



United States Department of Agriculture
Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement
1400 Independence Avenue S.W., Room 520A
Washington, DC 20250

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MINORITY FARMERS (ACMF)

ACMF Public Meeting: Summary Minutes

**June 27 - 29, 2023
Savannah, GA**

Tuesday, June 27, 2023

The meeting was brought to order by R. Jeanese Cabrera, Designated Federal Officer (DFO) with the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE). Upon confirming a quorum of the Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers (ACMF), Chair William Miller (succeeding Mr. Harvey Reed, III), commenced the final public advisory committee meeting for this term beginning with member introductions and read the entire *Letter from the Chair* which would be submitted to the USDA Secretary along with the Committee's Report on Recommendations. All agreed the letter was integral in both the spirit and letter of the Chair's message. Consensus was had for submitting the letter as an introduction or executive summary of the Committee's Report on Recommendations.

Visitors, several of whom traveled in from Ohio and Texas to observe and offer public comments on the record, included Ms. Joy Townsend of Texas who shared devastating accounts about her experiences dealing with the USDA. Ms. Townsend tendered perspectives and commented about seemingly insurmountable barriers and personal setbacks she's faced over the years as a micro-farmer. The Committee also heard from Dr. Cindy Folck, *Interim* Extension Director, State Program Leader for Agriculture & Natural Resources, Central State University (CSU) Extension, an 1890 land grant institution, and Mr. Mark Rendleman, Program Leader for Central State University Extension. Each CSU visitor spoke on many helpful aspects of USDA's engagement and programs but did not demur in speaking on the many areas of which the USDA would do well to shore-up. Due to technical difficulties failing to implement video streaming, the remainder of this meeting was virtually cast in audio only. Transcripts of each day's plenary discussions will be posted to the ACMF website.

The first order of business was the review of the Operations Guide prepared by the DFO and given to the members to review before the meeting. After a brief discussion and questions around specific plain language, there was consensus on what will be called the ACMF Committee Operations Guide (C.O.G.) which will be used as a by-laws type of reference going forward, subject to review and acceptance at the start of upcoming terms.

The DFO then gave updates on several administrative topics and thanked the members for their service, noting this to be the last meeting for this term.

The Committee also heard from Ms. Margo Schlanger, USDA Special Assistant from the Office of the Secretary (OSEC) who engaged the members on the topic of equity and other topics that the Secretary asked the members to explore and offer up recommendations.

Next the DFO described how this meeting would be essentially a 'working session' and although a public meeting, the primary output would be a near perfect draft of the ACMF's report of recommendations. Because this public meeting was limited in purpose and outcome, breakout sessions were built into each morning and afternoon after plenary discussions and deliberations, wherein the subcommittees would draft portions of the final written report on recommendations. Upon return from the first breakout the Committee explored FSA County Offices and Heirs' property challenges during which we heard from Ms. Monica Range, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights, who helped the members understand more thoroughly the issues surrounding heirs' property contests and claims, prevalence, and barriers. FSA and other sources were not available to address follow-on inquiries regarding heirs' property and FSA county offices given many agency resources were involved with the Equity Commission's most recent public meeting being held that week in Montana.

The committee members continued to explore and deliberate on FSA county office visits, practices, and procedures and a relative lack of consistency across the country in terms of customer experiences. Language for various recommendations were shared, read into the record, and consensus was achieved for each recommendation.

Several (not all) of areas explored by the members regarding FSA included:

- 7 CFR 7.16 Report of Elections, where discussion centered on better managing terms which are currently "unlimited" (limiting to 3 years).
- FSA must do better in instituting means and ability to ensure it can reach equity in representation at these county offices. The voting, eligibility criteria, getting on a ballot all seem impossible to cut through red tape and inconsistent guidance across county and state lines.
- Greater openness and transparency around announcements of events and preparation and dissemination of transcript of meetings.
- Guidance for obtaining receipts needs a face lift; this requirement which has been 'on the books' for some time seems to be inconsistently practiced depending on which office you visit.

Meeting adjourned for the first day at 4:15 p.m.

Wednesday, June 28, 2023

The meeting was brought to order by Designated Federal Officer, R. Jeanese Cabrera, of the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE). Upon confirming a quorum of

the Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers (ACMF), Chair William Miller, commenced meeting with a recap of the prior day. Chair Miller also described the order of business and areas that the Committee would explore, deliberate upon, and thereafter consider language to draft additional recommendations.

The Committee began the morning with an update presentation from Administrative Judge Tezra O. Woody, (Southern) Regional Director, National Appeals Division (NAD), USDA Office of Hearings and Appeals. Judge Woody presented updated case law and precedent around claimants seeking alternative resolution on their matters via NAD. Several bemoaned the fact that many – many – stakeholders are unaware of this. The Judge confirmed their assumption with statistics which is why she and her colleagues are seeking opportunities (like presenting to this advisory committee) to explain NAD’s operations as an alternative approach or venue to the usual (complaints filed on a civil rights track). There were many questions and answers. J. Woody’s presentation has been posted to the website under presentations for this meeting.

Public comments received this day were stirring and struck a chord among those present and listening to comments from Ms. Joy Townsend of Texas.

The second day’s afternoon committee discussions began with barrier analyses for various USDA’s agency programs, beginning with Rural Development programs (income thresholds, burdensome participation requirements) and exploring pioneered initiatives for one-stop applications containing baseline information to utilize across agencies. Breakout sessions followed by deliberations and consensus on language drafted for the Report on Recommendations. Much of the discussion centered on Rural Development’s 504 Program for dilapidated housing and why it is not more widely being utilized. This was explained by Scott Nista, Senior Policy Advisor, Single Family Housing, who shared significant material which is (will be) posted to the Committee website. This discussion also yielded the primary impetus for a recommendation that the USDA’s must triple-down on its efforts and commitment to “get the word out” on its programs and assists that are currently on the books and those that are being rolled out. This effort must be concurrent with expanded workforce development to assist farmers and ranchers (and others) on how to access and leverage the information and assistance available to all.

Deliberations and consensus building commenced, language to draft the next set of recommendations was considered and added to the Report on Recommendations for the second day’s build.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:00 p.m.

Thursday, June 29, 2023

The meeting was brought to order by Designated Federal Officer, R. Jeanese Cabrera, of the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE). Upon confirming a quorum of the Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers (ACMF), Chair William Miller, commenced meeting with a recap of the prior day and a quick recital of the day’s timeline for third day of the Committee’s final meeting of its current term. The Committee chose to take up building recommendations under the Department’s outreach and communications efforts on

the last day because these recommendations, if embraced and employed by the Secretary, would impact all its agencies. Several topics the members explored in the morning plenary session included (but not limited to) the following:

- 2501 – expand to reach and assist more; need more *boots on the ground*;
- Targeted technical assistance for producers;
- Agency outreach – assess efficacy and reach, late rollout practices (e.g., I.R.A. or Inflation Reduction Act);
- Language access – this was a critical look-see – how can the USDA reach more? What are the primary barriers for more impactful or effective communications from the USDA – comprehension; language or dialects; costs versus practicality; and very important inquiry of how do we reach the younger people in a more meaningful way – to get those next generation millennials, Gen X, Y, etc., excited about agriculture production and every aspect of the business.

The members continued their afternoon discussions around communications and outreach, considering the following:

- Enhanced support for 1890 Institutions;
- Expanding Climate Smart initiatives for greater minority participation;
- Deep dive venture into systemic (institutional) barriers to effective leverage of USDA programs; farmers and other producers are not always getting the information they're seeking or they're getting led astray (often given inconsistent guidance). All too often, a program rollout is discovered – too late.

Deliberations and consensus building commenced, language to draft the next set of recommendations was considered and added to the Report on Recommendations for the second day's build.

The members successfully drafted real-time the language for the Report on Recommendations and put in place the plan of action for finalizing the document with several plenary reviews and editing during the final week of their term which was slated to end July 8, 2023.

We had final words on the record from the guests from Ohio and Texas. One that particularly resonated with the members was from an Ohio State University Extension executive who noted the richness of discussion attendant to in-person public advisory committee meetings (versus virtual). All agree that public advisory committee meetings held virtually were difficult to follow, and just not the same experience.

After final words from among the members and a visitor, the meeting was adjourned early at 2:34 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



R. Jeanese Cabrera
Designated Federal Official
Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers

September 29, 2023

Date



William Miller
Chair
Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers

September 29, 2023

Date