

Secretary Vilsack:

Good morning. And it's an honor to extend a warm welcome to the 2023 public meeting of the advisory committee on minority farmers. I want to thank the committee members and each of whom has volunteered their time to inform USDA's efforts to forge connections with minority farming communities in ways that are long overdue.

Today's convening is an opportunity for individuals joining in person and virtually to lead the conversation on this important work. USDA centers equity, accessibility and inclusion in everything we do. This involves taking a hard look at our past, and dedicating ourselves to making adjustments in our programs, policies and structures so that we become a model department going forward.

And it's the advisory committees like this one that bridges the gap between us and those we aim to better serve. This meeting gives an opportunity to receive your valuable input, so that we can apply it throughout our policies and programs. As part of this broader work, just a few weeks ago, USDA received a set of 32 interim recommendations from our Equity Commission, which like this advisory certain, gives us feedback that USDA will implement to better our organization and improve the experience for our customers.

The Equity Commission benefited from the prior work of this group, so thank you for those efforts as well. It's recommendations for broadening access to our agricultural programs span issues from heirs' property to technical assistance, base acres, and county committees. These are just a few examples. And we're already working to implement many of these recommendations to ensure that USDA assists all farmers and ranchers across America.

Over the course of the week, representatives from USDA will update this advisory committee on steps taken since your last meeting. And I'll start it off today by sharing a few recent initiatives we've undertaken to reach underserved farmers and ranchers. One key to progress is President Biden's historic Inflation Reduction Act, or IRA. Under the IRA, farm loan borrowers with USDA, who face financial distress may be eligible for programs specifically designed to keep them on their farms.

In October 2022, USDA's Farms Service Agency provided 800 million dollars in IRA automatic assistance to more than 13000 USDA borrowers. That includes 600 million to 11000 delinquent borrowers whose accounts are now current. And more than 200 million dollars to 2100 borrowers who had their farms foreclosed on, but were left with outstanding debts, which have now been resolved. And these payments are just the start.

The President's 2024 budget proposal also contains several congressional recommendations that would improve USDA's flexibility in making and servicing farm loans. These are steps that do so much for distressed borrowers, but they mean nothing if those impacted aren't aware of the opportunity.

That's why USDA is sending out letters to all of our 100000 direct borrowers, letting them know about a new tool to intervene earlier if they're experiencing cashflow challenges. Now, under a separate program, also funded by the IRA, USDA intends to provide financial assistance to producers who have experienced direct farm lending discrimination in the past. These programs are two steps of many in the long march towards justice and an inclusive, equitable USDA.

We're also proactively working to grow involvement of underserved producers in our department wide efforts. We dedicated a pool of funds under our partnership for climate smart commodities opportunity, as well as our forestry partnership initiative to focus on innovative environmental projects that emphasize enrolling small and underserved producers. And NRCS's Equity and Conservation Agreements Effort funds partnerships that deliver conservation assistance to underserved producers. Last year, this program administered \$50 million through more than 100 agreements, and now we have a funding opportunity open through April 27th for up to 70 million dollars for the next round of agreements. These partnerships will play a critical role in reaching new producers through outreach and engagement.

Additionally, our Farm Service Agency, FSA, has been working to keep farmers farming as well. Among the first actions of the Biden-Harris administration at USDA, was to suspend farm loan foreclosures, which disproportionately involved underserved farmers, and to reopen the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, or CFAP, with new targeted outreach partnerships. FSA also targeted assistance to underserved farmers through the various ad hoc and permanent natural disaster and pandemic assistance programs. The improved Emergency Relief Program, known as ERP, streamlined the application for producers with crop insurance or noninsured crop disaster assistance, or NAP, coverage, and cut the paperwork burden by an estimated 90%.

Both the CFAP and ERP programs recognize that underserved producers often have fewer resources to weather disaster and, as a result, increased the payment rate.

This Administration has also improved the permanent programs as well. In January, we made a major overhaul of the NAP Risk Management Program to streamline the process and make the basic catastrophic coverage that is free to underserved producers automatic with an opt-out. USDA even made this streamline NAP coverage retroactive for anyone already on file as being underserved, which includes minority farmers. And FSA is in the process of reaching out to eligible producers to sign them up before June 2023.

These are some of the USDA's many actions to better serve minority and other underserved farmers, but we know this work is a collaborative effort. We recognize that not only do farmers and ranchers of all races deserve a seat at the table, but America as well needs them to participate in our agricultural economy, and we're committed to listening to and supporting your vital work.

You bring these experiences to the forefront, and by doing so, you show us how we can better serve all farmers as we explore areas where we may be missing the mark.

As your Department liaison will explain, this year we'll highlight some questions on which your feedback will be particularly helpful. We're grateful for the opportunity to come to lasting solutions by working with advisory groups like this one. Best of luck on a successful meeting and thank you for your service. I look forward to our continued collaboration as we work to serve the many, and not just the few.