed** clarified that sub-recommendation e notes ‘women-owned small businesses’ and he understands women as a minority group and suggests removing women for redundancy.
 - **Member Racelis** asked which sub-recommendation is intended to address small, Hispanic farmers and producers that have to oblige by certification requirements.
 - **Member Lee** responded that sub-recommendation (e) addresses minority small businesses.
 - **Member Racelis** responded that resources need to be more readily available for small, Hispanic businesses.
 - **Member Corley** flagged that definitions of minorities do not always include women and suggested keeping that language in sub-recommendation e.
 - **Co-Chair Cousin** asked if additional organizations should be included in the recommendation that would entail farmers. She also suggested for sub-recommendation f to delete ‘firms’ and replace it with ****businesses****.
 - **Member Lee** responded that very few organizations have experience working with underserved farmers and dealing with Government contracting.

Recommendation 2: Land Access

Ensure equitable funding to community-led land access and transition projects.

b. Upon receipt of appropriations, the agencies would implement land-access related data gathering, including the Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land survey that includes data collection on farmer demographics and economic data by county. Report data by county publicly and include median and average rates of participation by race, gender, and ethnicity.

- **Member Hughes** presented on the amendments made to 2b: ****Amend and fund the Land Access and Farmland Ownership Data Collection Land Tenure data collection as authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill to require the National Ag Statistics Service to include in the Tenure, Ownership and Transition of Agricultural Land (TOTAL Survey) survey questions relating to which land is held in absentee ownership; and in heirs property (farm including forest) land held in undivided interests and no administrative authority); and the impact of these farmland ownership trends on the successful entry and viability of beginning farmers and ranchers and the impact of land tenure patterns, categorized by race, gender, and ethnicity; and state, county and region.****
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked if the language should be updated on line four to include all heirs' property not just farmland.
- **Member Horne** responded heirs' property is inclusive of farm and forest land.
- **Dr. Goldman** suggested taking out the parentheses behind heirs' property.
- **Member Stephens** inquired if the parenthesis was intended to include land tenure.
- **Member Hughes** clarified that land tenure was considered but is open to taking out the parenthesis if that would make the recommendation more implementable.
- **Member Horne** noted that land tenure is not covered in the farm bill.
- **Member Hughes** responded that the parenthesis can be removed in the recommendation.

Recommendation 8: County Committees

Address historical and present-day inequitable services by making County Committees more equitable.

- f. Establish at the federal level an advisory or support group composed of internal and external individuals to serve as advocates for producers to understand their complaint and appeals options. The group should establish standard operating procedures for County Committees and performance metrics to be reviewed during the quarterly strategic reviews held by the Deputy Secretary.
- **Member Rainey** presented the tabled sub-recommendation 8f: ****County Executive Directors should be moved to a federal employment grade in order to ensure transparency, oversight, and accountability of county committee disputes in order to build trust and confidence in agency decisions.****

- **Member Sias-Hernandez** asked if there's opportunity to add language that would make this recommendation a federal designation.
- **Member Rainey** explained that there's an issue with county committees electing their Executive Directors and those Director's then oversee their actions.
- **Member Matteson** added that by interrupting the local control by the Executive Director who has other responsibilities to serve the local needs, there would be concern on who then guides the local responsibilities and needs of the community. He suggested evaporating County Committees and not moving it to federal employment.
- **DFO Hernandez** added that FSA Deputy Under Secretary Gloria Montano would be providing an update on the status of County Committees on the third day of the Public Meeting.
- **Member Sarah Vogel** urged the passing of the recommendation by the Equity Commission and noted that it's shocking that County Committee Directors are not currently federal employees as they're paid by federal dollars.
- **Member Sherrod** shared how diversifying the County Committees has not worked as a solution as minorities are often pushed out by the others.
- **Dr. Goldman** echoed the importance of passing a recommendation addressing the future of County Committees.
- **Dr. Eubanks** asked if there could be an interagency affiliation if the Director is a federal employee that is held accountable but ties them locally to the communities.
- **Dr. Goldman** provided an example through Advisory committees or RMAs that mimic this.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested adding to the language to encompass the importance of making a change to County Committees on the federal level.
- **Dr. Rainey** noted that he would make the changes.
- **Member Hughes** requested that the representation language be made stronger and to consider engaging young and beginning farmers.

Recommendations 30, 31, 32: Nutrition Recommendations

- **Member Lower-Basch** drew attention to changes she made to recommendations 30, 31, and 32:

30: **Continue to review and update the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) to reflect the needs of today's consumers, explore options for boosting the minimum benefit and increasing benefits more than annually during periods of high inflation, Support research on whether SNAP enables participants to actually purchase a healthy diet and encourage Congress to consider options including explore options for boosting the minimum benefit and increasing benefits more than annually during periods of high inflation, and consider basing SNAP benefit levels on the Low-Cost Food Plan.**

31: ** Continue to encourage state SNAP agencies to administer SNAP in a way that treats applicants and participants with dignity and respect and to consult with those with

lived experience of poverty as they administer the programs and provide technical assistance on how to do so. USDA should seek legislative authority to hold states accountable for barriers to access and require states to develop processes for beneficiaries to be involved in program and systems design and evaluation. USDA should explore methodologies to report SNAP participation data among eligible individuals disaggregated by race and ethnicity. **

32d: ** Implement proposed changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food packages to better support access to culturally appropriate foods, in consideration of comments received; and continue supporting the participation of underrepresented community providers as WIC vendors. Remove barriers to WIC access, including by supporting Congressional full funding of WIC and extending waivers of physical presence requirements. **

- **DFO Hernandez** closed the session for discussion and moved to voting on the passed interim recommendations to be included in the final report.

7. Equity Commission Deliberation and Voting on Interim Recommendations Passed in February 2023

- **DFO Hernandez** opened this portion of the meeting and explained that the Members of the Equity Commission will deliberate each recommendation, make any necessary edits, and vote before moving to the next recommendation.
- **DFO Hernandez** read over each top-line recommendation that was voted on and passed for inclusion in the Interim Report and has not received any amendments since.
 - **Recommendation 1: Heirs' Property and Fractionated Land**
Provide non-loan options for producers to prevent the creation of heirs' property and fractionated land that would reduce the barriers this type of land ownership encounters when accessing USDA programs.
 - **Recommendation 3: Conservation**
Include equitable climate actions in USDA conservation programs to address environmental justice.
 - **Recommendation 4: Technical Assistance and Outreach**
Establish and/or ensure USDA's external engagement office has the necessary capacity, resources, and skillsets to operate in a robust and centralized manner that will enhance the Department's role and financial investment in organizations (nonprofit, non-governmental, community-based) to provide technical assistance.
 - **Recommendation 5: Subsistence Farmers**
Direct the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to include the varying types of farmers and ranchers in the next Census of Agriculture to account for the nature of many traditional forms of how agriculture products are produced, sold,

or exchanged. In addition, NASS should evaluate the threshold used to quantify a qualifying farmer and provide education on alternative forms of documentation that can be used for eligibility. The Secretary should also direct NASS to research and consider changing the definition of a farm.

- **Recommendation 6: Farm Service Agency Loan Programs**
Transform FSA into a customer service organization that provides equitable treatment for all.
- **Recommendation 7: Base Acres Modernization**
Modernize base acre policies to address the concern of producers' inability to receive necessary program payments that help stabilize on-farm revenue during economic downturns with commodity markets.
- **Recommendation 9: Institutionalize Equity**
Institutionalize equity within the Department to drive compliance, accountability, and culture change across all of USDA.
- **Recommendation 10: Legislation to Ensure Accountability for Equity**
Support legislation to provide standing authority and accountability for the Secretary and senior leadership to carry out a continuous program to improve the equitable availability and distribution of services and program benefits to all eligible American residents.
- **Recommendation 11: Elevate the Office of Tribal Relations**
Elevate the Office of Tribal Relations from its current office to become The Office of the Assistant Secretary of Tribal Affairs.
- **Recommendation 12: Language Access**
Ensure equitable language and culturally competent access to USDA services.
- **Recommendation 13: Customer Experience**
Improve Customer Experience through institutionalizing customer feedback, service delivery, and program design.
- **Recommendation 14: Annual Compliance Reviews**
Fund, establish, and maintain accountability for the execution or conduct of annual civil rights compliance reviews across all USDA agencies.
- **Recommendation 15: Equity Audits**
Under existing authorities, conduct periodic system-wide audits to look at equity across USDA's services. Publish results on the USDA website and release underlying data to independent researchers. Analyze program complaints and make use of findings.
- **Recommendation 16: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights**
Transform and adequately fund the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR).
- **Recommendation 17: Private-Public Partnerships**
Enhance private-public partnership authorities that empower program leaders across thousands of offices and in headquarters to pursue innovation independently and rapidly, but with a central mechanism to manage funding,

monitor results, and disseminate/scale best practices to create a shared responsibility. Such an authority can be established as a new program through Congress and Secretarial authority, and/or by leveraging existing authorities.

- **Recommendation 19: Staffing Farmworkers' Work**
Institutionalize equity compliance and culture change across all of USDA by appointing a senior official with dedicated staff (career or political) with decision-making authority and access to senior level officials and the resources needed to serve farmworkers, their families, and the organizations that serve them. The senior official would serve as the USDA representative to interagency workgroups regarding farmworkers and associated issues.
- **Recommendation 20: Interagency Farmworker Service Council**
Issue a recommendation from the Secretary that the White House pursue the establishment of an Interagency Farmworker Service Council for infrastructure coordination on intergovernmental work processes. The Council should be convened by USDA and include the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, the Department of Education, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, the Department of Treasury, and private sector partners.
- **Recommendation 21: Farmworker Nutrition**
Ensure farmworkers and their families have access to all USDA food and nutrition programs.
- **Recommendation 22: Farmworkers' Access to USDA Programs**
Direct the USDA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) to conduct a report or a joint report from USDA and Department of Labor (DOL) on farmworker living and working conditions that are essential to understanding the needs of farmworker populations. The report shall also look at farmworker access to USDA programs. OIG and DOL should consult with farmworker organizations and farmworkers themselves and they must use innovative research methods to ensure anonymity, accurate data, and protection against retaliation.
- **Recommendation 23: Funding for Farmworkers**
Pursue legislation and utilize existing authority to ensure funding that benefits farmworkers and their families.
- **Recommendation 24: The Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program**
Seek increased funding for the Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP) and remove the competitive nature of the current application process to allow for more collaboration across Tribal extensions.
- **Recommendation 25: 1890s Institutions Matching Requirements**
Address disparities and difficulties with 1:1 matching requirement for 1890s land grant universities.
- **Recommendation 26: Cooperative Extension Service Programming**
Increase funding and support to expand Cooperative Extension Service programming to marginalized communities through cooperative agreements and

more descriptive language within Requests for Applications (RFAs) for competitive funding to facilitate collaboration with minority serving agricultural colleges and universities.

- **Recommendation 27: Cooperative Agreements and Competitive Grants**
Increase financial support (in the form of cooperative agreements and competitive grants) and allocate equitable funding to federally designated minority serving institutions (including 1890 Land Grant colleges, 1994 TCUs, HSACUs, and community-based organizations).
 - **Recommendation 28: Distinctions that Allow Access to Endowments and Appropriations**
Recognize minority serving agricultural institutions who are making important contributions towards equitable access to information, education, and capacity to underserved (minority) students, farmers, ranchers, etc. The distinction should allow access to endowments and annual appropriations available to other land grant universities—resources intended to support and enhance regionally relevant research, access to education and other capacity building, and community engagement.
 - **Recommendation 29: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**
Support legislative action to remove eligibility restrictions on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that disproportionately limit access to nutrition supports by BIPOC.
- **DFO Hernandez** read each recommendation and members voted to pass or not pass it.
 - The Commission voted to approve the 26 recommendations for inclusion in the final report.

8. Closing of Public Meeting Six Day One

- **Co-Chair Rodriguez and Co-Chair Cousin** provided closing remarks.
- **Deputy Secretary Torres Small** thanked the Equity Commission members for their participation and commitment to the work.

DAY 1 MEETING AJOURNED

Day Two – October 25, 2023

Equity Commission Members Present:

- Co-Chair Cousin
- Co-Chair Rodriguez
- Todd Corley
- Elizabeth Lower-Basch
- Yvonne Lee
- Dr. Mireya Loza (Virtual)
- Charlie Rawls
- Dr. Ronald Rainey
- Dr. Hazell Reed (Virtual)
- Shirley Sherrod
- Poppy Sias-Hernandez
- Rick Smith (Virtual)
- Toni Stanger-McLaughlin

Agriculture Subcommittee Members Present:

- Dr. Gina Eubanks
- Janssen Hang
- Savi Horne
- Michelle Hughes
- Kari Jo Lawrence
- Erica Lomeli Corcoran
- Gary Matteson
- Dr. Alexis Racelis (Virtual)
- Russell Redding
- Dr. Jennie Stephens
- Sarah Vogel

Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee Members:

- Cheryal Hills
- David Carrasquillo-Medrano
- Lakota Vogel (Virtual)
- Valerie (Mann) Beel
- LaTonya Keaton
- Curtis Wynn
- Larry Holland (Virtual)

- Nils Christoffersen (Virtual)
- Doug O'Brien

USDA Staff in Attendance:

- Cecilia Hernandez, Designated Federal Officer
- Dr. Dewayne Goldman, Senior Advisor for Racial Equity
- Dallas Selle, Office of Budget and Program Analysis
- L'Tonya Davis, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer
- Xochitl Torres-Small, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture
- Gbenga Ajilore, Senior Advisor for the Office of the Undersecretary for Rural Development

1. Opening of the Meeting

- **Designated Federal Officer (DFO) Hernandez** called to order day two of the 6th Public Meeting of the Equity Commission meeting, took attendance, and provided an overview of the agenda for the day.
- **Co-Chair Ertharin Cousin** provided opening remarks and welcomed the Equity Commission members and the public commenters to the meeting. She expressed her appreciation for the Equity Commission's commitment to finalizing the approval of the recommendations to be voted on and included in the final report.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** provided opening remarks and expressed his personal connection with the venue for the meeting taking place in Arizona and its ties to the history and impact of Cesar Chavez. He applauded the hard work of the RCED recommendations that will be deliberated upon and to keep rural communities at top of mind during the day's discussions.
- **Dr. Goldman** provided opening remarks and encouraged the members to remember the goals for the day and to think about the future and longevity of the recommendations. He then introduced USDA Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer L'Tonya Davis.

2. Presentation: State of Affairs of Internal Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility

- **L'Tonya Davis (Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer)** provided an update on progress made by USDA through internal diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.
- **Member Corley** sought clarification and provided a point of clarity on how the Commission voted on the recommendation regarding institutionalizing the office and where it reports. He noted that while Chief Davis's slide on institutionalization showcased a process that it is currently being established, he expressed that as a commissioner that this process is expected to be done.
- **DFO Hernandez** clarified how USDA has internally divided the work and noted that L'Tonya's team is focused on internal DEIA and USDA having a diverse and inclusive

workforce whereas the Program Equity is reviewing USDA's programs and how they are designed, which is what the equity team Member Corley is referring to.

- **Member Corley** recommended that the structure of the internal DEIA is sound and set with a proper accountability structure. He stated that the work that Internal DEIA is leading supports all of the other pillars.
- **Chief Davis** acknowledged Member Corley's recommendation.
- **Member Poppy Sias-Hernandez** celebrated Chief Davis' work with internal DEIA. She then asked about the relationship of the internal DEIA team and the equity action team.
- **DFO Hernandez** clarified that herself, Dr. Goldman, Chief Davis, and Margo Schlanger are all working together as the equity team.
- **Dr. Goldman** added that while the three pillars of the Department's equity team are there, from the Equity Commission, to Program Equity and Internal DEIA, there is a constant need to evaluate these pillars and repeat the evaluation cycle to achieve equity.
- **Member Yvonne Lee** asked about the matrix and how it was developed to ensure recruitment would be engaged with equity. She also asked if during the development of the matrix if they considered how the external stakeholders are involved in the process, such as an external council to look at the matrix and ensure that the potential hires or staff up for promotion can be engaged in the hiring and promotion process.
- **Chief Davis** responded that they are working hiring a coordinator to make this happen.
- **Dr. Goldman** reminded the Equity Commission that their feedback in holding the Department accountable is highly valued.
- **Member Toni Stanger-McLaughlin** commented on the authority of the DEIA office to be embedded in all of USDA's mission areas and that the EC has a recommendation similar to that for the Office of Tribal Relations and within each part of USDA to elevate a Native American position to serve as an advisor for each agency. She asked Chief Davis to keep in mind that tribal governments are different than minority groups and that they are a political designation rather than a racial designation and that the reason for tribal representation in advisory positions within all parts of USDA is to help coordinate government-to-government relationship and trust and responsibility. She also asked how the DEIA office will assist with the office personnel management in hiring minorities and expressed concern that there will be legal pushback in inclusive hiring based on the recent Supreme Court ruling. She then offered a suggestion for the DEIA office to embed minimum requirements that surround topics such as having familiarity or being able to communicate with certain communities.
- **Chief Davis** acknowledged Member Stanger-McLaughlin's comment and questions. She responded with one of the office's current projects where they are working to highlight the Department's demographic data dashboards as well as identifying and promoting the various hiring authorities that are available to bring awareness to hiring managers as a way of hiring diversely without specifically calling it out. She also appreciated the idea of

modifying job requirements to attract people who might have that expertise and skills as another way to advance the Department's diversity.

- **Dr. Goldmon** acknowledged Member Stanger-McLaughlin's mentioning the recommendation involving the changes in the Office of Tribal Relations and clarified that the Secretary will provide an update during his comments tomorrow and that this specific recommendation will require a legislative change based on the 2018 Farm Bill. He said that he wanted to point this out because this is a good example where if the team is going to advance equity, recommendations such as this will need legislative change.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** acknowledged that that recommendation is not going anywhere currently based on the Farm Bill.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** celebrated Chief Davis's accomplishments and asked her about her pain points for the DEIA office and how the office can use the Equity Commission's help to move forward.
- **Chief Davis** responded that hiring, especially in terms of timeframes and finding qualified people, is the challenge and asked if the Commission can help seek knowledgeable people in DEIA. She also acknowledged Member Corley's previous comment where there is uncertainty in the political atmosphere should the administration change where there may be little support for DEIA. She then asked the Equity Commission to consider the type of support they can provide in the event there might be a change in administration.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** thanked Chief Davis for her presentation. He then asked if the DEIA office staff might need more resources do carry out the enormous work needed for the office.
- **Chief Davis** replied that as she is hopeful that the current 11 staff her office employs is just the beginning stages and continue to show the value of the DEIA work to continue to ask for additional resources.
- **DFO Hernandez** added that at the Department level, there are dedicated staff under each of the mission areas and agencies that share a community of practice for DEIA. She also stated that the intent for the DEIA institutionalization is to teach staff members who may not hold an official DEIA title how to embed equity in their everyday work.
- **Dr. Goldmon** added that DEIA will be more sustainable in the Department once equity is embedded throughout each agency and mission area so that there will be no need for a single person focused on equity.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked if DEIA is now being institutionalized in the Department so that in the future, this process continues to stay.
- **Dr. Goldmon** responded that the equity team is working to instill this process and that once customers begin to feel and see the improvements, they will begin to see equity as an expectation. He affirmed that the actions that stem forth from the Commission and subcommittees will become more ingrained.

- **Member Silas-Hernandez** asked Chief Davis about the connection between her office’s internal work and the regional offices.
- **Chief Davis** responded stating that there is an internal DEIA coordinating group comprised of representatives from various agencies and mission areas that meet monthly to discuss projects and initiatives. She also stated that because the DEIA office is currently undergoing the onboarding and hiring process for employees, there hasn’t been a real connection with the regional offices at this time. However, she affirmed the intent is to have a member of the DEIA team to serve as a liaison with all the mission areas and agencies for regular interaction and connection to determine how the office can support initiatives.
- **Member Corley** requested Chief Davis to attend future Equity Commission meetings to provide an update on the DEIA infrastructure and emphasized that the equity work will be more impactful based on structural security within the Department.
- **Member Wynn** thanked Chief Davis for her presentation and asked if there has been any consideration for outside consultants or third parties familiar with DEIA work who can be used as an additional resource for the DEIA office.
- **Chief Davis** confirmed that she is working with outside consultants who have specialization in DEIA working with her team on project management, data work, and strategic communication.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested a small advisory group of DEIA professionals from the private sector as there is a growing interest from leaders in the DEIA space.
- Chief Davis welcomed the idea.
- **Member Lower-Basch** provided the remark to Chief Davis that she is encouraged to reach out the Equity Commission should she need any assistance or further resources.

3. Presentation: The State of Agriculture in the Southwest

- **Dr. Goldmon** introduced Charlene Fernandez, State Director, RD (AZ), Keisha Tatem, State Conservationist, NRCS (AZ), and Ginger Sykes Torres, State Executive Director, FSA (AZ).
- **Charlene Fernandez (Arizona State Director of Rural Development)** presented an overview of USDA’s Rural Development investments and operations in Arizona.
- **Dr. Goldmon** introduced Ginger Sykes Torres, (State Executive Director with FSA for Arizona).
- **Ginger Sykes Torres (State Executive Director, FSA)** presented an overview of USDA’s Farm Service Agency investments and operations in Arizona.
- **Dr. Goldmon** introduced Keisha Tatem, State Conservationist with NRCS for Arizona.
- **Keisha Tatem (Arizona State Conservationist, NRCS)** presented an overview of USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service investments and operations in Arizona.
- **Dr. Goldmon** asked about the Arizona Rural Development map, if the large size of the 15 counties across the state presents any management challenges.

- **Director Fernandez** stated that she and her colleagues work closely together to promote and educate holistically on rural development, farm services, and state conservation. She mentioned that her team additionally manages a data tracker to compare notes and share information.
- **Director Sykes Torres** added that Arizona’s geomorphology creates a challenge to travel and educate but also that it is worth for her and her USDA colleagues to make the drive and visit producers.
- **State Conservationist Tatem** added in reference to broadband and Wi-Fi where she emphasized access to technology for not only USDA employees to visit producers but also for producers in rural areas to have access as well.
- **Member Rawls** commended the presentation and asked what is missing when one says, “equity is making all of one’s programs and services available to everyone that is eligible.”
- **Director Fernandez** responded stating that equity is an intentional discussion that needs to take place every day and described how she and her colleagues embed the discussion of equity with their employees.
- **Member Rawls** directed the question to State Conservationist Tatem and Director Sykes Torres.
- **Director Sykes Torres** responded with how equity to her means reaching out beyond the status quo and making the effort of bringing the producers in the door while encouraging feedback. She also mentioned that she trains her employees to treat all costumers with respect and keeping employees happy and confident in where they are in their jobs and making sure they have the resources they need to serve producers.
- **State Conservationist Tatem** provided an example to answer the question. She described a Navajo community that unified with a rotating grazing system among the producers to create this success but also mentioned that the conservation program behind this successful community took seven years for the plan to be written. She noted that timeframes can become the barrier to get a project running.
- **Dr. Goldmon** agreed and stated that equity is about doing what needs to be done to get people to reach people where they are.
- **Member O’Brien** asked for thoughts on the balance of the need to have people and technology resources and what the trajectory looks like for the Arizona RD office.
- **Dr. Goldmon** asked that the members who had their hands raised for questions to state their inquiries and give the presenters time to answer at least one of the questions if there is time or discuss separately during the break as the session is past time.
- **Member Holland** expressed gratitude to the Arizona directors for the customer service through USDA’s Rural Development as they provided to him as a customer in Mississippi. He also emphasized making constituents aware of services. He also asked the directors if there is anything they need to support their effort.

- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked to hear more about the CAMP program NRCS is partnered with the Farm Bureau and if they would be interested in working with the Intertribal Intercultural Council.
- **Member Horne** expressed gratitude of the presenters and directed her question to Director Sykes Torres about the Discrimination and Financial Assistance Program as it emanates from the patterns and practices from FSA on the role of county committees. As a cooperator, she has not seen much Western participation in the program and asked if Arizona farmers and ranchers are using guaranteed loans instead of direct farm and if there are any resources that is needed to reach out to educate about loans to diverse communities across the state.

4. Public Comments

- **Lionel Savage** presented the public commenters.
- The Commission heard comments from:
 - Jeffrey Ratje, AVP Operations for University of Arizona School of Agriculture
 - Paula Daniels
 - Webster Davis
 - Angelica Royal
 - Chloe Waterman
 - Ebony Alexander
- **Mr. Savage** informed members of the public they could submit written public comments to equitycommission@usda.gov and in future meetings they can register to provide an oral comment by visiting <https://www.usda.gov/equity-commission>.

5. Questions for Presentation: Agriculture in the Southwest, Continued

- **Director Hernandez** responded to Member O'Brien's question agreeing that there must be an investment in technology for RD staff and the customer when discussing broadband and access to contacting RD for resources.
- **State Conservationist Tatem** answered the question about the CAMP (Conservation and Mentoring Program) and that every state implements this program to meet their specific needs. For Arizona, she stated that this program allows pairing NRCS employees with farmers to learn more about the industry and its perspectives and issues so that they can write effective conservation plans and create conservation measures for producers.
- **Director Sykes Torres** also highlighted the USDA Tribal Scholars program and Arizona's promotional efforts to fulfill their priority to attain more tribal scholars and bring in more new and diverse candidates.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** called upon Member Horne and Member Holland to reiterate their questions asked prior to the public comments.
- **Member Horne** asked how Arizona RD can implement and develop outreach for farmers on USDA's program redressing historic discrimination and claim for loan processes. She

was curious to know about the rollout status as she expressed concerns about follow-through on the farmers' end to commit to apply for the program based on historic mistrust.

- **Director Sykes Torres** thanked Member Horne for her question and referenced to the audience that the program Member Horne was discussing was 22007 in the Inflation Reduction Act. She stated that 22007 is not administered by their county offices or the state office at FSA but pointed to the website producers can access to apply. She also stated that they have been able to post 22007 information on several web and office locations and that much of the outreach is through action taken USDA's partnerships with outside farm organizations. She also offered further ideas to help support the program.
- **Member Horne** flagged the external conversations on the numbers of participants going out in the West. She thanked Director Sykes Torres for her response.
- **Member Holland** restated his two-part question. He first asked if there is anything the Equity Commission may be missing to accomplish their overall goals. He then asked if there are items the Equity Commission is currently recommending that they would like to see as a first set of priorities.
- **Director Fernandez** responded highlighting the recommendation surrounding the Rural Partners Network and emphasized the importance of the Rural Partners Network in Arizona as the state's most distressed communities are those with people of color and the RPN has opened the door for participating agencies to start conversations of the resources these communities need.
- **Member Holland** invited Director Sykes Torres and State Conservationist Tatem to share a response.
- **Director Sykes Torres** asked the Commission to encourage USDA to work with outside departments and agencies to navigate barriers for producers and provided the example about the loan assistance access barrier for tribal producers.
- **State Conservationist Tatem** noted that there is a struggle when the population of the state is not diverse in appealing to potential employees. There is an additional challenge due to the:
 - Stigma of agriculture
 - The investment it takes to make a career out of State Conservation
 - Convincing young people to pursue a career in agriculture
 - Addressing real cultural issues
- **Member Holland** expressed appreciation for the response.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** referenced how they have reflected on the growth.
 - How do you respond to the question of "if we are doing this level of outreach, how do I not lose if you continue to win?"
 - She then expressed admiration of support amongst the Arizona state agencies and asked how others can create that same level of close-knit community in order to form better partnerships within the Department to move forward with the Equity Commission agenda across the organization.

- **Director Sykes Torres** spoke on how you have to sell the idea that with equity, everybody wins. She then introduced her staff that were on-site at the meeting and then noted that not only do her colleagues reflect equity but also that her staff reflects equity, which means that her staff wins, and when their staff wins, communities win.
- **State Conservationist Tatem** stated that as a conservationist, we are trying to address resources issues and that she needs to be working with those who are using the land. She also noted that everything is about relationships and that NRCS does what they can to bring all communities together in the same space so that they can feel they belong in agriculture together.
- **Director Sykes Torres** stated that in order to serve all of Arizona’s producers, they can identify that they are not serving some of the state’s producers, so through maintaining excellent customer service with current producers while doing a little bit more outreach to bring in new producers, there is still a win. She stated that at a staff level, by keeping staff members engaged and feeling good about working at USDA, they are able to retain staff while bringing in new staff.
- **State Conservationist Tatem** added that creating an environment and shared spaces is important. She stated that while there are moments where there is disagreement or friction between programs, they create space to talk about these issues with an open mind.
- **Director Sykes Torres** added that through leading by example, where staff sees leadership in alignment, it sets a standard for the rest of the employees.
- **DFO Hernandez** thanked the Arizona representatives and encouraged the members to continue to engage with them throughout the rest of the day. Before calling for break, she then welcomed Deputy Undersecretary for Farm Production and Conservation Gloria Montaña Greene and invited for remarks.
- **Gloria Montaña Greene** shared appreciation of the presentation and representation of collaborative work and looks forward to spending the rest of the week with the Commission.
- **DFO Hernandez** closed the meeting.

6. Presentation and Discussion of Refinements to Recommendations

- **DFO Hernandez** provided an introduction and introduced Member Beal and Member Lower-Basch to begin presentations.

RCED Recommendation 1.7: Environmental Justice (1/2)

USDA should ensure environmental justice considerations are woven into the project lifecycle of all USDA programs to ensure benefits and burdens associated with USDA-funded activities are equitably shared among communities.

- **Member Beal** presented the modified recommendation 1.7 and discussed the three sub-recommendations, part A. focusing on community support, part B. asking for a section in the application for a statement on positive impact on communities affected by these activities, and part C. focusing on creating opportunities for training for applicants and USDA employees implementing it.

Recommendation 1.9: Office of Coordinated Rural Community Response

Establish an Office of Coordinated Rural Community Response for improved coordination of USDA and other Federal resources for timely and comprehensive outreach and response to the urgent needs of underserved rural communities.

- **Member Rawls** presented the new recommendation 1.9 and discussed how underserved rural communities lack the resources to address needs such as proper water and sewer treatment and how this recommendation establishes infrastructure, such as a small group of experts reporting to the Chief of Staff level that would be available to recommend integrated solutions for small communities when the issues arise so that the problems can be handled immediately. He added that this same group would be able to identify emerging problems through proper data gathering and provide a budget to develop resources for the group to immediately address the urgent needs of underserved rural communities.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked if underserved rural communities would also include farmworker community issues.
- **Member Rawls** confirmed that this group referenced in the recommendation would be able to utilize any authority to respond to all issues in rural communities, including farmworkers.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** expressed that this information was helpful and described how in the past, the process was to go through the state senator to get them to access funding through USDA.
- **Member Rawls** replied that this recommendation would not create authorities but actually coordinate pathways to tap authorities to respond to these issues.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** thanked Member Rawls for the response.
- **Member Rawls** clarified the current process, where an issue brought to the top would be handled by a working group that works with the state. He then emphasized that this recommendation would create an institutionalized group without reinventing the wheel each time an issue comes up.
- **Member Redding** spoke in support of the recommendation and agreed that a coordinated response structure can identify the assets and resources and contacts needed to tackle an issue in underserved communities, which has an association with community preparedness. He then commended the extended immediate response and the need to continue to monitor and engage and hold people accountable in both the private and public sector.

- **DFO Hernandez** shared a reminder to the members to ensure they speak into the microphone when sharing a response.
- **Member Hills** expressed support for the recommendation and added that while communities usually have mitigation and organization plans, this recommendation can help with cross-education on how to prepare for rural communities to respond to emergent situations.
- **Member Sias Hernandez** expressed support for the recommendation and asked for clarification about the resources mentioned in part b., where she asked if the vision will be a specific budget set aside for the group to access when emergent situations arise.
- **Member Rawls** responded that they kept the budgeting and spending of budget general in the recommendation but confirmed that the idea is that the budget would be readily available for emergent issues and through high-level approval with limited funding for the group to tap into to plan and execute.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** spoke in support of the recommendation and asked if the trained professionals in the group would involve emergency response professionals or professionals trained areas of responsibility inside the Department. She also asked, knowing the depth and breadth of USDA's responsibilities, how the group should be able to understand the various programs as she expressed her concern that if the group has limited knowledge of all of USDA's programs, they may also have limited value in its interventions to a particular emergency.
- **Member Rawls** responded to the first question where the professionals in the group would be programmatic in which they would know the various programs and policies of the Department to know which ones to tap into. He added that this group would include representatives outside of the Department.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested that the recommendation be modified to say that the professionals are programmatic who are familiar with various programs and have access to the entire department, or similar language. This will ensure that we are giving them authorities that we need them to have based upon the variety and complexity of the different situations they may need to respond.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** suggested that when presenting this recommendation to include having subject matter expert representation within the Department as well as in the states themselves to help quickly form a solution for emergent issues.
- **Member Lee** asked how this office will not internally and externally be perceived as a duplicative service from other agencies and Departments such as FEMA and how this can avoid creating extra levels of bureaucracy.
- **Member Rawls** acknowledged Member Stanger-McLaughlin and Member Lee's questions and first answered Member Lee. He noted that this group would not take the place of FEMA's emergency response programs and services; this group would coordinate utilizing USDA's services and programs to help accelerate providing the assistance needed for the issue.

- **Member Lee** asked if Member Rawls would be open to exploring an inter-agency emergency response group to help coordinate roles.
- **Member Rawls** mentioned that there may be a structure like that in place already.
- **DFO Hernandez** affirmed that there is already a coordinated structure in place with the emergency response team at USDA which is housed in the Assistant Secretary for Administration's Office.
- **Dr. Goldman** noted that the White House Environmental Justice Committee are looking at similar issues as the group referenced in the recommendation. He noted that communication or coordination efforts are needed with that office to ensure that we are not duplicating efforts while these recommendations are being developed.
- **Member Rawls** acknowledged Dr. Goldman's question and mentioned that this recommendation originated from Member Rawls' concerns associated with Justice40 at USDA. He also pointed out that this recommendation would serve as a skeleton for the Secretary and the Department leadership to shape the implementation and institutionalization of this group.

Recommendation 2.12: Community Facilities Direct and Guaranteed Loan and Grant Program

Expand access to USDA's Rural Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Programs.

- **Member Keaton** presented the recommendation and highlighted the need to target and fund socially disadvantaged communities. She described the refinement of the socially disadvantaged communities not having been given the level of access to rural community facilities at the expected level, given the number of sparsely populated and socially disadvantaged communities in these areas. The intent is to focus on an increase in participation with an eye towards how USDA can clarify and refine how these communities access the programs. This includes differentiating between a county meeting the threshold and the census tracts that are below the population threshold so that funds are appropriated, and monitoring is optimized.
- There were no comments or questions from members.

Recommendation 2.13. Removing Barriers for Community Facilities and Guaranteed Loan and Grant Program.

Remove barriers to participation in Community Facility Loan and Grant Programs for small and underserved communities in counties with less than 5,500 people.

- **Member Keaton** presented the recommendation and explained the benefits of conducting an annual assessment on the distribution of Community Facility Loan and Grant funds. She highlighted the intent of the recommendation on conducting an analysis and being able to use the data to determine the technical assistance and appropriate funding for socially disadvantaged communities who need it. She also points out how this

recommendation will include the proposal of changing the grant and loan threshold to provide more dollars for small programs.

- **Member Corley** asked if a quarterly data check in requirement should be added to the recommendation language or if instead of an annual assessment, the Commission recommends a quarterly assessment.
- **Dr Goldmon** asked Member Keaton a clarifying question about the funding scales proposed in the recommendation language.
- **Member Keaton** clarified the language.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** reminded the group that there were previous discussions regarding what to do with communities with small populations and high incomes. She stated that the current recommendation language does not address this issue.
- **Member Keaton** agreed. She shared that the programs already have income thresholds, and she will edit the recommendation language to include it.
- **Member Sherrod** shared her experience as a State Director of Georgia and witnessing communities with small populations and high incomes greatly benefiting from programs and services.

Recommendation 1.8. Using Technology to Increase Access to Rural Development Programs

Rural Development should take full advantage of the Technology Modernization Fund to support the development of new Customer Experience tools for all federal rural programs.

- **Member O'Brien** presented the recommendation and informed the Commission on the technology modernization work that is currently being done at USDA and his proposal to use new tools to measure the effectiveness of customer experience. He provided the background on the Technology Modernization Fund, a government-wide fund to help federal agencies modernize their customer experience for technology, to include cybersecurity and other modern technology ideas. He emphasized the ability for someone to access USDA programs to be critical, which also includes having a primarily accessible and understandable online experience as a consumer of online content. He also provided context on USDA's Rural Development and how its rural.gov website's resources can continue to become more robust so that rural communities can continue to navigate federal programs with ease. He notes that this recommendation will be able to address both contextual topics to make improvements based on stakeholder feedback and data on program applications and site usage.
- **Member Rawls** asked if this technology is already available, why has USDA not accessed it?
- **DFO Hernandez** responded that USDA has accessed it for other programs such as for FSA. However, there has not been a proposal yet for Rural Develop to access the Technology Modernization Fund.

Recommendation 2.8. Improve Support for Underserved Communities Through Rural Utilities

Incentive utility cooperatives and companies to support rural economically distressed and underserved communities through USDA-administered grants and loans, increase the transparency of the utility programs, and encourage fair and transparent election of utility boards.

- **Member Wynn** presented the recommendation and explained the changes made after discussion with the Commission that were tested based on practicality on the user end. He shared an example and its positive impact to the end user and noted how this example shows that the elements broken down in the recommendation are proved digestible and doable.
- **Member Holland** shared his experience being a member of his local rural water board and the need to diversify the group to represent the broad demographics of the population.
- **Member O'Brien** thanked Member Wynn and Member Holland for their hard work on the recommendation.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** thanked the members for revising the recommendation based on earlier discussions. She recommends adding “adequately fund and support” to sub-recommendation f.
- **Member Holland** agreed that this is an important add.
- **Member Wynn** agreed.
- **Dr. Goldmon** is curious if the disadvantaged communities are aware of the rural co-ops and their role in the community. He stated that rural co-op boards may become more diverse if awareness is increased about their activities in disadvantaged communities.
- **Member Wynn** said yes, more engagement with those communities and information sharing would be beneficial.
- **Member Holland** explained that many rural co-op boards are unregulated. He believes the processes would be fairer if there were some guidelines or regulations put in place.
- **Member Sherrod** added that this is where community-based organizations need to be leveraged to provide outreach.
- **Member Wynn** agreed, he is very interested in finding ways to engage community members and likes the idea of working with community-based organizations.
- **Member Hills** also expressed agreement.
- **Dr. Goldmon** said that a top priority of the Commission should be to ensure that all Americans have access to water and electricity.
- **Member Holland** explained that many people who do not have access to water systems have a well. However, the individual must have enough money to drill a well, which is very costly. This is one of the main issues he sees in his community.
- **Member Hills** added that there are USDA programs who funds these projects however there are barriers to accessing these programs such as people not knowing about them or being income eligible.

- **Member Holland** reiterated that lack of program awareness by his community members.

7. Presentation and Discussion of Refinements to Recommendations (continued)

Recommendation 1.1: Staffing

Ensure the communities with greatest need have access to critical staff resources. Specifically, USDA should:

- Conduct a full assessment ~~**—to of the~~ **include a demographic analysis of the** current location of staff and resources available to them.
 - Following the assessment, quickly act to re-align staff **and allocate new resources** to socially and economically disadvantaged communities as defined by rural data and communities with environmental justice concerns as defined by Justice 40.
 - When recruiting, ensure new staff are reflective of the local community they serve **with an intentional focus on underserved populations within the demographics of the community.**
 - Use technology and remote work strategies to improve staff interaction with communities.
- **Member Hills** presented modifications to recommendation 1.1., highlighting the clear identification made on the need to seek resources as well as analysis within the recommendation.
 - There were no questions raised by the members for this recommendation.

Recommendation 1.2: Staff Skillset

Increase the skillset of staff **(central and field)** on community economic development, as opposed to only grant management, underwriting, and compliance driven tasks. There should be a core of community economic development specialists to assist other staff in providing rural communities more comprehensive solutions.

- Staff work plans and performance metrics should include proactive outreach and engagement with underserved communities to build relationships and identify needs and opportunities. This will facilitate timely, quality, responses to new funding opportunities.
 - Bolster the skillset of central and field staff to maximize opportunities for underserved communities.**
- **Member Hills** presented the modifications to recommendation to 1.2, highlighting the additional language clarifying central and field staff to maximize opportunities in underserved communities.
 - **Member Reed** spoke in support of the recommendation emphasizing the importance of staffing, especially in the delta region of the U.S.

- **Member Hills** agreed with Member Reed’s highlight and added that one of the issues this recommendation addresses is the lack of cross-understanding within the Department to be able to provide the best solution.

Recommendation 1.3: Partnership Models

Significantly expand and fund partnerships for historically underserved, low-income, and remote, sparsely populated communities. In collaboration with community organizations and leaders, identify priorities, design solutions, and secure funds for community priorities.

****Develop and fund partnerships/agreements with local organizations to ensure program readiness.** ~~Set up partnerships/agreements with local organizations to build up their capacity so they are prepared for funding when awarded.~~ **

- a. Cultivate better partnerships within the federal government - both within USDA agencies and with other federal departments such as the Department of Commerce, Small Business Administration (SBA), Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Department of Labor (DOL) **** to better understand the needs of the communities they serve. ****
- b. Leverage high-capacity community-based organizations, particularly local organizations serving historically underserved and economically disadvantaged communities, to extend USDA’s reach into communities fostering measurable outcomes, including deeper connections, equitable distribution of resources, and capacity building to ensure more effective support. This should include:
 - i. Investing in existing high-capacity CBO partnerships
 - ii. Establishing new partnerships to serve underserved regions/counties/communities
- b. Fully fund, expand, and institutionalize the Rural Partners Network (navigators and implementation practitioners) with a focus on equitable strategic design to improve service delivery. To ensure underserved and sparsely populated communities receive the support, expand the network to include at least one coordinator per state. Congress should authorize RPN in the next Farm Bill and ensure robust funding to support the program.
- c. Engage new partners particularly local organizations serving economically disadvantaged households and communities for the equitable distribution of resources and to build capacity. ~~**Follow the example of NRCS, which has reached out to new partners, to set up agreements in preparation for increased funding. **~~
- d. ****Develop a communication channel to serve as an avenue of shared learning between the CBO partnership model with the RPN for complementary, coordinated, and mutually reinforcing strategies.****

- **Member O’Brien** presented the modifications in this recommendation, highlighting the refinement to ensure there was proper local input and local participation in the partnership models, such as setting partnership agreements to set up local capacity.
- **Member Christoffersen** added that the approach in the recommendation can be highly impactful in supporting low- and modern-capacity CBOs that have less access to federal

relationships, partnerships, programming, and funding but the program design should be able to deliver a majority of the benefit to entities outside of high-capacity CBOs. He added that this recommendation becomes a parallel to the Rural Partners Network and its ability to benefit to CBOs who play this role in similar capacity with RPN staff providing and opportunity for these entities to share lessons learned to build relationships and create impact for landowners.

- **Member Hills** spoke in support of the recommendation and emphasized the importance of having these partnerships within USDA on how to navigate and help people access these programs.

Recommendation 1.5: Demographics of Funding/Lending Recipients

****Improve transparency of data gathering and analysis of**** the ****Assess the**** distribution of grants and investments currently managed by USDA RD. Regularly analyze and compare the economic, place, and race demographics of where USDA funding or lending is going – and not going. If there is an uneven distribution to some rural areas or populations, evaluate reasons why ****and identify ways USDA RD could better serve those communities.**

- a. Fund improvements to the Rural Data Gateway by drawing on lessons and usage of other National Data tools. At a bare minimum the Rural Data Gateway should layer ALL the following inputs on one user friendly map:
 - a. Socially vulnerable counties – per the Rural Data Gateway inputs
 - b. USDA investments made - Ten year history of USDA investments – either by quantity/number or dollar amount of investments in geographic area
 - c. Type of USDA investments - grants or loans and whether or not the investments were for capacity building (planning) or implementation.
 - d. USDA RD Staff - # of USDA RD staff overlayed by those who report to DC and those that report to a State Director.
 - e. Disaggregation of data by demographics******
- b. As these assessments uncover disparities in the distribution of programs, USDA should take immediate actions to ****prioritize investments to areas of high-need and low utilization of RD resources, including reassessment of the application process for programs that are not equitably benefiting communities~~equitably.~~****

- **Member Hills** presented modifications to recommendation 1.5, highlighting the need to identify data to determine where the funding is going and where there is lack of proximity between staff and communities that need the resources the most. She added the point that disaggregation of data will help the nation respond to gaps.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** spoke in support of the recommendation emphasizing the need for USDA and Rural Development to be able to implement systems that can communicate with each other.
- **DFO Hernandez** acknowledged Senior Advisor for Rural Development Dr. Gbenga Ajilore’s arrival and offered invitation to make comments to the recommendations.

- **Member O'Brien** spoke in support of the recommendation, adding that Rural Development has made strides in the past five or six years and is beginning to create momentum surrounding this recommendation along with the Department.
- **Dr. Ajilore** agreed that Rural Development has made strides to create the Rural Data Gateway for the purpose of accountability and transparency; however, the disaggregation of the data is lacking other datapoints of equity such as race, ethnicity, or disability. He emphasized his support for the recommendation, highlighting that there are ways USDA RD can better serve communities who receive funding.
- **Member Hills** thanked Dr. Ajilore's clarity and finished presenting on section b. of the recommendation.
- **Member Rawls** spoke in support of the recommendation and noted that although his comment is beyond the purview of the Commission, it would be good know what other federal agencies are doing to help rural communities.
- **DFO Hernandez** took a moment to acknowledge the presence of Lee Jones, Executive Director of the Rural Partners Network, to help answer questions.
- **Member Keaton** asked how the recommendation's language can be more inclusive and honed in on thinking about aligning the language to prevent issues in the future. She shared the example of the difference between "socially vulnerable" and "socially disadvantaged" communities.
- **Dr. Ajilore** replied that the difficulty with terminology is that it is referencing a specific statutory term and encouraged that if the terminology needs to be considered, it would be best to evaluate the types of communities versus the indicators now and consider the statutory terms later. He also encouraged the use of plain language when considering terminology.

Recommendation 2.7: Broadband

Enhance broadband mapping and funding to address rural economically distressed and underserved census tracts.

- a. Reassess the broadband census tract methodology and rules that determine where USDA's programs believe broadband currently exists ****to understand if it is effectively capturing the needs of underserved areas.****
- b. Eliminate the current 'one-and-done' funding stipulation that ****disqualifies rural economically distressed and underserved communities from receiving access to more inclusive grants and low interest loans to support broadband.**** Allow additional USDA funding for ****communities where broadband does not currently meet the federally established standard.** ~~previously funded census tracts if an unmet need is still demonstrated.~~ ******
- c. ~~**Recognize and further support the need for 'operational technology' investments that require broadband.**~~

- **Member Wynn** presented the modifications to this recommendation, addressing the language made in the recommendation to clarify reassessment purposes and funding stipulations.
- No questions were raised by the members for this recommendation.

Recommendation 2.10: Prevent Displacement through Equitable Land Zoning and Community Participation

Ensure future infrastructure projects account for impacts to local communities particularly rural economically distressed and historically underserved communities. Specifically, USDA should:

- Assess the impacts of potential infrastructure projects on the displacement of local communities ~~and real estate prices.~~ ****by developing criteria to evaluate the potential community displacement based on factors like number of households displaced, loss of cultural sites, disruption of local economies etc. Review impact assessments to quantify predicted effects. ****
 - As part of the decision-making process in infrastructure projects, ****increase funding for further ** engagements with**** local stakeholders through public consultations to ensure the project aligns with the community’s interests. This engagement should include inter-agency collaboration through programs like the Rural Partners Network. ****Measure stakeholder satisfaction through surveys and impact on decision-making through analysis of how feedback was incorporated.****
 - Strengthen its collaboration with local and regional governments to better understand the needs of rural communities ****by Encouraging and incentivizing** local policies and plans through qualitative review. ~~** communities to promote equitable zoning and land use planning, including mandating a portion of new housing units be affordable for low-income households and subsidizing existing affordable housing.~~
- **Member Carrasquillo-Medrano** presented the modifications to this recommendation, highlighting the changes to clarify implementation and incorporation of the intentionality of the project’s long-term impact into the decision-making process.
 - No questions were raised by the members for this recommendation.

Recommendation 3.1: Matching Waivers for RD Programs and Grants

Develop consistent eligibility requirements and waive matching requirements ****that prioritize rural economically distressed communities and historically underserved communities, including Federally Recognized Tribes, and**** enhance access to USDA programs and services.

Specifically, USDA should:

- **Remove match requirements from the scoring rubric.**** ~~Prioritize waiving matching requirements for all grants and loans.~~
- **Provide priority points for rural economically distressed communities and historically underserved communities. ****
- Clearly communicate the process to request waivers for matching funds to all service providers.

- d. While working to implement sub-recommendation ‘a’, establish a universal application to waive matching requirements for all programs.
- **Member Vogel** presented the modifications to this recommendation.
 - **Co-Chair Cousin** expressed appreciation of the simplification of language in 1a. and asked about the viability of the suggested outcome.
 - **Dr. Ajilore** responded with uncertainty that this is viable based on the issues surrounding match requirements, but with entities who can match should do a match. However, he remained supportive of the recommendation’s suggested outcome because it is an important equity issue.
 - **Co-Chair Cousin** expressed appreciation of Dr. Ajilore’s response.
 - **Dr. Ajilore** added that it is important to understand that what is vision today could in ten years become reality.
 - **Member Stephens** noted the 5500 limit for population for smaller communities and asked clarification on if this is already determined by Rural Development or if Member Vogel and colleagues developed that.
 - **Member Vogel** was uncertain about where the 5500 population number came from and could not cite where the language states it.
 - **Member Stephens** suggested that the recommendation should also consider communities slightly larger than the suggested population number that can also benefit from the recommendation.
 - **Member Carasquillo-Medrano** noted that the minimum for a census block is 300 and a maximum would be 3,000 for each block.

Recommendation 3.2: Rural Business Loans – Financing for Native Agricultural Producers by Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDOs)

Allow products ~~in~~ ****all loans and grants administered by Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDOs) to serve agricultural operations and provide agricultural credit as defined in the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act, Con Act. Specifically, USDA should: ****
~~Rural Business Services to serve agricultural operations. Specifically, USDA should:~~

- a. Remove Agricultural production as an ineligible loan purpose S 4274.319 (f) in RD Instruction 4274-D for the Intermediary Relending Program.
- b. ****Remove agriculture producer as an ineligible ultimate recipient from Rural Business Development Grant Program. ****
- c. ****Pilot the program with 2-3 strong partner MDO’s and provide \$5 million in direct financing for the MDO to provide agricultural credit to their target market, similar to the 502 Relending pilot done in South Dakota. ****

- **Member Vogel** presented the modifications to this recommendation.
- No questions were raised by the members for this recommendation.

Recommendation 3.3: Loan Loss Reserve Requirement

Permanently remove the loan loss reserve (LLR) requirement for intermediary lenders that submit an acceptable strategy for handling defaulting loans.

- a. **Require and include in the scoring that the Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDO) submit an acceptable strategy and track record for handling defaulting loans within their Revolving Loan Funds (RLF) Plan, with proof of a loan loss reserve contra-asset account established.**
- **Member Hills** spoke in support for the recommendation and highlighted its importance since organizations who receive loans are obligated contractually to pay back USDA with interest for that loan to do relending. She noted that having a loan loss reserve dictated by USDA prevents organizations from going after funds, and organizations who provide services to hard-to-reach populations who are restricted from funds because of the loan loss requirement will become underutilized for those populations.

Recommendation 3.4: Equitable Lending Frameworks

Create and include administrative grants with every loan product to intermediary lenders.

~~**(MDOs).~~

- a. **The 2018 Farm Bill amended Section 379E of the Con Act (Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act) to require that grant amounts to Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDO) be in an amount equal to not less than 20 percent and not more than 25 percent of the total outstanding balance of microloans made by MDOs.**
- **Member Vogel** presented the modifications to this recommendation.
 - No questions were raised by the members for this recommendation.

Recommendation 3.5: Investing in Cooperatives

~~Allocate~~ **Provide robust** ~~more resources for robust~~ research, education, and technical assistance for rural people who seek to use cooperatives to access markets, services, and capture economic opportunities.

- a. ~~Significantly increase~~ **Double the current** investments in the Cooperative Services staff so that it can acquire, analyze, and share information about all types of cooperatives in rural areas - including emerging cooperative sectors such as those in the care economy and conversion of rural small businesses to worker or consumer owned cooperatives.
- b. Use the discretion provided in the Rural Cooperative Development Grant program to provide ~~for~~ **much larger, multi-year grants to cooperative development organizations, particularly in rural economically distressed and historically underserved communities.** Congress and USDA should provide much greater **financial** resources for these grants, **appropriating \$20m in funds.**
- c. **Allocate new resources and provide \$300,000-\$500,000 to** ~~U~~ **utilize** the voluminous new data provided by the Census Bureau Business Census,

which in recent years has collected statistically significant data on cooperatives from different sectors to help inform policy makers and other stakeholders on how people are and can use cooperatives to grow their local economies.

- **Member O'Brien** presented modifications to this recommendation, highlighting **Dr. Ajilore** mentioned, in reference to this recommendation, that October is National Cooperative Month and encouraged members to view the Rural Development website for resources and success stories.
- **DFO Hernandez** reviewed the next day's meeting agenda.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** and **Co-Chair Rodriguez** provided closing remarks.

DAY 2 MEETING ADJOURNED

Day Three – October 26, 2023

Equity Commission Members Present:

- Co-Chair Cousin
- Co-Chair Rodriguez
- Shorlette Ammons (Virtual)
- Todd Corley
- Elizabeth Lower-Basch
- Yvonne Lee
- Dr. Mireya Loza (Virtual)
- Charlie Rawls
- Dr. Ronald Rainey
- Dr. Hazell Reed (Virtual)
- Shirley Sherrod
- Poppy Sias-Hernandez
- Rick Smith (Virtual)
- Toni Stanger-McLaughlin

Agriculture Subcommittee Members Present:

- Dr. Gina Eubanks
- Janssen Hang
- PJ Haynie III (Virtual)
- Savi Horne
- Michelle Hughes
- Erica Lomeli Corcoran
- Gary Matteson
- Dr. Alexis Racelis (Virtual)
- Russell Redding
- Shari Rogge-Fidler
- Dr. Jennie Stephens
- Sarah Vogel

Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee Members:

- Cheryal Hills
- David Carrasquillo-Medrano
- Valerie (Mann) Beel
- LaTonya Keaton
- Curtis Wynn

- Larry Holland (Virtual)
- Nils Christoffersen (Virtual)
- Doug O'Brien

USDA Staff in Attendance:

- Cecilia Hernandez, Designated Federal Officer
- Secretary Tom Vilsack
- Dr. Dewayne Goldmon, Senior Advisor for Racial Equity
- Dallas Selle, Office of Budget and Program Analysis
- Gbenga Ajilore, Senior Advisor for the Office of the Undersecretary for Rural Development
- Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
- Gloria Montaña Greene, Deputy Under Secretary for Farm, Production, and Conservation
- Kim Peyser, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration

1. Opening of the Meeting

- **Designated Federal Officer (DFO) Hernandez** called to order day three of the 6th Public Meeting of the Equity Commission and took attendance.
- **DFO Hernandez** reviewed the meeting agenda.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** facilitated a moment of silence for the individuals who lost their lives in a mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine on October 25, 2023.

2. Presentation: Department's Commitment to Next Steps

- **Secretary Vilsack** presented on USDA's equity accomplishments and shared the Department's commitment to implementing the Equity Commission recommendations.
- **Member Sherrod** inquired about the criteria used in appointing minority members to the FSA County Committees. She expressed that, based on her experience, the weakest minority farmer tends to be selected, who may not actively engage with fellow farmers to share information about programs and services.
- **Secretary Vilsack** responded by explaining the various and diverse methods of input used to identify the most suitable County Committee minority members. This involved seeking nominations from local and state staff. He also encouraged Member Sherrod to inform USDA of any instances where the appointed minority member is not a strong contributor.
- **Member Sherrod** recommended that USDA include community-based organizations input as part of the selection process.
- **Secretary Vilsack** replied that USDA did speak with community-based organizations during the selection process.

- **Member Redding** shared that he has learned a lot over the past two years working with the Equity Commission. He thanked the Secretary’s inclusion for farmworkers in both the Commission and USDA’s ongoing equity conversations. He noted that USDA’s usual focus on farmers often omits consideration of the farmworker’s perspective and contributions.
- **Secretary Vilsack** thanked Member Redding for his comment.
- **Secretary Vilsack** thanked Dr. Penny Brown Renyolds for her commitment to enhancing the civil rights office at USDA. He stated that the office has greatly improved in accountability, transparency, and efficiency, and highlighted the ongoing efforts to further improve policies, practices, and processes.
- **DFO Hernandez** thanked Secretary Vilsack for joining the meeting in person and showing his dedication to implementing the Equity Commission recommendations.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** shared that the Equity Commission’s work focuses on how to ensure USDA works for everyone, not just one group of people. She thanked Secretary Vilsack for his continued support and encouraged the Commission members to think about how to strategically conduct outreach to ensure stakeholders are aware of the all the programs and services offered by USDA.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** agreed with Co-Chair Cousin and stated that the future of agriculture is small and mid-sized farms therefore, USDA must ensure these farmers have access to programs and services. He also thanked Secretary Vilsack for his commitment to enhancing programs and services for farmworkers.

3. Presentation: Progress Update

- **Dr. Goldman** introduced panel speakers, Kimberly Peyer (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration) and Gloria Montaña Greene (Deputy Under Secretary for Farm, Production, and Conservation).
- The panelist provided a progress update on the implementation of the Equity Commission recommendations.
- **Member Keaton** asked what criteria was used to survey customer experience, what were the findings, and how has USDA worked to resolve these issues.
- **Kimberly Peyer** responded that USDA has a team of experts who use a human-centered design approach when launching and evaluating programs current and new programs. Additionally, USDA is working on developing a new Customer Experience Impact Lab, which will allow all new programs to be worked on and developed by a group of program design experts for up to 6 months.
- **Gloria Montaña Greene** added that FPAC is prioritizing high serving impact communities and is also using human-centered design approaches to evaluate their programs. She highlighted that FPAC is conducting feedback surveys with customers and non-customers, which is providing valuable data.
- **Member Lee** thanked USDA for being dedicated to equitable procurement.

- **Member Hughes** thanked USDA for the work done on the Increasing Capital, Markets, and Access Program. She shared that some of the organizations that have been awarded funds are still in the negotiation process with USDA and asked when will the funds be distributed to awardees.
- **Gloria Montaña Greene** thanked Member Hughes for her comment and thanked the National Young Farmers Coalition for their work providing organizations with application support.
- **Member Hughes** added that the coalition was funded through the 11th Hour Project, who provided about \$200,000 to create a rapid response program to provide technical assistance to organizations to apply for the USDA funds. The coalition assisted almost 20 BIPOC organizations and 13 of them were awarded funding.
- **Gloria Montaña Greene** stated that FPAC is working diligently to give out the funds in a timely manner.
- **Member Eubanks** asked Gloria Montaña Greene how quickly does FPAC review and assess data.
- **Gloria Montaña Greene** shared that FPAC is always in the process of collecting and assessing formal and informal data. Regarding decision-making, she shared that it is often easier to identify issues and implement changes in FPAC's grant programs because they can monitor application numbers. However, it is more challenging with FPAC's loan programs because the surveys are collected annually.
- **Kimberly Peyer** added that in the small business space, USDA conducted six months of listening sessions across the country to understand what barriers small and disadvantaged businesses are facing. They found these listening sessions provided valuable data and the office developed many relationships.
- **Dr. Goldman** closed the session by thanking the panelists.

4. Presentation: The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)

- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** presented on "The State of OASCR Fiscal Year 2023 Report".
- **Co-Chair Cousin** expressed appreciation for Dr. Penny Bown Reynolds hard work in making transformative changes within OASCR.

5. Presentation of New Recommendations

Recommendation on Office of Small Farms

Create an Office of Small Farms focused on small farms with gross sales under \$250,000. The office would be located within the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Mission Area to include liaisons from other relevant Mission Areas/ Agencies. The Office of Small

Farms should help ensure that small farms, ranches, and forest operations have full access to USDA programs.

- **Member Rainey** presented the recommendation to the Commission and Subcommittee members.
- **DFO Hernandez** opened the floor for comments, questions, or corrections.
- **Member Corely** expressed support for the recommendation.
- **Dr. Goldman** stated that he spoke with the member of the public who proposed that this office is created, and they support the language of the recommendation.
- **Member Reed** also expressed support for the recommendation.
- **Member Lower-Basch** asked if this recommendation would support urban agriculture.
- **Member Rainey** responded yes, all of agriculture under \$250,000.
- **Member Carrasquillo-Medrano** asked if this office would have the capabilities to have its own programs or have nuances for existing programs.
- **Member Rainey** replied yes, the office would have both. He shared that this recommendation should be implemented with the other Equity Commission recommendations on supporting small farms. The goal is for there to be a staff person designated to focus on how small farms are being impacted and ways to help farmers sustain and grow their operations.
- **Member Holland** added support for this recommendation.
- **Member Stephens** asked for clarity on the justification section of the recommendation.
- **DFO Hernandez** showed the justification language on the screen for her to read.

Recommendation on Biennial Research Process

Create ****and publish a**** biennial research ****process report**** assessing the state of BIPOC producers focused on identifying insights into the impacts that USDA policies, fundings and programs have on the viability of BIPOC producers.

- **Member Rainey** presented the recommendation.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** asked if the recommendation could include language to publish a report.
- **DFO Hernandez** asked for the specific language.
- **Member Stephens** suggested “create and publish a report”.
- **Member Rainey** suggested “a disseminate publicly the findings” instead.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** asked for a moment to think about it based on Member Stephens and Rainey’s suggestions.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked if BIPOC would include all socially disadvantaged people.
- **Member Rainey** responded that based on the public input, they stated “BIPOC” producers.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** added it means “Black, Indigenous, People of Color”.

- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** said this means, it does not include women.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked which office will be responsible for this process.
- **Member Rainey** replied that he envisions the newly created Office of Small Farms would be responsible since most BIPOC farms are small farms.
- **Member Rawls** recommends that an existing office be responsible for the biennial research such as NIFA.
- **Member Rainey** responded that he is supportive of that as long as once the Office of Small Farms is established, then they are a collaborative partner in the research.
- **Member Stephens** agreed that NIFA would be a good fit.
- **Member Rainey** stated he is fine with it being under NIFA.
- **Member Holland** discussed some issues with USDA’s formulas for calculating data that cause small farms to be further disadvantaged in existing programs.

Recommendation on Strategic Outreach

Increase visibility of USDA’s equity-focused initiatives **, **programs and services**,** designed to impact stakeholders, through coordinated marketing and strategic outreach ****activities efforts.****

- **Member Corley** presented the recommendation.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested that “efforts” be changed to “activities”.
- **Member Corley** replied yes.
- **Member Holland** asked if the recommendation also includes better marketing of programs and resources to underserved populations. If so, he recommends adding “programs and services”.
- **Member Corley** agreed to add the language in.
- **Dr. Goldman** suggested that the Office of Communications be responsible for this recommendation.

Conclusion of Presentations on New Recommendations

- **DFO Hernandez** welcomed any final comments before the conclusion of the recommendation presentations.

6. Equity Commission Deliberation on Recommendations

- **DFO Hernandez** opened this portion of the meeting and explained that the Members of the Equity Commission will deliberate each recommendation, make any necessary edits, and vote before moving to the next recommendation.

- **Member Corley** reminded members that they have already discussed changes to the recommendations earlier therefore, the deliberation process should be smooth and fast.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** agreed and said that there were changes discussed however, the recommendation language was not edited to reflect those discussions.
- **Member Corley** agreed that more edits are needed.
- **Member Rainey** thanked the members for the clarity and motioned to vote on the recommendations without edits together, as a block.
- **DFO Hernandez** added that 10 RCED recommendations have no amendments.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** seconded the Member Rainey’s motion.
- **DFO Hernandez** replied that first, they will deliberate on the new recommendations and recommendations with amendments.

Recommendation 2b. Land Access

Amend and fund the Land Access and Farmland Ownership Data Collection Land Tenure data collection as authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill to require the National Ag Statistics Service to include in the Tenure, Ownership and Transition of Agricultural Land (TOTAL Survey) survey questions relating to which land is held in absentee ownership; and in heirs property land held in undivided interests and no administrative authority); and the impact of these farmland ownership trends on the successful entry and viability of beginning farmers and ranchers and the impact of land tenure patterns, categorized by race, gender, and ethnicity; and state, county and region.

- **Co-Chair Cousin** shared that members have already discussed and edited this recommendation. She motioned that the Commission supports this recommendation.
- **Member Rainey** seconded the motion.

Recommendation 8. County Committees

****The Secretary shall**** establish at the federal level an advisory or support group composed of internal and external individuals to serve as advocates for producers to understand their complaint and appeals options. ****This**** group should establish standard operating procedures **** (SOPs) **** for County Committees ****including the preclusion of access to customer financial and sensitive information. The SOPs shall be made publicly available and updated annually. and P****erformance metrics to be ****established and**** reviewed during the quarterly strategic reviews held by the Deputy Secretary.

- a. In order to enhance accountability, the County Executive Director should be hired by and report directly to the District Director.
- b. ****The County Executive Director should be prohibited from providing customer financial and sensitive information to the Committee members.****
- c. The role of the County Committee must focus on advisory activities particularly communicating local needs. The County Committee shall serve as the representative body for all farmers and ranchers.

- **Member Rainey** stated that his overarching goal with this recommendation is to add transparency to the process and help producers understand their complaint and appeals options.
- **Member Corely** asked if the “internal and external individuals” will help provide an objective lens when establishing the standard operating procedures.
- **Member Rainey** said yes, it would be some FSA employees but also external individuals who have experience working with underserved communities.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** expressed support for the recommendation and suggested that the standard operating procedures be made publicly available and updated annually on the website to further ensure transparency.
- **Member Rainey** supports this addition to the recommendation language.
- **Member Lower-Basch** supports adding language that states, “external individuals must have experience working with underserved communities”.
- **Member Rainey** also supports this addition.
- **Member Sias-Herandez** asked a clarifying question about the deliberation process.
- **DFO Hernandez** clarified the deliberation and voting process.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked is there should be language about how this group is created, and members appointed.
- **Member Rainey** responded that members should be appointed by the Secretary.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested to add “The Secretary shall” at the beginning of the recommendation to address this.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** agreed.
- **Member Rainey** also agreed. He then presented the two sub-recommendations.
- **Member Lee** asked if the County Executive Director would have to go through the federal employment process to be hired.
- **Member Rainey** said no, from his understanding, the District Director is hired by the State Director. However, the State Director is a federal employee.
- **Dr. Goldman** said he is unsure if the County Executive Director can be hired and report to the District Director.
- **Member Hainey** added that the County Executive Directors need oversight from the District and State Directors because they do not always act fairly.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked Member Hainey if he is comfortable with this language.
- **Member Hainey** said yes.
- **Member Rainey** asked if the County Committee still has access to financial records. He recommended adding language to prohibit the ability of County Committee members to view personal financial records.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** recommended adding this to the topline recommendation for 8.
- **Member Holland** informs members that the County Committee currently can view personal financial records when producers apply to loans.

- **Member Loza** agreed. She recommended adding “including the preclusion of access to financial information”.
- **Member Rainey** agreed. He recommended adding “customer financial information”.
- **Member Loza** suggested to add instead “customer financial and personal information”.
- **Member Rainey** does not agree with adding “personal information”.
- **Member Loza** instead suggested using “sensitive information”.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** recommends creating another sub-recommendation that states, “the County Executive Director should be prohibited from providing customer financial and sensitive information to the Committee members.”
- **Member Corley** stated that this would mean that USDA would have to change their application requirements.

Recommendation 30. Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)

Continue to review and update the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) to reflect the needs of today’s consumers. Support research on whether SNAP enables participants to actually purchase a healthy diet and encourage Congress to consider options including boosting the minimum benefit and increasing benefits more than annually during periods of high inflation, and consider basing SNAP benefit levels on the Low-Cost Food Plan.

Recommendation 31. Customer-Centered Service of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Continue to encourage state SNAP agencies to administer SNAP in a way that treats applicants and participants with dignity and respect and to consult with those with lived experience of poverty as they administer the programs and provide technical assistance on how to do so. USDA should seek legislative authority to hold states accountable for barriers to access and require states to develop processes for beneficiaries to be involved in program and systems design and evaluation. USDA should explore methodologies to report SNAP participation data among eligible individuals disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

Recommendation 32d. Review of Nutrition Programs

Implement proposed changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food packages to better support access to culturally appropriate foods, in consideration of comments received; and continue supporting the participation of underrepresented community providers as WIC vendors. Remove barriers to WIC access, including by supporting Congressional full funding of WIC and extending waivers of physical presence requirements.

- **Member Lower-Basch** reviewed the three nutrition recommendations.
- There were no comments by members.

Recommendation 33. A Pathway to Citizenship

USDA should support policies that lead to pathways to access citizenship and ~~**reunify families~~ **family unification.****

- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** presented the recommendation and discussed the changes that were made per Member Redding’s comments.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested that instead of “reunify families” to use “family reunification.”
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** agreed.

Recommendation 34. Right to Access Agricultural Land

The USDA Secretary should serve as a permanent member of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS).

- There were no comments by members.

Recommendation 35. Equitable Compensation and Protection for Agricultural Workers

USDA should support a pathway to citizenship, equitable compensation, and adequate protections and rights for all agricultural and food system workers.

- **Co-Chair Cousin** reiterated the need to include food system workers in the recommendation language.
- **Member Lower-Basch** added that the recommendation justification should be changed to reflect the revised recommendation.

Recommendation 36. Equitable Access to Rural Housing Service Programs

Ensure equitable access to Rural Housing Service programs regardless of household immigration status.

- There were no comments by members.

Recommendation on Biennial Research Process

Create ****and publish a**** biennial research ****process report**** assessing the state of BIPOC producers focused on identifying insights into the impacts that USDA policies, fundings and programs have on the viability of BIPOC producers.

- **Member Sias-Hernandez** recommended adding “create and publish a biennial research report.”
- There were no other comments by members.

Recommendation 18. Procurement

Establish a dedicated team within the USDA Office of Procurement ****and Contracting focused** ~~This team should concentrate~~ ****on** procurement and supplier diversity, specifically collaborating with the socially and economically disadvantaged agricultural businesses from underserved and

underrepresented agriculture communities. To build the requisite capacity and experience for equitable access to the USDA's supplier and procurement programs:

- a. Create set-aside programs for minority, Tribal, and women owned small agricultural businesses.
- b. Create a special 8(a) category for minority, tribal and women farm, agricultural and food businesses by lowering the threshold for entry to the program.
 - i. Provide technical and financial assistance to support socially disadvantaged small agricultural and food businesses to meet necessary standards toward successful participation to the 8(a) program.
 - ii. Increase 8(a) set aside programs for qualified small agricultural businesses ****;** ~~and**~~ partner with the SBA to explore ****ways to ease the entry criteria into the program for a**** minority, tribal and women farm/agricultural businesses ****that will ease the entry criteria into the program.****
 - iii. Partner with nonprofit, community service organizations to provide technical assistance to support socially disadvantaged small agricultural and food businesses to qualify for the 8(a) program.
 - iv. Collaborate with external stakeholder organizations to formulate a resource guide and host workshops ****to help them document their** ~~This aids qualifying businesses to documenting their**~~ individual social disadvantage narratives.
- c. Establish limited competition programs within each of these categories.
- d. Incentivize major contractors to form partnerships with underserved and disadvantaged small agricultural businesses as subcontractors.
- e. Partner with the SBA to establish a database of minority, tribal and women owned small agricultural businesses who are eligible for subprime opportunities.
- f. The USDA ****should**** enter~~**into~~ an MOU ~~**to support with**~~ professional community organizations such as the National Minority Supplier Development Council to build up the base of ~~**MREs~~ **Minority Business Enterprises (MBEs)**** in agriculture for government procurement.
- g. Create a federal advisory council specializing in small business and the agricultural industry.
- h. Update the Agriculture Acquisition Regulation (AGAR) to disqualify vendors with serious labor violations.
 - i. Coordinate with the SBA to maintain an updated list of firms known to have breached workplace health and safety regulations, ****committed**** unfair wage practices, provided inadequate housing, and engaged in other unethical behaviors like child labor. Until these issues are addressed, these firms ~~**would~~ **should**** be ineligible for government contracts.
 - a. Engage with the Interagency Task Force to Combat Child Labor Exploitation regardless of the child's place of birth.

- i. Release and update a roster of eligible prime and secondary contractors from the USDA, detailing past awards.
 - j. The USDA Office of Inspector General should implement a tracking system ensuring prime contractors collaborate with listed subcontractors post contract awards.
 - k. The USDA Office of Ombudsman should curate a resource guide focusing on the confidential reporting of potential government contract abuses. This guide should accompany all published procurement and contracting opportunities.
 - l. Initiate a 3-year pilot project within the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).
 - i. This project should select five municipalities based on their consumer and agricultural business diversities. These municipalities should commit that at least 25% of school meal and pantry program purchases come from local underserved agricultural businesses familiar with the cultural practices and dietary needs of their communities. By the project’s conclusion, the aim is for 50% of contract funds to benefit underserved and socially disadvantaged agricultural businesses.
 - a. FNS should offer technical assistance, reimbursement flexibilities, and additional funding to address extra costs.
 - b. FNS should collaborate with local or regional stakeholders, including agricultural businesses and community organizations, to pinpoint and assist qualified vendors.
 - m. Annually release a report and maintain a publicly accessible live database that shows recipients of USDA funds. This database should be transparent, user-friendly, and should detail contract awards and financial distributions (subsidies, grants, etc.). Additionally, it should incorporate award information about both prime contractors and subcontractors.
- **Member Lee** presented the recommendation language and answered clarifying questions by members.
 - There were a few grammatical corrections but no other significant proposed changes by members.

RCED Recommendations

Recommendations 1.1. Staffing

Ensure the communities with greatest need have access to critical staff resources. Specifically, USDA should:

- a. Conduct a full assessment—to include a demographic analysis—of the current location of staff and resources available to them.
- b. Following the assessment, quickly act to re-align staff and allocate new resources to socially and economically disadvantaged communities as defined by rural data and communities with environmental justice concerns as defined by Justice 40.

- c. When recruiting, ensure new staff are reflective of the local community they serve with an intentional focus on underserved populations within the demographics of the community.
- d. Use technology and remote work strategies to improve staff interaction with communities.
 - Members reviewed the recommendation and had no additional changes.

Recommendations 1.2. Staff Skillset

Increase the skillset of staff (central and field) on community economic development, as opposed to only grant management, underwriting, and compliance driven tasks. There should be a core of community economic development specialists to assist other staff in providing rural communities more comprehensive solutions.

- a. Staff work plans and performance metrics should include proactive outreach and engagement with underserved communities to build relationships and identify needs and opportunities. This will facilitate timely, quality, responses to new funding opportunities.
- b. Bolster the skillset of central and field staff to maximize opportunities for underserved communities.

- Members reviewed the recommendation and had no additional changes.

Recommendation 1.3. Partnership Models

Significantly expand and fund partnerships for historically underserved, low-income and remote, sparsely populated communities. In collaboration with community organizations and leaders, identify priorities, design solutions, and secure funds for community priorities. Develop ****and fund**** partnerships/agreements with local organizations to ~~**increase capacity and to ensure funding program**~~ ****and fund**** readiness.

- A commission member recommended to add “to ensure program readiness, develop and fund partnerships/agreements with local organizations to increase the organization’s capacity.”
- **Co-Chair Cousin** stated that the discussions around this recommendation have focused on not only increasing access to funds but also ensuring there are partnerships with community organizations to assist communities.
- Members discussed and made grammatical changes.

Recommendations 1.4. RD State Advisory Committee

Strengthen or establish a state and tribal advisory committee and to support and advise the State RD Director on equitable systems thinking in identifying priorities, building partnerships, and monitoring effectiveness.

- a. Ensure strong representation of under-resourced communities by including diverse representation within each state. Model after the NRCS State Advisory Committees.
- b. Provide the tools and as necessary training that will increase the capacity of committee members to provide advice and support to ensure all customers particularly those from historically underserved and economically disadvantaged communities have equitable access to all USDA RD services.
- c. Delegate authority to USDA RD Directors to utilize these advisory committees in translating national program goals and targets into state-specific outcomes.
 - Members had no additional changes.

Recommendation 1.5. Demographics of Funding/Lending Recipients

Improve transparency of data gathering and analysis of the distribution of grants and investments currently managed by USDA RD. Regularly analyze and compare the economic, place, and race demographics of where USDA funding or lending is going – and not going. If there is an uneven distribution to some rural areas or populations, evaluate reasons why and identify ways USDA RD could better serve those communities.

- a. Fund improvements to the Rural Data Gateway by drawing on lessons and usage of other National Data tools. At a bare minimum the Rural Data Gateway should layer ALL the following inputs on one user friendly map:
 - (a) Socially vulnerable counties – per the Rural Data Gateway inputs
 - (b) USDA investments made - Ten-year history of USDA investments – either by quantity/number or dollar amount of investments in geographic area
 - (c) Type of USDA investments - grants or loans and whether or not the investments were for capacity building (planning) or implementation.
 - (d) USDA RD Staff - # of USDA RD staff overlaid by those who report to DC and those that report to a State Director.
 - (e) Disaggregation of data by demographics.
- b. As these assessments uncover disparities in the distribution of programs, USDA should take immediate actions to prioritize investments to areas of high-need and low utilization of RD resources, including reassessment of the application process for programs that are not benefiting communities equitably.
 - Members had one grammatical correction.

Recommendation 1.6. Measures of Success

Revise definitions and measures of successⁱ that build upon multiple forms of community-based assets including quality of life, social capital, and the characteristics of the people they are serving, not just the quantity. USDA should:

- a. Ask for, accept, and learn from any (optional) supplemental community-driven metrics and encourage rural initiatives to report other measures or indicators that they think – or discover – are important.

- b. Conduct a joint analysis across the portfolio to spark new thinking about measuring progress and to add to the menu of potential progress indicators.
 - c. Measure progress from community starting points, not predetermined program or agency ideals of success. Measure assets and opportunities *as well as* needs.
 - d. Gauge rural progress as ratios in relation to the starting point to determine true impact. Ask for equity *process* indicators and measures.
- Members had no additional changes.

Recommendation 1.7. Environmental Justice

USDA should ensure environmental justice considerations are woven into the project lifecycle of all USDA programs to ensure benefits and burdens associated with USDA-funded activities are equitably shared among communities.

- a. When designing programs, USDA should include environmental justice considerations throughout the design process. USDA should support intermediaries such as community-based and direct service organizations, to work with environmental justice communities to promote access to USDA programs and services. To ensure USDA programs have a positive impact on local communities, USDA should identify and consider the potential impacts of the program on communities, inform communities about the program and make them aware of notice and comment opportunities, and support impacted communities in participating in decision making and funding processes.
 - b. To ensure environmental justice communities are not disproportionately impacted by USDA-funded activities, programs that provide extra points for the citing of competitive grant funded activities should justify how projects would positively impact environmental conditions for local community where the project is placed. For larger projects, more evidence of community support is needed.
 - c. To ensure that environmental justice analysis is consistently and adequately performed during National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes, all NEPA practitioners should receive training on environmental justice analysis in NEPA.
- Members had no additional changes.

Recommendation 1.8. Using Technology to Increase Access to Rural Development Programs

Rural Development should take full advantage of the Technology Modernization Fund to support the development of new Customer Experience tools for all federal rural programs.

- a. Rural Development should coordinate with other rural-serving agencies across the federal government to submit a proposal for Technology Modernization Funds.
- b. These funds should be used to revamp Rural.gov to include a Customer Experience dashboard that allows customers to access details about programs based on the type of customer (Business, Cooperative, Community Development Financial Institution, Individual) and contact information for both relevant staff and technical assistance organizations in their regions.

- c. Following the implementation of sub-recommendation's 'a' and 'b', all agencies with programs targeting rural communities should conduct outreach campaigns to increase awareness of this tool.
 - d. Continuously evaluate the effectiveness of new and existing Customer Experience tools to make improvements based on stakeholder feedback and data on program applications/site usage.
- Members had no additional changes.

Recommendation 1.9. Office of Coordinated Rural Community Response

Establish an Office of Coordinated Rural Community Response for improved coordination of USDA and other Federal resources for timely and comprehensive outreach and response to the urgent needs of underserved rural communities.

- a. The Secretary should establish an office, reporting to the Chief of Staff, that will be responsible for providing immediate and integrated solutions to selected high priority problems of underserved rural communities. This Office of Coordinated Rural Community Response would maintain a small but critical mass of trained program professionals familiar with and access to programs across the Department that would be available to conduct analysis and recommend a coordinated, integrated relief and long-term investment. The Office would also interface, in coordination with the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, at a program level with other Federal Departments and Agencies that have programs or assistance that should or could be part of the solution. Finally, this Office should conduct analysis of data across the Department and the Federal government to identify areas that USDA could conduct proactive work to find communities with high levels of need that lack the resources to ask for help.
- b. Consideration should be given to providing the office, if necessary, by legislation, with the authority to utilize, through transfer authority, some small percentage of program funding such that immediate, on-the-ground, solutions could be implemented quickly and efficiently.

- Members had no additional changes.

Recommendations 2.1- 2.11

- Members reviewed and had no comments or additional changes.

Recommendation 2.12. Community Facilities Direct Loan and Guaranteed Loan and Grant Programs

Expand access to USDA's Rural Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Programs.

- a. Increase participation and funding for Socially Disadvantaged and underserved communities, specifically, USDA should focus on communities in counties with smaller populations (under 5,500).

- b. USDA should clearly differentiate between counties below 5,500 and communities in census tracts below 5,500 and how priority points are awarded for Community Facilities Programs. USDA should emphasize funding for counties below 5,500.
- c. Appropriate funds for counties with a population below 5,500 to automatically receive funding and increase their access to the Community Facilities Programs.
 - **Member Rawls** asked if the Commission was using the SBA’s definition of socially disadvantaged.
 - **DFO Hernandez** said yes, that is what the recommendation is referring to.
 - **Member Rawls** added that the Commission may need to add a section in the final report about this definition.
 - **Member Lee** said that previously, the definitions for socially disadvantaged and economically distressed were similar but now the socially disadvantaged definition has been protected by law.

Recommendations 2.13, 3.1-3.6

- Members reviewed and had no comments or additional changes.

7. Equity Commission Voting on Recommendations

- **DFO Hernandez** explained the voting process for the recommendations.
- **DFO Hernandez** read each recommendation and members voted to pass or not pass it.
- The Commission voted to approve all recommendations for inclusion in the final report.
- **DFO Hernandez** closed the voting period.
- Members provided closing remarks.

MEETING ADJOURNED

I hereby certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the foregoing minutes are accurate and complete.



Ambassador Ertharin Cousin

Co-Chair USDA Equity Commission



Arturo S. Rodriguez

Co-Chair USDA Equity Commission

APPENDIX

Members of the Public: Attendance List

First Name	Last Name	First Name	Last Name	First Name	Last Name
Celeste	Banda	Nadia	Gronkowski	Denise	Attaway
Joshua	Cassar	Heather	Manier	Sally	Lewis
Alex	Cordova	Kassandra	Martinchek	Breanna	Gonzalez
Claudia	Meng	Chloe	Waterman	Mikayla	Bodey
Tara	Chadwick	Lisa	Gonzalez	Reta Wegary	Gissa
Maria	Fernandez	Zach	Huebschman	Kameka	Gray
Roberto	Gonzalez Jr.	Markus	Holliday	Kallie	Turner
Catherine	Hamilton	Paula	Daniels	Whitney	Sawney
Coy	Poitier	Marisa	Rudolph	Samantha	Belote
E Rene	Soule	Emma	Hackler	Simone	Williams
Kimberly	Hammonds	Rebecca	Wright	violeta	dominguez
Margie	Otto	charles	smith	Katherine	Burse
Kayla	Mattson	Laura	Crowell	Sarah	Lavelle
Byron	Evans	Esther	Lin	Kirstin	Nelson
Angelica	Royal	Sanci	Richardson	Agbor	Iweriebor
Webster	Davis	Jimmy	McAlpine	Karla	Hollis
Summer	Grandy	Alice	Runde	Chuck	Abbott
Samora	Bennerman	Chandelis	Duster	Barry	Bernard
Cassie	Harrison-Ramos	Trina	Brake	Danny	Bismark
M. Carlo	Altman	Laissa	Cavallini	Jeannine	Wendel
Sophia	Kruszewski	Margaret	Graves	Emily	German
Kamilah	Jackson	Gary	Crawford	Amy	Lyman
Marissa	Martinez	Kristin	Reynolds	Annette	Hiatt

Ellyn	Ferguson	doris	Washington	Allison	Johnson
Ibrahim Mohamed	Kahin	Laurie	Thiboutot	Jennifer	Almond
Neil	Burnette	Patrice	Brown	Michelle	Schroeder-Moreno
Miranda	McDaniel	Mauricio	Medina	Deborah	Burns
Bryan	Sobel	Francés	Vázquez Jeffery	Nadine	Chatman
Musemakweli	Prosper	Ethan	Tsui	Geraldine West	Hudley
Joe	Graham				

ⁱ Transformational Capacity Building - Measure of Success

Suggested measures -

- The stock of year-round, locally owned housing
- Change in school enrollments
- The number/ratio of disconnected youth
- Increases in post-secondary educational attainment
- Labor market participation rates per industry based on race, gender and disability status.
- Changes from an accurate baseline in the number and growth of locally owned enterprises and cooperative structure. Changes in race, ethnicity, and gender wage gaps.
- Affordable childcare slots compared to demand
- Community college alignment with local economy
- Aligned continuum of family services
- Entrepreneurial growth as voluntary or involuntary (Is self-employment only an *emergency* response?)
- Dollar leakage in or out of the community
- Change in air, water, housing quality
- Economic and social impact of job retention

-
- Living wage requirements – and living wage job availability – in a region
 - Change in household savings rates
 - Broadband coverage to homes rather than broadband “coverage” only on Main Street
 - Benefactors of investments.
 - Locally generated wages.
 - Systems and policy changes that create equitable economic growth
 - Require all measures create no environmental damage/degrade.

Built – Have there been improvements in infrastructure?

Financial – Has there been increased investment in the region?

Amount of Leveraged funding for projects and programs

Adequate Technical Assistance funded.

Growth in operations

Individual – Have people acquired or improved skills, or improved their health and well-being?

locations of retail food businesses received TA

of people receive TA

Improved working conditions.

of referrals made to partner organizations

Amount of sales for affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods

Improved access to markets.

Intellectual – Is there greater knowledge, creativity or innovation in the region?

of new programs offered from access points (example: RX-CSA’s or culturally diverse art integration)

Natural – Has the work benefitted natural resources or the environment in the region?

\$\$ of sales from local farmers/ranchers/producers allowing for farmland to stay in production

of effective agricultural or conservation practices.

Political – Has there been an increase in influence over decision-making and policies?
of and type policies revised to support food access, affordability, and availability

Social – Have new relationships and networks been built?
of minority-owned businesses that received technical assistance -
of new collaborations formed as result of TA and how they impacted leveraged resources
Have low-income businesses or individuals, or minorities been involved in the design and implementation of strategies.

Cultural – Has the work supported/preserved valued assets-traditions or ways of doing things?
Jobs created or retained for local and regional residents from low-income and moderate- income areas that reflect area demographics, including communities of color.
Stories told that show impacts
Changes in ownership of or decision-making power over local resources.