

October 7, 2021

FACT SHEET: USDA Activities to Promote Equity

Since Day One of the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA has committed itself to building back better for historically underserved communities. That commitment spans many projects across all of USDA's mission areas and agencies. Here are some of the core actions USDA has taken to level the playing field for our constituents:

EQUITY IN AGRICULTURE

- **Standing Up an Equity Commission:** USDA is standing up an independent Equity Commission to examine USDA programs and services. The Commission will be charged with reviewing USDA programs to identify and make recommendations for how USDA can reduce barriers to access and advance equity. The Commission will also ensure accountability within and empower customers from underserved communities outside of USDA to take fuller advantage of our programs and services, signaling the beginning of the kinds of systemic, structural and cultural changes essential to advancing equity.
- **Engaging with Congress:** Secretary Vilsack [testified](#) at the House Agriculture Committee's first-ever Hearing to Review the State of Black Farmers; he also [testified](#) before the Senate Judiciary [Committee](#) in support of the Farm Worker Modernization Act. In these first opportunities to provide his priorities to congressional leaders he clearly laid out his commitment to equity and justice. In House Ag his testimony and comments were included racial equity and social justice work at USDA and the need to address past discrimination.
- **Ensuring Equitable Pandemic Assistance:** Under the previous administration's Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), only 4% of funding went to socially disadvantaged farmers (among those who identified their race and/or ethnicity). After identifying gaps in previous COVID-19 relief funding, [USDA announced 'Pandemic Assistance for Producers'](#) to distribute resources more equitably and committed to directing to the people and sectors who needed assistance most via the newly-established initiative. Among other funding opportunities, the [Pandemic Assistance Initiative](#) includes re-opening signup for CFAP2, \$700 million in grants to provide [relief to farm and food workers](#) affected by COVID-19, \$700 million to provide relief for [small producers, processors, farmers markets and seafood vessels affected](#) by COVID-19, and \$2 million to establish partnerships with organizations to provide outreach and technical assistance to historically underserved farmers and ranchers. CFAP2 has seen an increase of enrollment to approximately 21% of CFAP applications since April being from socially disadvantaged producers.
- **Restoring the Nation to Nation Relationship with Indian Country:** As part of USDA's commitment to restoring the nation to nation relationship with Indian Country and implementing both President Biden's Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Under Served Communities and the Executive Order on Tribal Consultation, USDA held and Secretary Vilsack participated in an all-of-USDA tribal consultation in March 2021, within weeks of being confirmed.

- **Restoring the Office of Tribal Relations** – Secretary Vilsack restored and empowered a free-standing Office of Tribal Relations that reports directly to him. During the Trump administration the Office of Tribal Relations was minimized and folded under the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement. USDA is restoring the Office of Tribal Relations to a free-standing office that can maintain the nation-to-nation relationship as is required both by law and by treaty.
- **Resolving Heirs’ Property Succession Issues:** In July, USDA announced it was providing [\\$67 million in competitive loans](#) through its new Heirs’ Property Relending Program to help agricultural producers and landowners resolve heirs’ land ownership and succession issues.
- **Supporting Socially Disadvantaged Farmers:** In July, USDA announced approximately [\\$16.6 million in funding](#) to community-based and nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, and Tribal entities that help socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers and ranchers own and operate successful farms.
- **Investing in HBCUs:** USDA announced an [investment of over \\$21.8 million](#) to 1890 Land grant-Institutions to support research at Historically Black Colleges and Universities at our nation’s Land-grant University System. These investments are designed to build capacity for teaching, research and extension activities at eligible institutions including curriculum design, materials development, faculty development, student recruitment and retention, and expansion program development support.
- **Providing Conservation Assistance to Underserved Producers:** In August, USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service announced up to [\\$50 million in cooperative agreements to support historically underserved farmers and ranchers](#) with climate-smart agriculture and forestry. These Racial Justice and Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements are available to entities and individuals for two-year projects that expand the delivery of conservation assistance to farmers who are beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers.
- **Advancing Equity in Agriculture via Economic Opportunity and Next Gen Leaders:** The American Rescue Plan includes \$1 billion that will enable USDA to better support address the needs of historically underserved populations via technical assistance, access to land and support for efforts to resolve land title issues, access to credit, and support reaching new markets. To implement these funds USDA is designing new programs from scratch; the structure, focus and design will reflect input from historically underserved communities, including those received via a recent equity-focused [Request For Information](#). The funds also direct USDA to develop career pathways for the next generation of leaders in agriculture in partnership with minority serving institutions, which will enable USDA to expand, for example, the [Pathways Programs](#).
- **Working toward Debt Relief for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers:** The American Rescue Plan included provisions for USDA to provide debt relief to socially disadvantaged producers with Farm Service Agency Direct and Guaranteed Loans and Farm Storage Facility Loans. USDA took swift action to implement the program. In light of numerous lawsuits and injunctions that prevent payments, USDA is working closely with the Department of Justice to defend the program in district courts.

BUILDING A MORE DIVERSE USDA

- **Leading with Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access Front and Center:** USDA’s commitment to diversity and equity includes strong leadership and experience. The Administration has sought out key leaders from across the country known for their work in agriculture, experience in working with historically underrepresented communities, and their commitment to shape policy at USDA to be more inclusive.
- **Issuing Strong USDA Civil Rights Policies and Updating Anti-Harassment Policies:** The Secretary has issued internal memoranda and communications recommitting USDA to civil rights. The Office of Civil Rights is leading a collaborative effort to revise USDA’s anti-harassment rules and program. Both are important to upholding values, setting expectations and holding USDA employees accountable.
- **Appointing a Senior Advisor for Equity in the Office of the Secretary:** To ensure equity is front and center in policy development and decision making in a cross cutting way, USDA for the first time ever, created a position—Senior Advisor for Equity—in the Office of the Secretary to be an internal advocate for underserved communities.
- **Appointing a Diverse Leadership Team:** Within the first two months of this Administration, the President appointed and nominated the first African American woman to serve as Deputy Secretary (Dr. Jewel Bronaugh), the Department’s first Senior Advisor for Racial Equity in the Office of the Secretary (Dr. Dewayne Goldmon), the first Native American to serve as General Counsel (Janie Hipp), the first Latinx woman to serve as Deputy Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation (Gloria Montaña Greene), the first Native American to serve as Administrator of the Farm Service Agency (Zach Ducheneaux), new leadership in the Office of Civil Rights led by Monica Rainge, and many others reflective of a commitment to build a team that reflects the diversity of America and with deep knowledge of the communities USDA serves.
- **Racial Justice and Equity Internal Working Group:** As part of its implementation of President Biden’s executive order on advancing equity, USDA launched its first-ever Racial Justice and Equity Internal Working Group to identify gaps and inadequacies. The group includes representatives from every USDA Mission Area and is a forum for learning and advancing an all-of-USDA equity effort
- **Request for Information:** In June, USDA published a [Request for Information on Racial Justice and Equity](#) and held over 15 hours of listening sessions with a wide-range of stakeholders to learn about experiences and receive feedback about its programs and services. The information collected will serve as a strong foundation for both the Equity Commission and to ensure these funds are deployed effectively and in response to the needs and priorities of underserved communities.

LOWERING BARRIERS FOR UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

Food and Nutrition Service

- **Expanding Pandemic Food Assistance:** USDA [increased the Pandemic-EBT food assistance benefit by approximately 15%](#), providing more money for low-income families and millions of children missing meals due to school closures. This action provided additional support to millions of low-income and food insecure children during the pandemic
- **Temporarily Increasing SNAP Benefits in Response to Pandemic Challenges: In March,** USDA extended a 15% increase in SNAP benefits— providing over \$1.1 billion per month in additional benefits for about 41 million participants—through September 2021.
- **Permanently Raising SNAP Benefits to Reflect True Costs:** USDA released a re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan in August, a tool used to calculate Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. As a result, the average SNAP benefit will [increase by about 27%](#)
- **Bolstering Access to SNAP:** USDA provided states with [\\$1.135 billion from the American Rescue Plan Act](#) to support and enhance their administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) for a variety of purposes, including investing in technology to improve access to SNAP benefits, exploring opportunities to better reach vulnerable populations, and improving reporting on program outcomes to enable data-driven decision making.
- **Increasing Benefits for WIC Recipients:** USDA announced [nearly \\$900 million for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program Woman, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#). This funding went toward implementing a temporary increase in fruit and vegetable vouchers to \$35 per month and a historic investment in innovation and outreach to better serve more than 6.2 million people who use WIC to support a healthy start for infants and young children.
- **Boosting Assistance for Homeless Youth:** USDA [expanded eligibility](#) for homeless young adults under the age of 25 to be able to receive meals at emergency shelters participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to reach the most vulnerable populations experiencing food hardship due to the pandemic under the America Rescue Plan.

Rural Development

- **Eviction and Foreclosure Moratorium:** In one of his first acts in office, President Joe Biden requested federal agencies to [extend eviction and foreclosure moratoriums](#) for millions of Americans. In response, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced an extension of eviction and foreclosure moratoriums on USDA Single Family Housing Direct and Guaranteed loans (SFHDLP and SFHGLP) and extended the eviction and foreclosure moratorium to affected [multifamily housing residents](#).
- **Expanding Electric Service in Tribal Communities:** The Rural Utilities Service obligated a \$235 million loan to the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority to improve electric service to the Navajo and Hopi tribes and deploy fiber-based smart grid infrastructure. These investments were part of a broader [\\$598 million investment to Improve and Modernize Rural Electric Infrastructure After Serve Weather and Age Test the Grid](#):

- **Sharing Resources for Rural Child Care:** USDA’s Rural Development (RD) and Health and Human Services (HHS) unveiled a joint resource guide aimed to help people in rural and Tribal communities increase access to child-care services. The guide provides useful information to help stakeholders in rural communities address the need for improved access to affordable, high-quality child-care and early learning facilities.
- **Supporting Economic Growth in Underserved Rural Areas:** USDA’s newly-announced [Rural Innovation Stronger Economy \(RISE\)](#) grants help rural communities create good-paying jobs and support new business opportunities in high-growth fields.
- **Promoting Environmental Justice:** USDA Rural Development submitted its plan to implement the Justice40 Initiative, a whole-of-government effort to ensure that at least 40% of climate-related spending is in under-served areas. The pilot uses the Rural Energy for America Plan, which finances renewable energy systems and energy efficiency improvements for agricultural producers and rural small businesses, to bring USDA within Justice40’s parameters.

Forest Service

- **Agreement on the Tongass National Forest:** The USDA Forest Service Alaska Region has entered into a 5-year agreement with the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indians of Alaska to strengthen tribal relations and center tribal perspectives on the Tongass National Forest.
- **Anti-Harassment Directive:** On March 25, USDA’s Forest Service published new guidance continuing their commitment to maintaining a work environment where all people are treated with dignity, fairness, and respect, and are free from harassment. Incorporating employee feedback, the updates establish expectations and responsibilities to prevent and address harassment and retaliation to sustain a productive, respectful work environment.