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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOR THE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT
REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL WORKFORCE, POSTAL SERVICE
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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am pleased to discuss the benefits the U.S. Department of Agriculture provides its employees serving in combat areas overseas. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is currently supporting the Administration's strategic efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Secretary Vilsack is committed to supporting President Obama's efforts to increase government effectiveness and enhance economic capacity in Afghanistan and Iraq. We recognize the critical role that agriculture plays in the economy and lives of the people of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since 2003, over 100 USDA employees have volunteered to serve as experts on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, USDA employees have provided expert technical services to the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture and the Iraq Ministry of Agriculture. In Afghanistan, USDA is prepared to significantly increase the number of agriculture experts assigned to PRTs, regional commands, taskforces, and the ministry, and to deliver other support to meeting this critical challenge to U.S. national security.

In both countries, USDA employees provide critical advice, guidance, and training to Provincial and District-level government officials, which strengthen the effectiveness of the government at the national, provincial and district levels, and increase economic opportunities for individuals who may otherwise join the insurgencies. They provide guidance to PRT leaders and military commanders on projects that directly impact the lives of farmers and their families and improve economic growth and job creation in those countries.

USDA has developed systems for recruiting, selecting, training, deploying and supporting PRT experts. The Department stands behind those who volunteer for these one-year assignments, and provides incentives and benefits packages based on those provided by the U.S. Department of State, U. S. Agency for International Development, and other agencies and departments with civilian experts in Afghanistan and Iraq. USDA notifies all employees working in Afghanistan and Iraq that they are entitled to compensation benefits under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) for any disability due to personal injury sustained while in the performance of duty or an employment-related disease while deployed overseas. USDA is working with the Department of Defense to ensure that USDA employees who have returned from their overseas deployments have continued access to Military Treatment Facilities and "Centers of Excellence", and that costs for treatment at these DOD facilities would be reimbursed from the Office of Worker's Compensation Program. USDA has established a centralized office for managing all entitlements for deployed civilians, including guidance in the areas of leave, retirement, travel, compensation and medical benefits.

USDA requires that all employees deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq participate in appropriate mandatory training programs. In the case of Afghanistan, newly selected experts undergo one week of pre-deployment training, along with their USG colleagues at the US Agency for International Development and the State Department, at the U.S. Army's Camp Atterbury in Indiana. This training covers force protection, military – civilian coordination, partnering with the Afghans and Government of Afghanistan officials, and general field simulation exercises. All agriculture experts being deployed to field positions in Afghanistan also receive two weeks of mandatory State Department training, including Foreign Affairs Counter Threat, and Afghanistan Familiarization. Personnel assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Teams or other field teams and under Chief of Mission authority are required to take the one-week Afghanistan PRT Orientation and participate in a one-week civilian-military exercise at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. Experts going to Iraq complete two weeks of mandatory training, consisting of the Foreign Affairs Counter Threat training and Iraq Familiarization; experts serving in the field receive in addition one week of Iraq PRT orientation. USDA also provides a Washington-based orientation program for new experts as part of the pre-deployment training. We have developed standard operating procedures and agricultural experts' handbooks that employees use throughout their service. The handbooks are updated as necessary so that USDA's employees are kept current of changes in incentives, benefits and other information. The new experts also undergo an intensive orientation program at the respective embassies and at the PRT level.

During their year of service, USDA provides continuing support to our employees. All PRT experts have access to a web-based portal to obtain timely and relevant technical information from other experts, from specialists throughout the Department, and from faculty at the land-grant colleges and universities. We also bring together periodically all of the experts for in-service training. Our program managers in Washington are in frequent contact with the advisors to help with technical issues, provide support with adjustment issues, or just to let them know that their sacrifices and hard work are appreciated. During service, the USDA experts receive medical care through the State Department medical program or from the Department of Defense, depending on the location, timing, and the critical nature of the need. We facilitate communication with the families of the advisors, and provide evacuation in case of critical family emergencies. Likewise, USDA's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offers counseling assistance pre-deployment, during deployment, and post-deployment to employees, their families and their supervisors and co-workers. EAP services are available throughout the United States and there are toll-free numbers available 24/7. EAP counselors are also available for in-country and third-country support.

USDA PRT liaisons based in the U.S. Embassies in Kabul and Baghdad provide overall management of the USDA program in each country. The liaison works closely with counterparts in other civilian and military agencies and ensures smooth interagency coordination for planning and program operations. PRT success is dependent upon coordinated interagency cooperation both in the field and in Washington. USDA staff in Washington meets regularly with counterparts at the United States Agency for

International Development and Department of Defense here to coordinate efforts and share lessons learned.

After service, USDA provides official recognition to our employees for their contributions to our reconstruction, development and counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Employees return to their home agencies, to the positions they held prior to their assignment in Afghanistan and Iraq. USDA holds an annual “lessons learned” event in which most of the returned experts participate, and we have incorporated these lessons to make continued improvements to the program. USDA helps identify resources to help returned experts, their families, and supervisors deal with readjustment or other issues.

We believe that USDA has developed the systems necessary to continue to provide a sustained level of skilled and highly motivated employees to serve as technical experts on PRTs and other military commands, or in government ministries in Afghanistan and Iraq in coordination with the Department of State. Congressional support for the Administration’s requested resources is critical to maintaining the ongoing U.S. government’s civilian efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and is essential to ensuring that the civilian contributions to the “hold” and “build” counterinsurgency strategy such as economic opportunities and improved governance are in place after our men and women in uniform provide security for the population.

Thank you for allowing me to share with you information about how the U.S. Department of Agriculture supports our employees serving in combat areas overseas.