Joe Parsons, Director of Methodology, Drs. Virginia Harris and Struther Van Horn Transcripts

Joe Parsons: Hello? Good afternoon.

Speaker 34:   Thank you Mr. Parson, director of Methodology and National Agriculture specific Service. Thank you for joining us. We're excited to this hear your presentation.

Joe Parsons: Thank you so much, and yeah, that's a mouthful, isn't it? Yeah. My name is Joe Parsons. I serve as director of methodology, and also a chair of the Agricultural Statistics Board here at the National Act Statistics Service. I think you heard from our administrator Hubert Hamer a little bit earlier today, and so we want to pick up and cover another topic. I have with me, Dr. Virginia Harris and also Dr. Struther Van Horn, and together we're going to talk through a few things with you if that's okay? What we want to share with you is something called the update or try the updating of statistical policy director directory number, directive number 15, standards for maintaining, collecting and presenting federal data on race and ethnicity. We'd like to draw your attention to this effort and make sure that your viewpoints are considered this new standard would apply across the federal government, and I think that some of you have already been working with NAS on some cognitive testing that we're doing here at the agency to support this overall effort across government. Next slide please.

So just a little bit of history, and some of you may know this already very well, so I apologize if I'm repeating stuff that you know well, but I want to get everybody on the same page. In 1977, the statistical policy directive number 15, I'll call it SPD 15, going forward, on race and ethnicity standards, was established mainly due to new responsibilities to enforce civil rights laws. In the 1977 directive provided a common language to promote uniformity and comparability across information collections for both race and ethnicity data. In the 1990s, OMB conducted a comprehensive review of the 1977 SPD 15, which resulted in its revision in 97, and that's the current standard today. The review of SPD 15 is underway right now, and is building upon previous research, so we didn't start from scratch or the team didn't start from scratch, of which Ginger and Struther are both on that and can tell us a bit more.

It's also important to keep in mind that a review of the standards must take into place consideration for many different uses, and methods of collecting race and ethnicity data as well as the feasibility across the federal government for implementing any new proposed changes to the standards. So a common question would be why should one review the current directive now? Some reasons offered are the Hispanic and Latino respondents view their identity as Hispanic or Latino, and need a distinct category available to them accurately

self-identify. Across the United States, many Middle Eastern and North African respondents view their identity as distinct from the white racial category. Stakeholders, including data users, advocate for the accurate and reliable collection of disaggregated data on all SPD 15 minimum race and ethnicity categories American Indian or an Alaskan Native, Asian, black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders and White, including Middle Eastern or North African.

So I want to move on to the next slide please. So anyway, on the last slide I should have said the current definitions of the minimum race and ethnic categories are inconsistent, and use some outdated terminology. I'm going to get to that. It's a great question and if I can, I'm going to hold that just a little bit, because we absolutely want to talk about that, if that's okay? You're likely all very familiar with the SPD, the 97 SPD requirement to use two separate questions when collecting race and ethnicity via self response. So that the question, as you know, or very likely know, are you Hispanic or Latino? And then what is your race separately with the five categories as you see on the screen.

And this just refreshes what you know about those. If we can go on the next slide, Struther. So where are we at so far? I mentioned earlier that there's a inter-agency technical working group that's conducting a review of SPD 15 now. This was initiated in June of 2022 when our new chief statistician of the United States, Dr. Karen Orvis, announced that updating SPD 15 was a top priority. This graphic shown on the slide gives you some sense of that high level, sense of the schedule. There are four major phases. The first phase took place last summer and focused on getting the working group up and running, gathering members from across federal agencies and departments, and briefing them on key issues, and getting them signed up to work on various teams. The second phase kicked off in September where the primary goal was to develop initial proposals for advising the standards, put them in the Federal Register Notice, and OMB published them.

On January 26th, OMB released the working group's initial proposals for revising the standards, which launched phase three, but the primary goal is to continue to examining any research or evidence, engage with the public to hear the reviews on the federal register, notice initial proposals, and developer report with final recommendations for the chief statistician. The final working group recommendations are going to be delivered to the chief statistician, and that'll kick off phase four about the... the final decision making process and presenting to OMB leadership, the Chief Statistician's recommendation for revising those standards, and last OMB has stated multiple times in blogs and stakeholder meetings that they're committed to announcing any revisions to the standards by the summer of 2024, so believe it or not, on regulation or directive stand, that's very fast.

The proposals for the, we can go on to the... nope, I need to stay right here, sorry. The proposals for the federal registered notice are preliminary, not final, and they do not represent the positions of OMB or NAS in this case, or USDA participating in the working group. These initial proposals that you're going to hear a little bit more about from Ginger Harris, Dr. Harris are we're developed by the technical experts from 35 federal agencies that participate in the working group. The working group as well as OMB now wants to hear from the public. The working group will continue to review evidence, hear from, hear from the public and deliberate before making final recommendations to OMB. I think I have one more slide.

Well, I guess I already talked about that, that they're preliminary, not final, and this is the time that we want to get out in front of folks, and make sure that your viewpoint is captured, either in a form like this or directly to the Federal Register notice, and so we're out trying to spread the word about this. As I say, this will affect all collections across federal government, not just statistical ones, and with that, I think I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Harris to talk a little bit more.

Dr Harris: Thank you, Joe. So I'm going to talk to you about the... can you move to the next slide, please? I'm going to... one more, please. So I'm going to talk to you about the proposals that are in the current federal registered notice. This is how the Inter-agency Technical Working Group proposes to adapt the current standards to the current environment. The first proposal is to collect race and ethnicity using a single combined question. There will no longer be separate questions on race and ethnicities. We realize this may take significant time and resources for some surveys and information collections to implement, and we do. The proposal is allowing agencies dependent on aggregate data or data that is not self-reported, some flexibilities and how they collect some of this data. Next slide.

The second proposal in the federal register notice is to add as distinct Middle Eastern or North African category as a minimum reporting category. The definition of the current white reporting category would be edited to remove MINA from the definition. The working group developed a proposed definition of this MINA category, which is inclusive both of the Middle Eastern and North African population, and it lists larger population groups within the United States as representative of this category. This category would include all individuals who identify with one or more nationalities or ethnic groups with origins in the Middle East. Some examples of these groups include, but aren't limited to Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Moroccan, and Israeli.

Next slide. The third proposal listed in the federal registered notice will require the collection of detailed race and ethnicity categories by default. Unless an

agency determines the potential benefit of this detailed data would not justify the burden to the public or to the agency, or that the possibility of the additional risk to privacy or confidentiality. In any case, an agency choosing not to use the minimum, the detailed categories would have to use the standards minimum categories. In all cases, however, agencies are going to be encouraged to collect and provide more granular data than those seven minimum categories in the proposal.

Next slide. So this is the proposed example for self-reported data in the new proposals. This represents just one of the potential options for collecting detailed data with mini categories being disaggregated by country of origin. This particular format for data collection was chosen because it performed best of several options tested by the Census Bureau when that testing occurred prior to the 2020 population census. The particular countries of origins listed reflect the most common countries of origin for those populations in the United States right now.

Next slide. If an agency determines it cannot collect detailed disaggregated data, they must, the proposal says that they must use the format presented on the screen now where seven minimum categories of race and ethnicity are listed. Again, it is a combined question for both race and ethnicity, and it adds a minimum, new minimum category for the Middle East and North African population. There is no, currently no order required for which the categories are listed. Agencies typically use these, rank the order by either population size or alphabetically.

Next slide. In addition, the federal registered notice includes updates to terminology in the SPD 15 standards. There are quite a number of these terminology updates proposed. I think you have this in your materials, so I'm not going to go over them in great detail. There are some changes being proposed to some of the language and the standards. They propose not to use majority and minority language, and ask for new standards for how the questions are worded.

Next slide. So you can see on this slide the two examples for how the standards suggest race and ethnicity will be conducted under the new standard. If we don't receive...

Ginger: ... if the team does not receive any feedback indicating, other changes should be made. So again, we have a combined question with minimum in detailed categories and we have a combined question with just the seven minimum categories.

Next slide. Again, we are reaching out to receive comments from as many people as possible. The federal registered notice was issued late January and comments are due by April 12th. Either individuals can respond to the federal register notice as individuals, as communities. You can attend town halls and you can also register for a listening session with members of the ITWG. Again, we would encourage you to go, if you want to follow the process, to go to the homepage for the team, which is spd15revision.gov.

Next slide. And please, help us encourage public input to this process. Again, your public comments are due by April 12th. Help us spread the word. There's a great blog post on the White House website. They can visit spd15revision.gov to learn about the process and to find out how to put in the public comments and they can read the detailed language of the federal register notice. Next slide. And I'm going to turn it over to Strother now for some discussion questions relating to these new proposed standards. Thank you.

Strother: Thank you Ginger and Joe, and thank you to the Advisory Committee. So, I know we covered a lot relatively quickly, and I know that we'll welcome feedback and comments and questions on anything that we covered. But we did have a few discussion questions specifically related to three of the proposals that we would love to get any feedback on. So, the first that we would love to get feedback on is the collecting of detailed race and ethnicity categories. So we're interested if anybody has any feedback on, if it is appropriate for agencies to collect detailed data even though the data may not be published or it may require combining multiple years of data due to small sample sizes.

We're also interested in getting any feedback on if there's anything that we should consider as an agency about weighing the benefits and burdens of collecting or providing more granular data than the minimum categories that Ginger just discussed, those seven minimum categories. And then finally, for this topic, we're interested if anyone has any feedback on... The example design is collecting additional levels of detail primarily by country of origin or tribe. So we're interested to hear if there's any other potential types of detail that would create useful data or help respondents to better self-identify themselves. So if anybody has any feedback on collecting detailed race and ethnicity categories, we would love to start that discussion.

Cameron: Is that for us to answer now? Okay. So I guess the first one, is it appropriate for agencies to collect detailed data even though those data may not be published or may be required by [inaudible 05:00:50].

Speaker 35:   I'd like to say something to that. Have you all considered looking at two things, publish it in the multiple papers in certain areas and what have you, this

information? And have you all considered those individuals that are multiracial? How would you identify that?

Strother: Yeah, no, I think that it's great for us to consider other avenues that we can potentially look to get the word out to get feedback. And that's where we're at right now, is trying to get feedback. And so actually, I think if we could go back a couple slides, we can look at the question. Continue back a few more slides. Sorry. One more forward. Yeah, and that's what I would love to get some feedback on and that's what we're hoping to do when we're testing these questions. The question is initially designed to hopefully make it so people can identify more than one race or ethnicity. And if we have any feedback on how well or not the committee thinks that this question is achieving that goal, I would love to get feedback on that. If you think that this question allows for that or doesn't. And I know that we have a question in the chat about people of Caribbean descent and so questions like that are important for us to consider.

              If we're looking at these questions and we don't feel that people can adequately identify themselves, that's feedback that we absolutely want to get. And take back to the inter agency working group.

Arnette Cotton: Let's see. This is Arnett Cotton, one third column for Black or African-American based on Joe's definition that race is from the country of origin. And then the second part is where they were born or now reside. Is that correct?

Ginger: So the question is asking people to check one of these minimum categories. So if someone identified as Black, they would check Black or African American. And then the new detailed data collection would ask them to check one of these categories or one or more of these categories as how they identify themselves in detail. Do they consider themselves an African American, a Jamaican American, a Haitian American? So the detailed categories are supposed to represent, is there a detailed category with which they would identify with? And if none of the categories, if they would identify with none of those six listed categories, they could also put in a different category in that right inbox.

Strother: Okay.

Speaker 36:   And I just wanted to point out, I know the print's small and you guys have the slides there, but for either of these situations or either of these proposals, it is select all that apply. So if you identified both as Black or African American and Asian, you could certainly choose that, et cetera.

Cameron: And can I just try to expand on this? This is Cameron, expand on Mrs. Cotton's question. I think the question she was trying to get across is this is really concentrating on your race for ethnicity. I think she was trying to get across what if they weren't born here. Someone might consider them Jamaican but

they're French. You understand? They might have been born in Jamaica but they're French.

Ginger: Right. So I think you're bringing up some really good points that a lot of audiences may find the way the questions are phrased confusing. And that's something we're going to take back to the working group to say what they're asking for with these detailed countries or these detailed origin groups is confusing to many people. It's not clear if it's supposed to represent where you live or where you came from or your ancestors came from. So I hear what you're saying and I hear that it's can be very confusing.

Arnette Cotton: So-

Speaker 37: Go ahead.

Ginger: I was just going to say, let me know if I got that wrong.

Cameron: No, you have it correctly. 'Cause I even say I live in New York and I'm a Texan. So I consider myself a Texan not a New Yorker. So it's the same kind of [inaudible 05:06:13].

Speaker 37: I don't see where this particular issue is going to simplify anything or anybody. It's just going to make things... Now, first of all, if you're going to try to be non-judgmental, even though you're not thinking that you are, it lists those things probably alphabetically instead of, by whatever method you use to get what else you have there. And try to eliminate as many problems before they become a problem.

Cameron: And I know I did the survey too guys, and that was one of the questions I brought up with the survey and I think I'll let you guys answer. Go ahead.

Speaker 37: Oh, I'm sorry.

Cameron: So his question was, Ms. Harris or anyone else that wants to answer, was alphabetical order because as Black people we hate that sometimes we don't want to see the white on top. We feel like why can't we be on top, right?

Speaker 38: [inaudible 05:07:26].

Cameron: So it can still seem a little [inaudible 05:07:34] or making us feel a little left out by having white up there first.

Arnette Cotton: I want to go back to the question.

Cameron: Can you go back to the question please?

Arnette Cotton:	The first one, I personally don't think that there's an issue with collecting data whether it's going to be used or not be used. I think the more that we are aware of who is around us and who we are working with and what the numbers are is a good thing and it's going to benefit somebody someday.
Speaker 38:	I'm sorry. And some people okay that now you acknowledge their particular [inaudible 05:08:21], but you got to make sure that everybody to some extent can acknowledge their ancestry somewhere [inaudible 05:08:27]. But like I said, I'm a firm believer in collecting that detailed data. I said, but you had to be careful what that data being used for.
Speaker 39:	Yes, that was exactly what I was going to bring up. You got agency say they're collecting the data, but what are they going to use the data for?
Cameron:	So is this used for those NASS purposes or is this going to be used across the whole USDA agency is our question.
Strother:	This is across the entire federal government. So whatever changes are proposed and implemented by OMB will be across the government. And as Joe mentioned, it won't just be on federal surveys, it will also be on other federal forms. And so thinking about that across the government.
Speaker 36:	Can I just add, I think one of the things that we wanted to... First off, thank you for everything you've said, but we also want to hear some about to what extent there should be flexibility, right? Dr. Harris. I mean the statistical policy directive could be very prescriptive or could offer a little bit more flexibility about what agencies should ask depending on the nature of the collection.
Speaker 35:	Well, look at it this way. If it's used within the federal government, there are some places in the FSA where white women are going into the office and checking off the minority box and how do you separate the white male from the white woman who's going in there, signing off on the minority box?
Strother:	I think that's a good point. And I'm writing down, if you see me looking down, I'm writing down the discussion points that you're bringing. I think that that's an important issue for us to consider across all of these. Is how OMB or if there's other guidance that can be provided or how we can address the issue of people identifying in ways that perhaps they shouldn't. So I'm writing that down as a discussion point.
Speaker 38:	This is Carrie Jr. Just one comment. First I want to say, actually, I like the way you broke out even in the simplified categories on the right over there. However, and especially in particular the Asian category, cause pretty much everybody was in one time, lumped in one pile. Actually they've broken it out. But the question I have now, they've broken out to some extent. If I were from

the country of India, because people from India and people from China, really, they're too different and a lot of places I see is South Asian place put on there for them.

Ginger: Right. Okay.

Speaker 38:   Oh sorry, go ahead.

Ginger: Oh no, I was just going to say the standards are detailed in that. This group belongs according to the standards in this category. And currently the standards say both, Asian, Indians, Chinese, Vietnamese, [inaudible 05:11:47] all report in the Asian category. And it's particularly from those groups that we've definitely heard that they would really like detailed disaggregation of those particular countries of origin.

Arnette Cotton: And so the box underneath the category then is supposed to be the space where you can make the difference if it's not listed, correct?

Ginger: Yes, exactly. You can list something that doesn't have a box. Right?

Arnette Cotton: Yeah. 'Cause I noticed that with the American-Indian or the Alaska native, there are just too many tribes. But you did put some tribes down there but there are too many tribes to name so they literally have to list their tribe out if you wanted that distinction.

Ginger: Yes, that's correct. For many of these categories, the groups listed form a large majority of the population in that category, but for the American-Indian category, there weren't just a few tribes that could be listed that would form the majority of that group.

Arnette Cotton: Can we go back to the questions, advance the screen on-

Cameron: Answer the questions, 'cause we have about two or three more minutes and then we're going to have to go to public conference.

Speaker 36:   There's a great question there. Could the form be interactive, which would give you more flexibility? And I want to take the opportunity to say that the 2022 census of agriculture is still ongoing. We have an online form and if any of you are farmers or know farmers and ranchers of every stripe, we would love for them to respond and we would love for them most to respond online. And it is true that the interactive form shortens the interview response because it just gets at the questions that are pertinent to you.

Arnette Cotton: I would like to address question one on this screen. To what extent would a combined race and ethnicity question that allows for the selection of one or

more categories impact people's ability to self-report all aspects of their identity? It would to a great extent, but I don't think it's necessary to report every aspect of your identity. If however, you have four different people within your DNA and you only interact with two of those DNA, then that's the part that you should be reporting. I have French and Irish in mine, go figure. But I don't do anything with the Irish, I don't do anything with the French. I identify with the African-Americans and with the Native Americans and those are the primary groups that I deal with.

Now people want the liberty to report all aspects of their identity. It would be beneficial, but otherwise, to the extent I don't think it's necessary.

Strother: Well, I know we're running up against time, but if you can just advance the very last slide. If there is any feedback that anyone has on adding Middle Eastern, north-African as the response category, particularly if there are any proposed nationality or ethnic group examples that should be added to this definition or if there's any other feedback. We have [inaudible 05:15:20] as a new response category, we would appreciate any feedback on that as well.

Cameron: I think just in general, I know that there's pockets. I was in Minnesota and that's a big pocket of Europeans and stuff.

Speaker 36:   [inaudible 05:15:40].

Cameron: So I'm just saying there's definitely pockets out there that this question might benefit.

Arnette Cotton: I would like to just make a comment. This is Mrs. Cotton. The race, there's one human race, one race of people, and that is humans. We fall under that category. Our ethnicities then distinguish us from each other in that capacity. And so when you divide the humanity of our various ethnicities, then it creates barriers that already exist and we can help eliminate that if we just identify all as humans with different ethnical or ethnicities in our background or in our DNA.

Speaker 40:   I was wondering, they use this majority and minority, we've been using those terms a lot. Well, we've been meeting this week with the Minority Farmers Advisory Committee and I was just wondering what the logic was behind discontinued [inaudible 05:16:58].

Speaker 36:   I had trouble hearing that. I'm sorry.

Ginger: I think-

Cameron: Ginger, go ahead take that one?

Ginger:	Yeah, I think the standards we just revised are thinking about a revision that that language may not reflect the truth anymore or the population. There may not be a majority white population or it's just not clear that those terms will be useful going forward.
Arnette Cotton:	I must comment because you stated earlier, Ms. Harris, you stated earlier that the possible reasons that they were listed in the way that they were was by population. And then now you're saying that there may not be, it's the same way with the Indians no longer being required to have a card or a number in order to identify as an Indian. If you break it all the way down and say, "We are all equal," and we're not all equal, it takes away some benefits. We are a Minority Advisory Farmer Committee and it takes away benefits when we don't have that distinction clearly.
Ginger:	So I would have to go back to see how the majority minority was referenced in the particular standards, but what I hear you saying is you think that that language is still valuable to keep in the standards because as members of the Minority Farmer Advisory Committee... How can I say it? It recognizes an important community that may not be served or has been traditionally underserved by different federal agencies, for instance.
Cameron:	Correct. Yes. I think the committee's pretty much in agreement with that. I'll probably speak up for that and that's why this committee was formed and if something like that is no longer on a survey, then you're trying to say this committee no longer needs to be an existent practice.
Ginger:	Thank you.
Strother:	So I want to make one final plug that if anyone would like to respond to the SPD 15 photo registry notice again, the Inter agency working group and OMB needs to hear from individuals that have comments. And then also as Ginger mentioned, if the Advisory Committee would like to schedule a session to speak to the Inter agency working group, they have slots available in August and September and you could reach out to Ginger or I if you would like help to do that if you feel that there's more information that would be beneficial to present to the Inter agency working group. But again, we just want to thank you so much and if anybody has any further questions or any other follow up information that would be helpful, please feel free to reach out to any of us.
Cameron:	Well, I would like to thank you because this was very, very important and it's allowing us to get input on the spot, which was critical and for you guys to write it down and really take that back to make some implementations really an honor us to have that input. So thank you very much.