

Torey Powell Agriculture Marketing Service Transcript

Kim Ratcliff: Welcome back from our break. We're going to get right back to our agenda. So, right now we have Mr. Tori Powell from the Agriculture Marketing Service. So I'm going to head it over to you and thank you very much for joining us today. Thank you. On mute, Mr. Powell.

Tori Powell: Well, I was doing a quick sound check, so I'm glad I did that right. Good afternoon everyone. My name's Tori Powell. I'm the Deputy Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the Agricultural Marketing Service, better known as AMS. First, want to start off by thanking Chairman Reid and the team from OPPE for having us and join this conversation today. A little bummed I can't be there in person with you all with congressional hearings and everything else going on. We just couldn't get away. But hope to join you next time. Next slide.

All right, so for those who aren't familiar with AMS, AMS is the agency primarily responsible for developing international domestic marketing opportunities. This includes the local regional food systems, which are essential. We've learned, especially over the pandemic essential to achieving food, our food systems transformation goal across USDA by building a more resilient food supply chain through more and better markets. So, because of the unprecedented level of focus and resources dedicated to building the food supply chain of the future, this is where I'm going to spend a lot of my time today, the bulk of my time today. Because as we think about the food system of the future, we are working to create a new and better market for all producers and consumers, but also thinking about this system in a way that is fair, competitive, distributed, and also resilient. Next slide.

Awesome. So, as we look at the supply local regional food supply chain timeline, I just wanted to throw this slide up there to kind of talk about the history of local regional food systems as a whole. This work has been going on for quite a while, since the early 1970s, but you'll see a lot of the programs that we'll talk about today aren't even on this slide deck. A lot of the programs that we're talking about today are unprecedented. They're direct results of the supply chain disruptions and the focus on building the food supply chain of the future and the food systems transformation work that USDA is currently undergoing. Next slide.

All right. So, when we think about this broader food system transformation framework and the USDA strategic plan. We're talking about this kind of new era of local regional food systems. So, I want to throw this slide up there to kind of talk about the various programs that fall within this kind of food systems transformation framework. The programs are red, are the ones that I'm going to highlight a little bit today. Those are the ones that directly are fall within the agricultural marketing service wheelhouse, but we're working collaboratively across the department to kind of implement these programs for the food supply chain of the future.

We know having more capacity to gather, process and move and store food and different geographic areas across the country does provide more options for producers to create value added products and sell locally. And it also provides consumers with more options, which supports new economic opportunities and job creation. We're also talking about investing in a fairer system and combating market dominance, which helps producers, consumers gain more power and the marketplace. So, that's kind of how I'm framing today's conversation. We spend all day, we could spend probably a week talking about the various programs at AMS. So, I'm going to just kind of keep the programs that I talk about today in that bucket. Next slide.

I also want to think about as we kind of think about AMS and our role in the food system transformation framework and kind of these buckets. We serve a lot of different roles across the ag marketing service. We serve as convenor, research data provider, technical assistance provider, funder, and food buyer. Many folks really don't engage with us in these buckets. A lot of folks see us as a grant provider is typically where we have a lot of engagement or with our processing and value added services like our grading and auditing services. So, I'm kind of helping set the tone for thinking about AMS and our role in the local food regional supply chain in a little bit of a different way. So, I'll go through each one of these buckets. Next slide.

So thinking about our role as convenor, we specifically at AMS coordinate the local regional food supply chain working group, which spans across 15 USDA agencies. We work to coordinate employee education, networking, inter-agency collaboration, inter-agency coordination, all around local and regional food systems, right? Thinking about strengthening institutional frameworks, USDA programs, specifically looking at internal and external local regional food systems. This included the launch of the local regional food systems response to COVID, a website that is worked with three universities and I believe 16 to 18 communities, a practice coordinating organizations on developing a project, really focused on supporting local regional food systems sectors from CSAs, farmer's markets, farms to institutions, ghost kitchens. We're talking about local fishing programs and projects all coming together to produce snapshots, highlighting the challenges pivots that had to take place during COVID-19 and technical assistance needs that were also highlighted during the pandemic.

As we are thinking about where we are currently at during of the pandemic, this project has kind of transitioned into a recovery and resilience phase and is really now kind of focused on three key priority areas, including developing a network of learning, collaboration and strategic action, developing playbooks so we can stay ready because we know what happens when the next disruption comes. And thirdly, around developing data and metrics that specifically support the local regional food chain system.

Next slide. So, in addition to our role as convenor, similarly, we work with internal and external groups and agencies to kind of explore common issues that the local regional food system faces. Specifically in the research area, we're

looking at projects ranging from specific subject matter like small kitchens or ghost kitchens, like I mentioned earlier, projects ranging from researching a particular subject matter to working with specific university partners on addressing critical information gaps on local regional food system. The real intent here is to ensure local food producers, markets and communities have access to the up-to-date ideas, innovations, and research that is specifically focused on growing and sustaining productive businesses.

Some of the most recent stuff that's coming out of our research area, we partnered with Colorado State University and the food corridor to compile data around shared kitchens across communities across the United States, and have developed several research briefs along with 4K studies, specifically highlighting how small kitchens are being used in the local regional food system space. We also use this research to develop local food directories. The main goal of these directories is to help our customers from families. When we think about customers, we're also thinking about families to wholesale food buyers, quickly identify some nearby suppliers and connecting them with buyers. So, when we're thinking about the research space, we're also using data to understand what's happening and trying to communicate that across our different stakeholder groups.

Next slide. Another project that I want to specifically highlight is our partnership with University of Maryland, Florida A&M to better understand where we're not doing so hot, specifically thinking about our grant programs and the distribution of those grant programs, both that AMS and [inaudible 04:17:00] more broadly at USDA, thinking about the inequities within our grant programs from the application process throughout the outreach technical assistance that are provided within AMS, and also thinking about ways that we can specifically rectify the inequities that are developed. We also have a three year cooperative agreement with the Farmer's Market Coalition to expand access to local foods, specifically looking at minority serving institutions and HBCUs, thinking about local food, how can we support local food access while also educating consumers about the benefits of local food.

Next slide. So, one thing that we know is that the pandemic highlighted the challenges within the middle of the food supply chain, right? Consolidated processing capacity, created supply chain bottlenecks. Small and mid-size farmers often struggled to compete for processing access and were left without revenue getting their animals to market. So, addressing these challenges is kind of be key to transforming that food system. So, when we think about the different programs that have been developed to specifically target that, I wanted to highlight the work that's being done with our Meat and Poultry Processing Technical Assistance program, MPPTA that is developing a network of technical assistance providers, specifically addressing the issues within the meat and poultry supply chain, thinking about federal grant management applications, business development, finance planning, operational support, supply chain development. So, we have a number of partners, but I do want to highlight some of our partners like Flower Hill Institute and Oregon State

University. There are niche meat processes network, the Intertribal Ag Council and a few others that are helping us pull this network of technical assistance providers together.

Speaker 31: Excellent.

Tori Powell: Yep. We also serve as a funder, and I mentioned earlier a lot of us interaction with stakeholders ends up in this funder space. We launched a lot of new programs during the pandemic. We stood up new programs and added some additional capacity to existing programs. Specifically want to highlight the Farm and Food Worker Grant program that is currently distributing funding. About 600 million dollars was awarded to 14 different nonprofit organizations, specifically to distribute pandemic funding. \$600 cheques to farm workers, meat packing workers and grocery store workers who were largely left out of pandemic assistance programs across the board. We are also supplementing the existing. So when we talk about some of the existing programs, the dairy business innovation, I think about 80 million dollars was of American Rescue Plan dollars was added to support additional processing capacity on-farm improvements, and again, technical assistance in response to some of the disruptions that occurred during the pandemic.

Next slide. Additionally, in the funding space, I didn't want to talk a little bit about the land program, the local agricultural market program that is largely one of our kind of bigger programs and tend to be what some of our organizations look to us for. This is an annual program, but it's also one of those programs that did receive additional funding from the various pandemic funding pots. So, two of the LAMP programs. So LAMP has kind of a umbrella program that has four different programs under it. It has the Farmers Market Promotion Program, the Local Food Promotion Program, and Regional Food System Partnerships Program. Those three fall under AMS. And then there's another program that is administered by role development and that's the value added producer grants. All four of those programs make up that LAMP umbrella. So I'll specifically kind of hit on the three AMS ones.

The Local Food Promotion Program and the Farmer's Market Promotion Program are really kind of focused on developing, coordinating and expanding local regional food systems. This year, AMS provided, I think it was an additional 65 million dollars in LAMP from the American Rescue Plan in addition to some of the funding that was left over in the last funding cycle. So, that actually upped the total funding pot within these two programs, within these three programs, sorry, to 133 million dollars across these three programs. So, wanted to highlight those programs specifically because the grant application period for those programs is currently open and closes May 2nd. Happy to answer any questions or go into more detail with that for anybody who has questions.

Next slide. And then another funding pot. And another program that we are really, really excited about is our regional food systems, our regional food business center, sorry. So, many of you probably heard around 400 million, was

used to create these regional food business centers really focused on providing coordination, technical systems and capacity building across the country, specifically targeting small and mid-sized farm and farm businesses, and then also particularly focused on processing, distribution, aggregation, and also providing TA on market access challenges. We are in the process of finalizing the applications and are hopefully going to be announcing the awardees for those programs in the next month or so.

So, please be on the lookout for those. Those will be pivotal locations across the country. So, as many of you are aware, we don't, the Ag Marketing Service doesn't have a large field presence in terms of some of our sister agencies like NRCS or Forest Service. So, these will be critical, important technical assistance and coordination centers for our stakeholders.

Next slide. All right. Then the last part that I'll talk about before kind of turn it over for you all to have a discussion is our role as a food buyer. Specifically wanted to highlight our work on the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program because it's a new model for AMS. Typically, we have operated in the grant space doing the typical grant cycle, but what we heard from our stakeholders is the cumbersome application process program to help.

Torey Powell:

From our stakeholders is the cumbersome application process prevented a lot of folks from actually accessing of programs and created a lot of equity issues. So through the LFPA or our local food purchase Cooperative re-program, we have put nearly 900 million dollars, 400,000,001 round and another 400 million, 500 million, and another round into this program that specifically creates cooperative, non-competitive cooperative agreements with state and tribal governments, to carry out programs within the respective states connecting social use advantage farmers and ranchers with food distribution programs, run and operated by the state. This second round specifically had a hundred million dollars specifically dedicated to tribal communities, to better support tribal applications, and also consider the tribal needs from a tribal food sovereignty perspective. That application period specifically for tribal governments was extended till May 12th, and so we'll be doing a lot of outreach related to engaging with tribes and the LFPA program, through March, through May 12th.

Next slide. And similarly, we launched another program called the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program. The names on these are atrocious but out of our control, but we launched this to help schools focused on connecting with child nutrition program operators, address supply chain disruptions that we saw. So 200 million dollars and again, very similar, connecting 50 states and territories, allowing them to purchase minimally or unprocessed foods in the local regional food space targeting underserved, social use advantage farmers and ranchers. Next slide. Yeah, it wouldn't be a conversation around thinking about the food system of the future without thinking about the food system workforce of the futures. So AMS is really taking a hard look in developing new programs, and new partnerships with

universities, and organizations across the country to rethink how we are engaging the next generation of agricultural leaders. We created several programs. One of those specific programs I want to talk about is the AMS Student Enrichment Program, which is a partnership with Tuskegee University.

We are in our second phase of that. Our students in that program are going... just got their assignments this week for their placements around the country. Some of them will be in our meat and poultry grading facilities. Others will be our specialty crops inspection facilities, and some of them will be placed in DC with our commodity procurement, giving them on-the-job training and some of our mission-critical physicians and occupations that we are frankly just having trouble getting young people excited about, giving them hands-on experience and allowing them to really get that step that often folks are missing, young people are missing from their resume, that real tangible experience to allow them to be competitive in their federal applications. We're really excited about that, again, we're doing our second cohort and with Tuskegee this year and hoping to expand to some of our tribal serving institution partners, and or around three or our third cohort. Next slide.

So some of the areas that we specifically thought about as we were thinking about how we can engage with this committee, is one, is how we can do better. We know that our programs, there's some barriers to accessing specifically our funding programs. So how can we do better? How can we work with you all to make sure that these funding pots are equitably distributed, and then similar to the last three speakers is that, how we can and figure out how to diversify our boards and committees? The secretary has made it a priority, and has actually started turning down some of our committee nominations. He is very serious about diversifying the board's specifically for AMS, our research and promotion, and our federal marketing order boards, but we also have two federal advisory committees to that we'd like to partner with you all in thinking through how we can ensure that these boards reflect the communities and the industries that they serve. So that, I'll stop talking because I hear myself talking, and I'd love to hear from you all on any thoughts from this or any questions you may have.

Speaker 34: Well that was great. Thank you very much. Great [inaudible 04:29:06]. I think we do have a couple questions

Cotti: Yes, I do. This is our net cotton. Oh, your [inaudible 04:29:13] pie there. I enjoyed you. Our Farmer to Consumer direct marketing Act is that the act that allows local farmers to sell directly from their farm up to 75,000?

Torey Powell: I have to get back to you on that one. Talking about the of 1976?

Cotti: No, the most recent.

Torey Powell: I have to get back to you. I'm not particularly...

Cotti: Okay [inaudible 04:29:44] When you talk about recovery and resilience in that the last of the three, the network, the playbooks and the data matrix, does that data matrix include the actual distribution centers who were on the ground passing out the food?

Torey Powell: No, it doesn't, and that's because that we don't have a good tracking mechanism for a lot of that. You're talking about for the food that was distributed during the pandemic?

Cotti: Yes, and so I asked the reason I deliberately, very intentional, because the food was distributed, first distributed to a facility that had freezer capabilities, employees that boxed the food up, and so forth, and so on, but then they went out to the people who were on the ground. Our organization was such a group, so we didn't receive payments or anything like that, it was a desperate time, desperate measures, and our community came together so that we could serve these farmers to family food box. Well we got four semi trucks a week. Did you hear me loud and clear? Four semi trucks a week, and the organization to which the food was delivered was the organization that was paid to do all of boxing up, but we didn't receive anything until the two months before the fifth stage of the Farmers to Family Food Box program was discontinued, and we need to be counted in the matrix.

Why do we need to be counted in matrix? Because we're still serving approximately 750 people a month from the same station. Okay. We're not working with the food banks. They have their own system of distribution, but we do not, because we did such work, we completely ruined our fellowship hall. We were a church and other things, but we still haven't received like walk-in refrigerator, walk-in freezers, that still enable us to expand our capacity to serve the group that we have now. We serve six states during that time. Now Terry, and if we are not being considered, I'm asking seriously why not, in light of the fact that you said you have three year cooperative agreements with HBCUs who students were stuck either at their colleges or at home, universities who are maybe not even positioned to serve their communities, because it takes volunteers, consistency and so forth and so on.

Why not have cooperative agreements with the people who are actually doing the work?

Carolyn Jones: And Tory, before you answer that, let me chime in here. This is Carolyn Jones from Mississippi Minority Commerce. I think I spoke with you several times during the pandemic, and just like Cotti said, we partnered with over 57 churches and community centers, and we distributed over 100,000 boxes of food. When the vendors who actually got the contracts to deliver the food, they came in with their 18 wheelers, we had to purchase, we had purchased pallet jacks, they just brought the truck there. We had to help our members get up in those trucks and unload those trucks, and we got our one dime. We are currently distributing over 150, over 850 boxes every month of food. We get no money for that.

We need just like Ms. Cotti, we need freezers, we need walk in freezers, we need tables, we need shelving. How can we get any of the assistance that the larger corporations are getting but they're not going to work?

Cotti: And before you answer that, [inaudible 04:33:37] those people are still coming to us because they developed a trust in our [inaudible 04:33:51] to meet their need, and these other places, they don't know who they are. If you called their names today, they would have no... "I don't know who those people are, but I know who Ms. Cotti is. I know who Ms. Jones is."

Torey Powell: No. Yeah, 100% I can underscore everything that you all have said, and Ms. Jones is good to see your face. I think we've only spoken on the phone several times. You all did amazing work during the pandemic. There is no underscore about that. Part of the challenge is that, and this is just coming from my previous experience with the USDA Center for faith-based and neighborhood partnerships, there's a disconnect between organizations like yours, and especially around faith-based organizations, and there's no real outreach because a lot of the conversation is usually centered on these organizations don't qualify for our grants and programs, but you all actually do. So what we need to do is figure out how do we better connect you all with those resources? So allow you to tap into them because 65 million dollars of that or was plus up in our land programs, some of that was money that was not applied for last year.

So to answer your question is I think we need to have a conversation because there's this misconception that faith-based, and some of the community-based organizations do not compete well or cannot compete for some of our grant program. We also have cooperative agreement funding that you all would be just as in line for some of these larger organizations, and I think there's just a disconnect in how we engage with some of our faith-based and community-based organizations and some of these organizations that were the second line distribution, especially during the pandemic programs. I hope you heard my sincere thank you. I got to work with a lot of the organizations in my former role that were distributing this funding throughout the pandemic, and we just would not been a able to do it, but we'd like to figure out how do we connect with you all again, and bring you back in the to fold, and it wasn't just this one time engagement, but rather we can bring you in and say, "Hey, you all need freezer capacity. You all need refrigerator capacity. You all are doing food programs."

You all are a vital program, a part of that local regional food system that you all shouldn't be left out, and it's a lot of it is just outreach and communication and helping you all know what programs you all are eligible for and not eligible for.

Cotti: Thank you. Troy. I will reach out to you. I do have one more question. The regional foods, we were contacted by the University of Arkansas, I believe it is, to ask if we would be willing to grow certain crops, I mean certain vegetables for them so they could get a regional hub to be able to, they wanted to know if we had a refrigerated truck and we have a 26-foot truck and we could deliver once

a week to the university. Is that the same of what this RFSP partnership is indicative of?

Torey Powell: So those are some of the key elements of that Regional food systems partnership program, so the regional food systems partnership is around linking that public and private partnerships. Thinking about partnerships as a big network projects can cover the planning and design of local regional food economies. There is a 25% match on there, but that usually some of these larger organizations put up the 25 that match, and their partners don't have to worry about that. So I definitely would encourage you to think about that, and think about whether that network fits in line with that program.

Cotti: Thank you.

Carolyn Jones: Thank you.

Torey Powell: We have a webinar coming up for that and if you connect with me, if you connect, if you show up, throw them the next slide up, it has my contact information. Shoot me an email and I'll get you all connected and we can set up a specific time to chat with you all about your project and see if it fits within not.

Cotti: Thank you.

Speaker 34: I have Harvey Reed has one thing to say real quick too.

Harvery Reed: Mr. Powell, how you doing?

Torey Powell: Okay.

Harvery Reed: Okay, you just asked, you just put the slide up there about working, how the committee can work with AMS?

Torey Powell: Yeah.

Harvery Reed: Our main purposes is is to reach out to find out accurate what could be done to service more people of color throughout the country and also as territories. One thing you all need to look at is to increase your outreach efforts to find those individuals, and find those communities, and find those organizations to work with. That's one of the things that hope that you all can do much more on because seeing it still that it's the same ones that get the same funding over and over again. Y'all tried to move more technical assistance to assist those minority farming pharmacy producers to overcome some new things, at least some of the challenges that they've had so far, because you have to get there. Y'all done more about that trying to reach those folks that, I mean such as Ms. Cotti is saying right now, and also Ms. Jones, have y'all increased your outreach effort to try to remit those things that has occurred?

Torey Powell: Yeah, we have and it's, I'll just be frank with you all. It's a new, it's a paradigm shift for our agency. Prior to the pandemic, 80% of AMS was really focused on those value added services, so grading and auditing around national organic program, we had our premium choice prime stake doing those grading and auditing service so that you know can create those market opportunities. It's a different way of doing business, and we had to shift over the last few years and largely that's what my team is looking at of how do we provide those technical assistance. We have some programs that have popped up like I talked about earlier, the meat and poultry one, but thinking about other sectors that we can provide technical assistance on, we've created some programs around technical assistance with the transition to organic program. We've launched a several resources in the organic space to help to transition farmers into organic, specifically thinking about the market opportunity that provides. So we've transitioned into a lot over the past few years, but again, it's a new space for us, and so we're just learning and growing into that technical assistance space.

Harvery Reed: Thanks. I'd like to just addressed this committee on how you all have addressed systemic discrimination with the EMS on regards to who you buy from, and how have y'all just started addressing systemic discrimination?

Torey Powell: Yeah, a few months ago, we know some of the systemic issues within our purchasing programs include the requirements for auditing, the cost associated with getting to a point that we can, you can even participate as a vendor. The being able to meet full truckload requirements is often hard for small and medium-sized producers and processors, so we've taken a look at all of those. We recently waived the auditing requirement, instead we're going to be looking at a different way of checking the financial records. We're looking at small batch purchasing opportunities so that small and mid-size processors and producers can participate in those programs. We're also specifically thinking about tribal, and the tribal space around tribal barriers that exist of what we can do to purchase culturally relevant, and respect tribal sovereignty, and our food purchasing, thinking about bison not purchasing so many.

Also making sure that we're purchasing on a calendar that respects when the bison are available. So we're thinking about a lot of different things that we can do to address those systemic barriers within our purchasing programs, and I'm happy to share those via email with some of those examples that I talked about.

Speaker 34: All right. Well thank you very much, and I just want to end with one statement. I know Ms. Jones and Ms. Cotton talked a lot about the organizations they were using as far as a picture in their community that provided a lot of resources when it came to distributing foods. I was one of them, and I think many of the other people on this board were in their similar situations, so they're not... it's definitely I'm on my local food bank board and if it wasn't for my neighbor that had a lift and had a freezer, we would've been in the same situation, so I just want you to know it's a mass among all the communities across the world, so it's definitely a dilemma that needs to be a high priority on the AMS. Okay.

Torey Powell: Loud and clear.

Speaker 34: All right. Well I appreciate you. Thank you. It's great presentation and thank you.

Torey Powell: Thank you.