

February 2023

Response to USDA Equity Commission Interim Report



Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

February 28, 2023

To the American People,

At USDA, we are steadfast in our commitment to advancing equity as we face the challenges of our time and deliver on our wide-ranging mission. Our commitment to equity is about creating an agricultural economy, a rural economy, and an American economy that create opportunity for all. It's in lock step with building our economy from the bottom up and middle out. And it's about ensuring that farmers, ranchers, landowners, communities, families, and business owners have the support and tools they need to build a good life in the communities they love.

Out of this commitment to equity, in February 2022, we announced the members of the Equity Commission and its Subcommittee on Agriculture, an important step towards implementing an Executive Order President Biden issued on his first day in office. We sought Americans who could share their voices and experiences supporting farmers, ranchers, farmworkers, people of color, women, Tribal and Indigenous communities, individuals with disabilities, individuals with limited English proficiency, rural communities, and LGBTQI+ communities. We also made certain to include the important perspectives from those in the small business community and higher education institutions, among others. The Commission, led by co-chairs Deputy Secretary Dr. Jewel Bronaugh and United Farm Workers President Emeritus Arturo S. Rodriguez, took immediate action to convene a forum to listen to external stakeholders, understand where barriers to accessing USDA programs and services exist, and assess data to identify opportunities to advance equity. In August 2022, we added a Subcommittee on Rural Community Economic Development to ensure that we address systemic inequalities in rural development and underserved communities to begin to earn the trust of those who have not benefited from USDA programs and investments despite their long-standing need.

Establishing the Equity Commission was a first step towards building a more equitable USDA that lives up to its name as the People's Department. We are truly grateful for the expertise, time, and dedication the members have provided over the past year. The passion of the members is highly evident in how each recommendation is aimed at improving USDA services to our diverse stakeholders. While this is a subset of many bold actions that we will seek to implement, they establish the foundation upon which USDA will build a more just and equitable farm and food system. USDA will institutionalize these strategies to become an organization that is trusted today and by future generations.

Our country is stronger when everyone participates and more vulnerable when people are left out. The Equity Commission's recommendations, and other related efforts the Department is already undertaking, will make our programs benefit every working American, particularly those who have been left behind.

On behalf of the Department, and all those we serve, I thank the Equity Commission for its efforts to identify ways to improve the lives of Americans for generations to come.

Sincerely,

THOMAS J. VILSACK
Secretary

What Equity Means to USDA

Founded in 1862, the Department's story reflects both the aspirations and historical missteps of this nation. USDA has not always fairly served all its customers and accepts accountability for this troubled history of discrimination. USDA has taken many actions to do better, and is committed to improving the Department's systems, processes, policies, and organizational culture. USDA is advancing a collective and ongoing effort to live up to its name as "The People's Department" and working to build a more perfect union by modernizing its institutions to reflect and serve all the communities that together compose "We the People."

The Commission's Interim Report has identified key areas of opportunities and has also helped to underscore alignment with the Department's ongoing equity efforts and commitment to improve the lives of all Americans for generations to come. USDA has taken a hard look at what equity means to its diverse stakeholders and identified ways the Department can provide immediate relief and progress to those it serves and those it has not yet reached. Through its [Equity Action Plans](#) the Department is taking swift action in alignment with [Executive Orders](#), civil rights laws, and other applicable laws and authorities to advance equity in program design, delivery, and services. USDA is doing its part to help build the economy from the bottom up and the middle out, and to transform the food system so that it provides opportunities for everyone, not just the few.

The Equity Commission's Interim Report provided recommendations for USDA's consideration that focus on the following areas for near and long-term actions:

- How USDA Works with Farmers, Ranchers, and Producers Day-to-Day
- USDA's Need for Department-Wide Change
- USDA's Commitment to Farmworkers and Their Families
- Re-evaluating Other USDA Programs

The information within this document mirrors the structural organization of the recommendations within the Equity Commission's Interim Report to highlight a subset of actions already underway within the Department. The efforts identified in this document do not reflect the totality of the work USDA is doing to support equitable service delivery. The USDA [equity website](#) provides a more comprehensive look at Departmental activities since January 2021 that are aligned with advancing equity.

How USDA is Advancing Equity for **Farmers and Ranchers**

The Equity Commission interim report provides a set of recommendations focused on advancing equity for farmers and ranchers. Since the start of the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA has engaged producers in new and more effective ways, streamlining the delivery of its programs, opening the doors of agriculture to all, and providing a more effective and holistic farm safety net. The Department is reducing barriers to programs and improving support to underserved farmers, ranchers, landowners, and communities by providing ways for stakeholders to share their experiences, insights, and needs. USDA is helping producers increase their revenue sources and income opportunities so their operations—and the agricultural economy—can become more sustainable, resilient, and profitable. USDA is helping farmers create a more resilient agricultural economy that can weather the challenges of the twenty-first century. Through various efforts to build markets for climate-smart commodities, create new and better tools to manage risk to crops and revenue, take proactive steps to improve access to programs, and increase support for working lands conservation practices.

The first recommendation within the Equity Commission's Interim Report addresses issues of **Heirs' Property and Fractionated Land**, which identifies access barriers to USDA programs for historically underserved producers, farmers, ranchers, and other landowners. In the Spring of 2021, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) expanded USDA's partnership efforts to support farmers and ranchers resolve land ownership and succession issues through non-loan options such as cooperative agreements and grant opportunities. For example, the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center at Alcorn State University continues to lead the development and implementation of an heirs' property and fractionation issues training curriculum targeted to underserved farmers and ranchers, who are disproportionately impacted by these issues. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund has been conducting outreach and technical assistance on the [Heirs' Property Relending Program](#) (HPRP) to ensure eligible heirs learn about the program, and receive programmatic and general support when applying to the HPRP, and to assist individuals working to resolve title issues, as well as supporting their access and participation in the HPRP program.

USDA is also leveraging the [Taxpayer Education and Asset Protection Initiative](#) to facilitate the delivery of heirs' property resources and estate planning training to farmers and ranchers because tax and legal issues often go hand in hand for underserved producers. FSA is increasing outreach regarding the HPRP to eligible lenders and is applying lessons learned from the first application process in Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22). FSA is identifying barriers to participation and are working to align the [Highly Fractionated Indian Land Loan Program](#) (HFIL) more closely with the HPRP based on input from Tribes and Native American Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs). USDA recognizes that more research and engagement with Tribal and Alaskan Native communities are needed and is committed to deepening these partnerships.

Of note, the National Agricultural Library (NAL) collaborated with their Agricultural Law Information Partnership collaborators at the National Agricultural Law Center (University of Arkansas) and the Vermont Law School to develop and disseminate resources on Heirs' Property. The materials are available on the [NAL website](#) and on the collaborators' websites. These are just some of the initiatives USDA is using to empower farmers and ranchers in their financial decision-making while ensuring they can protect their farm assets and transfer them to the next generation.

With respect to the Commission’s recommendation on **community-led land access and transition projects**, in August 2022, with authority and funding provided through the American Rescue Plan, FSA announced a grant and cooperative agreement program making up to \$300 million to assist underserved producers through the [Increasing Land, Capital and Market Access Program](#). Recognizing the importance of land access to agriculture and opportunity, this program is designed to help underserved producers by increasing land, capital, and market access. The program will fund cooperative agreements or grants for projects that help move underserved producers from surviving to thriving. The application period for this opportunity closed in mid-December and applications are currently under review, with awardees slated to be announced by Summer 2023.

USDA is in alignment with Commission’s recommendations on **climate change, conservation, and risk management** and is incorporating an equity lens in the programs that touch these areas. The Department is committed to an approach to climate-smart agriculture and forestry that is voluntary, incentive-based and collaborative that expands and creates new markets for climate-smart commodities and greenhouse gas reductions that reward farmers, ranchers, and forest owners for their stewardship.

The Department has made significant investments in partnerships to support climate-smart farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners through the [Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities](#). USDA incorporated stakeholder concerns into the program design and made equity a factor in award selection, encouraging partnerships with underserved producers. These efforts will finance the production of climate-smart commodities through partner-led pilot and demonstration projects that help expand and create markets for climate-smart agricultural commodities and will provide new sources of revenue for producers.

FSA also updated the [Conservation Reserve Program \(CRP\) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program \(CREP\)](#) to improve their environmental benefits while expanding the reach of the program. In 2021, FSA added a Climate-Smart Payment Incentive and higher payment rates for CRP and modified CREP to allow for added staffing capacity and to increase eligibility to a broader array of entities including Tribes. This past year, FSA enrolled about 5.6 million acres into the CRP through its General, Continuous and Grassland signups in 2022, which surpassed the 3.9 million acres expiring in 2023. Grassland CRP had its largest

Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) funds one- to two-year projects to expand the delivery of conservation assistance to producers who are new to farming, are low-income, identify as one or more marginalized race or ethnicity, and/or are military veterans. The program encourages new partnerships and the development of State and Community leadership for underserved producers, with projects focusing on key conservation priorities including:

- Improving soil health and water quality,
- Providing habitat for at-risk wildlife,
- Improving natural resources and productivity on agricultural lands,
- Increasing access to conservation staff and resource in urban areas, and/or
- Building and strengthening local and regional food systems and markets.

In FY22, NRCS administered a \$50 million investment in 118 partnerships to improve equity in access to conservation programs through [Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements](#) and is investing another \$70 million in FY23.

signup in history, enrolling 3.1 million acres. In 2022, FSA signed historic CREP agreements with three tribal nations in the Great Plains: Cheyenne River, Oglala, and Rosebud Sioux tribes. These partner agreements will help enroll eligible grassland, pastureland, and other agricultural lands within the boundaries of their reservations. USDA's Regional Climate Hubs are also working with Tribal stakeholders to include their knowledge and priorities as they deliver science-based climate-smart agriculture tools and programs. Specific examples include the Native Climate project and the Collaborative Conservation and Adaptation Strategy Toolbox, which includes codeveloping the Drought Severity Evaluation Tool for use by the Navajo Nation.

Another example where USDA is making progress and implementing elements of the conservation recommendation related to small-scale and diversified farming is through the new 2023-2027 action plan for Agricultural Research Service (ARS) National Program 216 (Sustainable Agricultural Systems) which prioritizes research that enhances the sustainability of small-scale, diversified agriculture and food systems, including improving and measuring climate mitigation impacts. ARS researchers in Auburn, Alabama, have been working to develop scale-appropriate technology (e.g., walk-behind no-till transplanters, thermal roller crimpers for termination of cover crops) for implementing conservation practices like minimum tillage and cover cropping on small-scale farms, including organic systems.

USDA appreciates the Equity Commission's positive response to the Risk Management Agency (RMA) work leveraging tools in the 2018 Farm Bill to expand crop insurance to more crops and producers. This past year, through a series of stakeholder engagements, RMA was able to learn about the needs of specialty crop and underserved producers, which led to the development of a new nursery policy that is easier for producers to access and for insurance companies to sell and service; a new policy for strawberries in Florida and California; several modifications to the [Whole-Farm Revenue Protection](#) program to expand eligibility limits and provide more coverage for organic and livestock producers; and a new [Micro Farm Program](#) targeted at providing crop insurance for smaller producers who sell locally, such as urban producers and those that sell to farmers markets. USDA will continue to adapt to meet the needs of its diverse stakeholders.

In January 2023, FSA announced updates to the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program that improves access to this important risk management tool. Beginning with the 2022 crop year, FSA will designate the CCC-860 form as the application for basic 50/55 NAP coverage. This update will provide free basic NAP coverage and waive the NAP service fee for producers who have certified as a socially disadvantaged, limited resource, beginning or veteran farmer or rancher. While this change is recent, we expect it to help streamline and expand enrollment, allowing more producers to receive coverage and better manage risk.

Within its **technical assistance and outreach** recommendation, the Equity Commission highlighted stakeholder difficulties navigating USDA programs and services. USDA is helping to ensure that underserved farmers, ranchers, and foresters have the tools, programs and support they need to succeed in agriculture, in part, by providing over \$100 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) funding to over 30 organizations to provide technical assistance to connect underserved producers with USDA programs and services. The goal is to provide targeted support for at-risk producers to avoid land loss, develop sound business plans, expand revenues and their markets, and unlock access to capital. Cooperative agreements with trusted technical assistance providers are an important step in building trust and reducing barriers so underserved producers can better access USDA programs and services.

[Two cohorts of organizations](#) have been selected to serve as partners to USDA based on their proven track records working with underserved producer communities, such as veterans, new farmers, limited resource producers, and producers living in high-poverty areas.

The Department agrees with the Commission's sub-recommendation to increase technical assistance and financial support for young and beginning farmers and has identified [Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coordinators](#) for each state from State Office staff of the FSA, NRCS, and Rural Development (RD), and regional staff of RMA. These coordinators are tasked with leading the development and implementation of a beginning farmer education, outreach, and technical assistance plan for their state. They are supported by regional coordinators and the USDA National Beginning Farmer Coordinator. This work includes targeting small, minority, and specialty crop producers through a variety of outreach channels including online education and outreach. The state coordinators also conduct stakeholder engagement, maintain relationships with non-profits and other service providers in their states, and make beginning farmer referrals to these organizations.

The Interim Report includes a recommendation that recognizes the many forms of **traditional agriculture**, including tribal and Native American, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian agriculture. The Department values and respects the diversity of traditional agriculture. Last year, FSA updated the Livestock Indemnity Program payment rates to recognize traditional tribal animals which better reflect the true market value of non-adult beef, beefalo, bison, and dairy animals. Other FSA programs (Livestock Forage Program, Livestock Indemnity Program, Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees and Farm Raised Fish Program) were also updated to include horses, which previously were not eligible. This change will allow eligible tribal ranchers who use forage to raise their horses to participate in the programs. When the results of the 2022 Census of Agriculture are complete, USDA will analyze the data particularly as they relate to the groups the Equity Commission has identified.

The Equity Commission notes the complexity of **FSA loan programs and processes challenges** and how this can present a barrier to accessing USDA programs and services. Significant progress has been made in simplifying loan processes over the past two years and the Department will continue to improve the access to—and customer experience with—FSA programs. In February 2023, FSA implemented a simplified direct farm loan application process, drastically reducing the burden and time spent on its forms. The agency also rolled out a [loan assistance tool](#) that helps farmers and ranchers better navigate the farm loan application process.

The Equity Commission emphasized the need to provide producers with proactive loan servicing and address longstanding debt that is making it hard for farmer to keep farming. As part of implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act signed by President Biden in August 2022, FSA provided nearly \$800 million in financial assistance to more than 13,000 distressed farmers and plans to assist thousands more in 2023. This work accompanies FSA's ongoing efforts to improve farm lending programs with a focus on improved loan servicing and ongoing support to keep farmers farming, rather than requiring farmers to become distressed before providing assistance.

The Inflation Reduction Act also provided resources for the Department to provide help to those impacted by discrimination in USDA farm lending programs. In October 2022, the Department issued a Request for Information to hear the valuable perspectives of farmers, farm advocates, academics, legislators, tribal governments, and other experts. The process of developing the program to provide financial assistance is underway. In accordance with the requirements of the Federal Acquisition

Regulation (FAR), the Department will issue contracts to vendors for program administration that will coordinate the delivery of a national program of financial assistance to impacted farmers, ranchers or forest landowners.

The Commission called attention to the disparities in farm program benefits paid to underserved producers. USDA acknowledges these disparities and welcomes further research, discussion, and work with Congress to address systemic inequities such as programs limited to only a few row crops or even specific farms with **base acres** of those crops that are baked into USDA statutes. In the meantime, USDA is working to ensure the resources it receives go to those who need them the most. The Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area has risen to the challenge as the pandemic continued to disrupt operations, markets, and lives across the countryside. The Pandemic Assistance for Producers initiative filled gaps in previous assistance, making sure that USDA was reaching a much broader set of producers, including those in underserved communities, small- and medium-sized producers, farmers and producers of non-commodity crops, and other agricultural businesses. This initiative also provided an opportunity for the Department to evaluate and adjust how it delivers programs based on feedback from the agriculture industry and add mechanisms such as looking at an operations overall revenue decline to target assistance to farmers with more severe impacts instead of the normal crop-by-crop approach that is less holistic.

Early in 2021, USDA briefly paused the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 2 (CFAP 2) to make significant improvements to the program and to better meet the needs of producers and industries left out of earlier pandemic assistance programs. This included a \$4.7 million investment to establish partnerships with organizations to provide outreach and technical assistance to underserved producers leading to a fourfold increase in participation by underserved producers after the program reopened in April 2021. More recently, FSA announced that it would be making automatic CFAP 2 top-up payments to underserved producers.

In addition to making substantial improvements to CFAP 2, USDA created several new pandemic assistance programs to support those producers who experienced substantial losses due to the pandemic but who had not been included in previous rounds of assistance. FSA focused on making sure the assistance helped address every producer's true, comprehensive losses. This meant creating new programs to support transitioning organic producers, cotton and wool apparel manufacturers, biofuel producers, producers who sold hogs through a spot market sale, livestock producers impacted by insufficient access to processing, timber harvesting and hauling businesses, dairy farmers who received a lower value due to market abnormalities, and more. It also meant reimagining and improving USDA's approach to disaster assistance. This expansion of assistance to cover more types of agriculture and farming communities has shown up through an average increase of 50,000 more new farms registering with FSA during each of the past three years relative to before the broadened programs.

The Equity Commission is also critical of the **County Committee (COC) system** which is a longstanding and statutorily required structure. Required by law, USDA continues the County Committee system; however, the Department is working to recruit Committee members who reflect the full diversity of American agriculture, improve their trainings, and develop strategies to increase engagement with farmers who have not been represented in the past. FSA has worked on an improved and robust training that provides more clarity on the functions of the Committee members. In addition, FSA is in a pilot stage to implement Urban County Committees and leverage the targeted deliverables to inform improvements in the traditional county committees. FSA appreciates the Equity Commission recommendations and is committed to improving the accountability of the County Committee system.

How USDA is Advancing Equity for **USDA Agencies, Employees, and Stakeholders**

Equity is now at the core of what USDA does; **institutionalizing diversity and equity** is a top priority of the Biden-Harris Administration. There are many steps that need to be taken to make equity a part of the Department's culture and make it a great place to work for all. Changes in the structure, leadership responsibilities, and accountability measures are all being considered, and the Commission's specific recommendations will be a key part of that process.

In the meantime, progress is being made. A robust diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) [strategic plan](#) was adopted in 2022. USDA is also hiring its first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer (CDIO), reporting directly to the Secretary. A CDIO office is being established and funded as a permanent program office in USDA. The office is leading USDA's internal work to institutionalize best practices for a diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive organization. It prioritizes developing a workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities USDA serves, bringing the best talent to USDA, investing in the workforce, and creating a culture where everyone feels welcome, and are given developmental opportunities to perform their best. A well-trained and robust field staff is also essential to providing the service producers deserve.

USDA is institutionalizing diversity and equity, including through hiring practices. FSA, for example, is prioritizing hiring staff in county office locations while taking steps to address systemic concerns with recruitment and retention. FSA significantly increased use of incentives to improve recruitment and retention of high-caliber employees. In FY22, FSA issued 334 student loan repayments to employees who, in exchange, entered into 3-year service agreements with the agency. FSA has also been addressing concerns about competitive salaries, for entry and mid-career pay while working toward fully staffing offices. Through focused recruitment and outreach efforts to minority serving institutions, FSA saw an 81% increase in hires from diverse backgrounds in county office staff in FY22 as compared to FY21.

In addition, the [Forest Service](#) continues to make strides in creating sustainable pathways to full-time employment for skilled applicants, particularly entry level and mid-level career individuals. The agency is taking action by implementing the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law firefighter pay, new Wildland Fire Occupational Series provisions, strengthening partnerships, and participating in national service programs. Over the last two years the agency, working with partners, has invested in thousands of paid work experiences for conservation and service corps participants doing mission-critical work, from wildfire risk reduction to improving safe and equitable access to the outdoors. These transformational experiences can lead to career pathways. For example, in the U.S. Forest Service Southern Region, a third of graduated AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) members who were on fire crews secured wildland firefighting jobs with federal land management agencies, and every team member who had interest in a forestry job received one.

While legislation determines USDA's authorities, the Department acknowledges the Commission's recommendation for **equity authority legislation**. USDA is committed to working with the White House and Congress to identify opportunities to ensure programs are continuously audited, analyzed, and improved. USDA will hold itself accountable to improve the availability and distribution of services and programs so that all customers and stakeholders have equitable access to USDA.

USDA is strengthening **Tribal Consultations and Nation-to-Nation relationships** in a variety of ways. In February 2023, the Forest Service released a historic Tribal Relations Action plan on tribal consultation and strengthening nation-to-nation relationships. The action plan seeks to advance tribal relations at the agency and provide guidance and assistance to fulfill the Department's federal trust responsibility, honor treaty obligations, and support tribal self-determination. As part of this work, the Forest Service also renamed the State & Private Forestry deputy chief area to State, Private & Tribal Forestry. The Forest Service has made co-stewardship of federally managed lands and waters with Indian tribes a key priority in stewarding the nation's forests and grasslands, leveraging existing authorities such as Tribal Forestry Protection Act (TFPA) 638 project authority to enable Tribes to conduct work on National Forest System (NFS) lands. Through the [Joint Secretarial Order](#) promoting increased tribal inclusion in federally managed lands, USDA and the Department of the Interior are implementing a policy to ensure that tribal governments have a role in decision-making on public lands that are their ancestral homelands. This policy enhances the protection of sacred sites and resources and incorporates traditional Indigenous values and perspectives in land and resource management decisions. As part of the Department's internal organizational planning, USDA will consider the Equity Commission's proposal to elevate the Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) ensuring the level of staffing and authority reflect the needs identified.

USDA agrees with the Equity Commission's assessment that language is a barrier for linguistically and culturally diverse communities trying to access programs and services; **language access** is a key part of ensuring communities are aware of USDA's programs and services. To improve this, last year alone, more than 150 new translated documents were shared on farmers.gov, highlighting priority programs, deadlines, and opportunities; Spanish translations of the farm loan discovery and service center locator tools were also built. FPAC is in the process of expanding financial partnerships with several of the groups listed in the Equity Commission recommendations to expand the number and type of service providers necessary to maximize access to culturally appropriate languages. In FY22, FPAC filled 150 Limited English Proficiency (LEP) requests resulting in 723 products spanning 30 separate languages. FPAC currently has a contract in place to provide a full range of translation services in support of Agency technical assistance efforts. It also has plans to increase financial partnerships to expand access to linguistically and culturally appropriate translation services which may also be used to assist with technical support efforts. Work remains to be done as it relates to language access and cultural competency; USDA will integrate the Equity Commission's recommendation into planning and requests for funding moving forward.

The Commission's recommendation about improving **customer experience** is timely as FPAC is emphasizing its Customer Experience Division (CXD) work to provide a more positive experience for customers and employees, increase access to products and services, and improve service delivery. FPAC

Co-Stewardship of National Forests

At the 2022 White House Tribal Nations Summit, the Forest Service highlighted [11 new signed co-stewardship agreements](#) which include a collective investment of approximately \$4.1 million in FY22. These co-stewardship agreements, along with 60 others involving 45 tribes in various stages of review, represent a Forest Service FY22 investment of approximately \$19.8 million in our shared commitment to advancing co-stewardship with tribes.

is now using new processes and technology to complete farmer and rancher requests in fewer steps for the farmer and less time to deliver results. This includes expanded use of digital signatures, remote workload processing, and a centralized call center staffed with employees who are readily available to assist customers virtually. These improvements allow farmers and ranchers to spend less time traveling long distances, taking them from their businesses, and provide much-needed flexibility to engage with the agency on their schedule. Resources are organized to make searching easier for producers including beginning, small-scale, urban, organic, women, youth, immigrant, and LGBTQI+ producers and farmworkers. Currently, FPAC is developing a webpage for Tribal producers to increase their awareness of USDA programs in general and those programs geared toward them.

One example of improving process is with the implementation of the Extending Government Funding and Delivering Emergency Assistance Act of 2021. FSA and RMA leveraged existing data to streamline an application process and get money to producers faster than previous ad hoc programs without burdening producers. In collaboration with the FPAC Business Center (BC), FSA and RMA created prefilled applications which allowed FSA to quickly assist producers in need. USDA estimates that the design of Emergency Relief Program and the Emergency Livestock Relief Program saved over a million hours of staff time, and while the exact time savings for producers can't be calculated, USDA estimates it to be equally significant.

In terms of feedback loops, CXD is distributing three nationwide surveys focused on better understanding farmers, ranchers, and forest managers who have not previously worked with FPAC. Each of the surveys has been translated into 13 languages and is available for completion online. These surveys have been shared with stakeholders as well as other avenues to gather feedback. FPAC is also actively seeking feedback through buttons on farmers.gov, FSA, NRCS, and RMA public-facing websites. In the first quarter of FY23, 972 responses were received to gather insights regarding the customer's experience on the FPAC platforms. USDA remains committed to continual process improvements and will consider the Commission's specific recommendations in the planning and execution of such improvements.

USDA appreciates the Commission's recommendations on ways to hold the Department accountable and increase transparency through **annual compliance reviews** and **equity audits**. USDA endeavors to continue to cultivate a learning culture whereby evidence is available, accessible, and used at all levels of the organization and is actively working to strengthen its evidence building capacity to better support data-driven decisions and program implementation. Specifically, USDA is focused on strengthening data collection, performance measure design, and formal program evaluation so these efforts incorporate an equity lens in the initial design. The recommendations will be taken into account as USDA adheres to authorities moving forward.

Rebuilding civil rights capabilities is critical and the **Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights** (OASCR) is setting the stage for a more inclusive future. USDA has committed to fully funding and staffing OASCR and agency-level civil rights offices. USDA is also ensuring that executive performance plans throughout the Department incorporate equity and civil rights training and compliance. OASCR has engaged in multiple listening sessions, conducted a thorough review of all processes, and is working to develop organizational assessments and identify process improvements. OASCR has drastically improved the timeliness of its Equal Employment Opportunity investigations, decision-making, and appeals. For discrimination complaints by USDA program customers, the processing time has been reduced from three years to approximately 16 months—the best record in more than a decade, though still requiring

improvement. In addition, a foreclosure moratorium has been implemented for RD home-loan borrowers while those customers' program complaints are processed. USDA has more to do to be accountable in all of its civil rights operations.

USDA applauds the Commission's support of **Public-Private Partnerships**. To have the greatest impact, public agencies cannot operate alone; such agreements are critical across all facets of the government. USDA is continually looking at ways to improve partnerships and make access more equitable. For example, to make it easier to work with the Forest Service, in July 2022, the agency introduced significant interim policy changes for partnership and cooperator agreements. The direction removed barriers that were preventing equitable access to partnerships and created a process to reduce or waive match requirements that are not statutorily required. The new policy waives match requirements for all agreements with Tribal governments and allows Forest Service leaders to reduce or waive policy match requirements for partners that serve underserved communities. This shift seeks to correct the systemic undervaluing of "services and in-kind contributions" of certain partners, such as strong relationships with underrepresented and under-resourced communities; innovative public outreach strategies; and connections to Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK).

The Commission's recommendation around focusing on **procurement** and supplier diversity includes a number of actions that will be considered. USDA is currently investing in local procurement and leveraging its buying power to ensure small and disadvantaged businesses have a fair shot at being able to do business with the Department. In doing so, USDA has exceeded its [small business goals](#) to 22.4%. Using \$1.1 billion of American Rescue Plan and Commodity Credit Corporation funding for the [Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program \(LFPA\)](#) which uses non-competitive cooperative agreements with state and tribal governments to procure and distribute local and regional foods and beverages that are healthy, nutritious, and unique to their geographic area. The funding also was used for the [Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program \(LFS\)](#), which strengthened the food system for schools by helping to build a fair, competitive, and resilient local food chain, and expand local and regional markets with an emphasis on purchasing from underserved producers and processors.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is preparing to conduct the 2023 Farm to School Census, which will include new questions to identify characteristics of the producers School Food Authorities are purchasing from, including minority- or women-owned businesses. Additionally, FNS has worked with the National Center for Appropriate Technology and the National Farm to School Network to develop and disseminate a producer focused farm to school training curriculum designed to help agricultural producers build their capacity to launch or expand sales of their products to Child Nutrition Programs.

In addition to farm to school efforts, USDA has also announced its [Healthy Meals Incentives](#) initiative under which four non-governmental organizations will be selected by FNS to manage funds for the School Food System Transformation Challenge. These organizations will award competitive grants to support and enhance the food supply chain for K-12 schools and promote innovation by food producers and suppliers, including local producers and small and disadvantaged businesses.

Finally, the proposed rule—[Child Nutrition Programs: Revisions to Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#)—will strengthen support for local and domestic foods. USDA proposes allowing schools to include locally grown, raised, or caught as a requirement for vendors bidding to provide food for their school meals programs. In addition, USDA proposes updating the Buy American provision by setting a limit of 5% of total food costs on non-domestic food purchases.

How USDA Is Advancing Equity for Farmworkers and Their Families

While **farmworkers** have long been the key to the success of the nation's food and agriculture industries, they have been a fundamentally neglected population. Farmworkers are essential to the nation's food security, and USDA recognizes the critical need to address challenges of labor instability, increase labor protections, and provide access to nutrition.

To address these challenges and the Commission's recommendation to provide financial support to farmworkers, in coordination with other federal agencies, USDA is developing a pilot program utilizing up to \$65 million in funding to provide support for agricultural employers in implementing robust health and safety standards to promote a safe, healthy work environment for both U.S. workers and workers hired from Central American countries under the seasonal H-2A visa program. The program will address current labor shortages in agriculture, expand pathways for migration, and improve working conditions for farmworkers. USDA will provide opportunities for stakeholder engagement as the program is developed. USDA is also partnering with the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) through a technical assistance cooperative agreement to inform USDA of the challenges faced by agricultural workers and to inform development of the pilot program. UFW will work with relevant stakeholders, including farmers, farmworkers, farmworker advocates, and unions, to ensure that the agency benefits from a wide range of views.

On the farmworker nutrition recommendation, FNS has been working to translate its public-facing nutrition assistance program materials into Spanish and other languages, including the [SNAP Eligibility](#) page, a prototype school meals application, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Meal Benefit Eligibility Form, and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Breastfeeding Support resources. In 2022, FNS published a [Non-Citizen Communities](#) webpage that provides information on what FNS programs support eligible non-citizens and family members, and FNS plans to develop a SNAP-specific non-citizen page in the future.

For The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), FNS is making \$100 million in grant funding available to expand the program in underserved areas. Grant funds may be used to translate program materials into additional languages.

Furthermore, FNS is encouraging States to conduct outreach to inform low-income households of all communities, including farmworkers, about the opportunity to apply for SNAP. In FY 2023, 44 States are conducting SNAP outreach activities based on FNS-approved outreach plans.

Farm and Food Workers Relief Program (FFWR)

The [Farm and Food Workers Relief Grant Program](#) provides Consolidated Appropriations Act funds to provide grants to State agencies, Tribal entities, and nonprofit organizations with experience in providing support or relief services to farmworkers or meatpacking workers. Highlights from 2022 include:

- \$700 million in grants made available to provide relief to at least 1 million farmworkers, meatpacking workers, and front-line grocery workers who incurred pandemic-related health and safety costs.
- 14 non-profit organizations and one tribal entity were awarded grant funding to administer the FFWR program.

While USDA has made significant strides to improve the living and working conditions for farmworkers and their families, USDA recognizes and validates the recommendations of the Equity Commission that there is more to be done. USDA is currently exploring the feasibility of the recommendations that address the need for farmworkers to be adequately recognized within intergovernmental processes, programs, services, funding, and policies.

How USDA Is Advancing Equity for **Research and Extension Programs**

USDA recognizes the documented decline in federal investment in **agricultural research**, which directly impacts the number of college graduates available to meet private and public sector employer needs across disciplines. According to National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)-supported research published by Purdue University in the [2022-2025 Employment Outlook Report Summary](#), employer demand for college graduates with degrees and expertise in food, agriculture, renewable natural resources and the environment (FARNRE) will continue to exceed the number of available graduates.

The Department appreciates the Commission’s recommendations to invest in and advance federal agricultural **research, development, and deployment**. USDA understands that the investments the Department makes will define innovation for decades to come. To best support producers and communities as they face new and evolving challenges, USDA is aware that it must ensure that its research arm is flexible, nimble, and working on timely and relevant research and data collection. Additionally, USDA recognizes the value of investing in inclusion, diversity, and inspiring future generations through formal and informal learning. As part of [Justice40](#), USDA’s Research, Education, and Economics agencies are investing in academic scholarships, career development support, and research projects with minority-serving land grant partners that support the next generation of leadership and strong agricultural science careers. With funding and authorities provided by the American Rescue Plan, USDA made \$250 million available to enable Minority-Serving Institutions to create career development opportunities in agriculture for next generation scholars. This competitive funding is necessary for attracting, inspiring, and retaining diverse and talented students for careers in food and agriculture, and careers at USDA. The program application window closed in late December and applications are currently under review with announcement of awardees expected by Summer 2023. This also establishes a foundation and model on which, in partnership with Congress, USDA can make changes that enable USDA internship, fellowship, and other professional development experiences to become food and agriculture career opportunities for next generation scholars and professionals.

USDA also invested \$40 million for workforce development and training to build a pipeline of well-trained workers to meet the demand for both current processors and increased independent processing capacity. The primary investment will be through competitive grants to support workforce training at community, junior, and technical colleges with programs specifically for meat and poultry processing.

NIFA has systematically evaluated and implemented plain-language improvements to its RFAs that encourage collaborations with minority serving agricultural colleges and universities. NIFA included plain language in its RFAs for Advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility. NIFA has also been

“From Learning to Leading” Program

In 2022, USDA announced \$250 million for the “From Learning to Leading: Cultivating the Next Generation of Diverse Food and Agriculture Professionals” program to Create Career Development Opportunities for Next Gen Scholars at Minority-Serving Institutions. This competitive funding opportunity is aimed at attracting, inspiring, and retaining diverse and talented students at eligible minority-serving institutions for careers in food, agriculture, and related disciplines, with an emphasis on federal government sector employment.

working on a cooperative agreement for implementation in FY23 with the Southern Regional Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University to pilot a team-based, dialogue-to-change process, that, once developed, can be used to expand Extension and Research programming to marginalized communities.

Through the Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement (FASE) Grants, NIFA aims to provide competitive grants that strengthen science capabilities in research, education, and/or extension programs for FASE eligible institutions. FASE Grants are designed to help institutions develop competitive projects, and to attract new scientists and educators into careers in high-priority areas of national need in agriculture, food, and environmental sciences. FASE Grants provide support for Pre- and Postdoctoral Fellowships, New Investigators, and Strengthening Grants. FASE Grants consist of New Investigator Grants, Pre- and Postdoctoral Fellowship Grants, and Strengthening Grants. Strengthening Grants are further divided into Sabbatical Grants, Equipment Grants, Seed Grants, Strengthening Standard Grants, Strengthening CAP (Coordinated Agricultural Project) Grants, and Strengthening Conference Grants. Fifteen percent of NIFA's flagship Agriculture & Food Research Initiative (AFRI) funding is set aside for Strengthening Grants and Pre and Postdoctoral Fellowship Grants. Additionally, NIFA has successfully utilized cooperative agreements for targeted programs that will benefit stakeholders and help USDA serve better.

How USDA Is Advancing Equity for Families Needing Food Assistance

FNS leverages its 15 nutrition assistance programs to ensure children, income-eligible individuals, and families have equitable access to healthy, safe, and affordable foods that promote optimal health and well-being, while building a more resilient food system. FNS accomplishes this by partnering with more than 175 States, U.S. Territories, and Tribal organizations that operate federal nutrition programs. In FY22, these programs served one in four Americans.

In alignment with the Commission recommendation, the Department is committed to **nutrition security and reducing barriers to access**. USDA recognizes that long standing disparities in diet-related diseases are rooted in structural racism and require collaboration beyond FNS. Therefore, USDA is working with federal partners and stakeholders across the country to meet the goals of the [White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health](#) to end hunger and reduce diet-related diseases and disparities. The Biden-Harris Administration's National Strategy, unveiled ahead of the conference, provides a roadmap for actions that the federal government will take administratively, common sense legislative proposals, and a call to action for how non-government entities can bring about the changes necessary to meet the goals. As part of the National Strategy, the Administration reaffirmed its support for legislative proposals to eliminate prohibitions for formerly incarcerated individuals and to support granting territories the option to transition from current block grants to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

FNS is also investing in outreach, innovation, and program modernization efforts in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to increase WIC participation and retention and reduce disparities in program delivery. As part of this work, FNS is supporting outreach and community-level engagement through the WIC Community Innovation and Outreach (CIAO) Cooperative Agreement. CIAO will support state and local partnerships to expand outreach to underserved populations and test new ways of conducting outreach. Through the cooperative agreement, FNS will facilitate technical assistance and at least two rounds of grant funding to support innovative WIC outreach projects. FNS will then identify effective strategies implemented within the grant-funded projects and use these learnings to inform an outreach framework for WIC operators and partners.

Additionally, in February 2023, FNS and NIFA announced an investment of \$750,000 to support the development of the public health workforce for WIC. This joint agency initiative is designed to cultivate

SNAP Modernization Efforts

- 49 states plus DC can now provide 99% of recipients access to online purchasing.
- In November 2022, 4 million SNAP households shopped online – up from 35,000 in March 2020.
- FNS launched an online e-commerce project to allow farmers markets to accept SNAP payments online.
- FNS awarded a grant that has enabled approximately 3,000 farmers to accept SNAP payments through on-site mobile devices.
- Working with smaller and independent stores to expand online shopping, FNS provided a \$5 million award to National Grocers Association Foundation to walk smaller retailers through the implementation process.

comprehensive and sustained solutions to increase cultural competency and culturally responsive care in WIC, in turn increasing participation in the program and improving the health of participants. The initiative also intends to leverage the experience and expertise of FNS and NIFA, including NIFA's partnerships with land-grant universities and colleges, to strengthen the diversity and cultural competency of the WIC workforce to better serve all WIC families.

With respect to the recommendation about re-evaluation of the **Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)**, USDA is continuing research related to the congressional mandate to re-evaluate the program every five years to reflect the needs of today's consumers. During FY23, FNS will begin a systematic review on food waste and a study on alternatives to the current TFP optimization model. The latest TFP report for the mainland U.S. was published in 2021 and the next report will be published in 2026. In the interim, USDA adjusts the cost of the TFP for inflation each month using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index. By law, the cost of the TFP—specifically, the cost of the June TFP—serves as the basis for the maximum SNAP benefit allotments in the following Federal fiscal year beginning each October 1st.

The Department supports the Commission's recommendation on having a customer-centered design of SNAP. As is the case with all USDA programs and services, **customer-centered service** is a primary goal of FNS. Through the management evaluation process, FNS conducts ongoing monitoring of State agencies to ensure that SNAP is administered in a way that treats applicants and participants with dignity and respect. FNS requires State agencies to take reasonable steps to ensure that limited English proficiency households or applicants have meaningful access to programs, services, and benefits. These steps include providing bilingual program information and certification materials, as well as interpretation services. FNS also ensures that State agencies provide equal access for people with disabilities by providing auxiliary aids and services when needed to ensure effective communication.

FNS is in the process of engaging in proactive and interactive training of SNAP-authorized businesses. This training has long been available in English and Spanish, but more recently, notices to the authorized SNAP business community have included translations in Arabic, Haitian, and both Traditional and Simplified Chinese. Another recent upgrade is the FNS grant for a SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Modernization Technical Assistance Center (SEMTAC). The SEMTAC team is charged with providing technical assistance to retailers interested in accepting SNAP payments online, with a specific focus on small retailers. SEMTAC will both simplify and translate materials and processes required of retailers who wish to pursue this payment option and assist retailers in assessing and making related business decisions.

USDA agrees with the Commission's request to **review the nutrition programs**. For example, FNS recognizes the importance of encouraging school meals that meet cultural food preferences and ensuring the nutrition standards allow them. This priority is reflected in the recently proposed standards, [*Child Nutrition Programs: Revisions to Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*](#). The proposed rule to update school meal nutrition standards marks an important step toward nutrition equity, which is not just equal access to nutritious foods but to foods that reflect cultural preferences. For example, the whole grain-rich proposal would allow schools to occasionally serve white rice or non-whole grain-rich tortillas, while still promoting whole grain-rich foods throughout the school week.

FNS published a [proposed rule](#) on November 21, 2022, to revise regulations governing the WIC food packages. The proposed changes are intended to provide WIC participants with a wider variety of foods

that align with the latest nutritional science and provide WIC State agencies with greater flexibility to prescribe and tailor food packages to accommodate participants' special dietary needs and personal and cultural food preferences and support more equitable access to supplemental foods.

In addition, FNS is investing in improving the WIC shopping experience through grantmaking and outreach. The agency will also research disparities in access to WIC-authorized vendors to inform ongoing work, including to support WIC State agencies in creating opportunities for businesses to participate as authorized vendors in the WIC Program.

What's Next for USDA

USDA can only succeed in its mission to help America thrive if it ensures that the Americans who need its services most receive them. Equity is not an add-on or extra; it is central to the Department's mission:

To serve **all** Americans by providing effective, innovative, science-based public policy leadership in agriculture, food and nutrition, natural resource protection and management, rural development, and related issues with a commitment to deliverable equitable and climate-smart opportunities that inspire and help America thrive.

USDA thanks the Equity Commission for contributing so vitally to that mission and looks forward to ongoing engagement with the Commission to identify opportunities to advance [equity](#) for all.