



## **Frequently Asked Questions about the Office of the Ombudsperson**

### **Why is there an USDA Ombudsperson?**

As part of the *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* settlement, USDA created the Office to assist USDA in identifying and addressing issues relating to program access by Native American and other socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (producers). The focus is to assist historically underserved farmers and ranchers (producers) to surface new issues and shared concerns about access to USDA programs. The Ombudsperson serves as an advocate for fair processes and administration, and advocates within the organization for change where the process and supporting data and information demonstrate such a need.

### **Is this Office only for certain parts of USDA?**

The Office will initially focus on programs through the service centers (Farm Service Agency, Rural Development Programs, and Natural Resources Conservation Service). The focus is to assist historically underserved farmers and ranchers (producers) to surface new issues and shared concerns about access to USDA programs. As a first step, the Ombudsperson will focus on surfacing new issues and concerns on accessibility to USDA programs as early as possible in the following areas: California, New Mexico, Missouri and Texas.

### **Who may contact the USDA Ombudsperson for help?**

The services are for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (producers) who are accessing USDA programs and technical assistance.

### **When should you reach out to the Ombudsperson?**

You may reach out to the Ombudsperson at any time. Your contact with the Ombudsperson is completely voluntary.

### **Who will the Office of the Ombudsperson help?**

The Ombudsperson is primarily for external stakeholders, specifically historically underserved farmers and ranchers (producers). However, if you are an internal USDA employee and have a concern about program access issues for historically underserved farmers and ranchers you may also contact the Ombudsperson.

### **What will the USDA Ombudsperson do?**

The Ombudsperson works to identify barriers that prevent or reduce the ability of members of socially disadvantaged groups (producers) to participate in USDA programs. Specifically, the Office of the Ombudsperson receives inquiries, input and feedback on issues relating to the accessibility of USDA programs to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, serves as an early warning mechanism on program concerns and barriers to access, and provides confidential assistance to both external and internal stakeholders to resolve issues relating to program access. The Ombudsperson's recommendations are informed by review of data relating to program participation by socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, as well as input and feedback provided by both external and internal stakeholders.



### **Who will the Ombudsperson make recommendations to?**

The Office provides recommendations to the Secretary, Under Secretaries, Agency Administrators, the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights and other Department officials and senior leaders.

### **How will the Ombudsperson handle confidentiality?**

The Ombudsperson maintains confidentiality to the extent permitted by law and does not willingly disclose names or provide testimony even when given permission by the caller or visitor to do so. However, the Ombudsperson may need to reveal this information to the appropriate entity if there is intent to harm person or property, criminal activity or potential fraud, waste, or abuse of government resources.

### **What types of issues will the Ombudsperson not accept?**

The Ombudsperson does not accept issues or concerns that were in previous litigation, settlement, or similar formal processes. In addition, the Ombudsperson does not address internal human resources matters, union matters, workplace issues and concerns or individual Equal Employment Opportunity complaints. The Ombudsperson does not process program civil rights complaints. These types of concerns and issues are referred to the appropriate internal USDA resources. Please see the signed charter document and fact sheet for what the Ombudsperson will accept and will not accept.

### **How might an Ombudsperson be helpful and beneficial?**

The Ombudsperson serves as an early warning system and helps the agency identify systemic issues and trends across USDA with the delivery of services to historically underserved farmers and ranchers (producers). The Office does not take each individual problem and seek to resolve those issues one at a time. If there are specific concerns, the Ombudsperson seeks to refer you to the appropriate person or find the shared concern in your issue and bring the overall concern back to USDA leaders.

### **How does the Office of the Ombudsperson operate?**

There are four guiding principles: 1) neutrality and impartiality, 2) confidentiality, 3) independence and 4) informality that will guide the Office. Please see the International Ombudsman Association ethics and standards of practice links below.

[http://www.ombudsassociation.org/IOA\\_Main/media/SiteFiles/Code\\_Ethics\\_1-07.pdf](http://www.ombudsassociation.org/IOA_Main/media/SiteFiles/Code_Ethics_1-07.pdf)  
[http://www.ombudsassociation.org/IOA\\_Main/media/SiteFiles/IOA\\_Standards\\_of\\_Practice\\_Oct\\_09.pdf](http://www.ombudsassociation.org/IOA_Main/media/SiteFiles/IOA_Standards_of_Practice_Oct_09.pdf)

### **How will the Office work with the other program offices?**



United States Department of Agriculture

As appropriate, the Ombudsperson works directly with the program offices and affected staff to try and resolve the issue at the lowest possible level and as early as possible. The Office is an independent, distinct and separate office.

### **How is this Office different than OASCR, OTR, and OAO?**

Each of these offices has a very specific role (please see attached web links below for additional information). The Ombudsperson's role is to surface shared concerns on accessibility to USDA programs and look across the agency for trends and identify common issues that historically underserved farmers and ranchers (producers) face.

#### *Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights*

[http://www.ascr.usda.gov/about\\_cr\\_mission.html](http://www.ascr.usda.gov/about_cr_mission.html)

#### *Office of Tribal Relations*

<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=otr>

#### *Office of Advocacy and Outreach*

<http://www.outreach.usda.gov/>

### **What will the Ombudsperson do with data?**

The Ombudsperson accesses USDA data and reviews it to identify any trends and issues from a variety of information sources. The goal is to serve as an early warning system. The data review is used with other input that the Ombudsperson will hear in confidential discussions with individuals.

### **Does going to the Office of the Ombudsperson provide notice to the Agency on alleged discrimination concerns?**

It does not provide notice to the Agency. Individuals must go through formal channels such as the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at [www.ascr.usda.gov](http://www.ascr.usda.gov), the Office of the Inspector General (referrals to OIG should go through normal channels and in accordance with Departmental Regulation 1700-2, OIG Organization and Procedures), the Office of Ethics or their managers as appropriate. Individuals should keep in mind that some of these other channels have certain timeframes in which one must file a complaint.

### **Who does the Ombudsperson report to?**

The Ombudsperson reports to the General Counsel or Acting General Counsel as the Secretary's designee. The Secretary strongly supports the functions of the Office of the Ombudsperson and the Office as a separate and independent office.

### **Contact Information:**



**United States Department of Agriculture**

If you are an underserved farmer or rancher and have a program access question or concern, the Ombudsperson may be contacted by telephone or email (Please note that discussions via email are not secure and confidentiality cannot be assured.).

Joanne Dea, Ombudsperson, USDA

Phone: 202.205-1000

Email: [ombudsperson@usda.gov](mailto:ombudsperson@usda.gov)