



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 PUBLIC MEETING

Summary Minutes

March 28 – 30, 2023

Tucson, Arizona

Tuesday, March 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 Harvey Reed, commenced meeting with the introduction of all ACMF members, and introduced the Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack, Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), who began the meeting with a pre-recorded opening address to the members who have *“volunteered their time to inform USDA’s efforts to forge connections with minority farming communities in ways that are long overdue. . . . advisory committees like this one that bridges the gap between us [USDA] and those we aim to better serve.”* Sec. Vilsack also spoke about the Equity Commission *“which benefited from the prior work of this Committee”* and thanked the members for those efforts as well. Sec. Vilsack also mentioned the Inflation Reduction Act and the millions of dollars that were given to borrowers in the way of automatic assistance and how those payments are *“just the start.”*

Next, we heard from OPPE’s Deputy Director, Kenya Nicholas, who addressed the committee briefly, thanking the ACMF members for their *“tireless work”* and to the University of Arizona, Ms. Nicholas likewise extended a hearty thanks for hosting and supporting the ACMF’s 3-day meeting as a USDA partner being one of 558 Hispanic Serving Institutions in the country. OPPE chose Tucson with intention, acknowledging the land and territories of Indigenous peoples. Arizona is home to twenty-two federally recognized tribes, with Tucson being home to the O’odham and the Yaqui. The University of Arizona has built sustainable relationships with sovereign Native Nations and Indigenous communities through education offerings, partnerships, and community service. We honor them, their diversity and inclusion in all things.

Dr. Marla Franco, Vice President for Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) Initiatives with the University of Arizona. Dr. Franco’s presentation was a 50,000 ft. review of what USDA partnerships could be like, exploring a little about the 558 HSIs across the nation and in

general, highlighting the key staple programs offered by the USDA. Dr. Franco shared how HSI is a federal designation that began with the Department of Education, having been birthed out of *“an increased student population identifying as Hispanic Latinx.”*

The afternoon began with Ms. Eloris Speight, Executive Director of the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center, Alcorn State University (an 1890 university) who shared a powerful video on the policy center which was authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill and stood up in 2015. The Center’s policies have to do with those policies dealing with socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers; USDA programs participation; bridging the technology divide; access to and use of resources; youth programs; community and urban agriculture.

Ms. Heather Dawn Thompson, Director USDA Office of Tribal Affairs, began with introducing the ACMF members to the new Tribal Advisory Committee, and continued the presentation on the current tribal barriers’ consultations between Tribal nations and the USDA. She delved deeply into the history of federal policies’ effect on native farmers or ranchers over the years, e.g., the Homestead Act, treaties and maps, and access to lands and natural resources.

The final presentation of the day was from Mr. Brian Ellerman, founding Executive Director of FORGE, the acronym for “Finding Opportunities and Resources to Grow Entrepreneurs.” He explored ideas for building capacity and cultivating students, to inspire new thinking around the “3 Cs” of campus, community, and capital. He reports working with University of Arizona’s Vice Presidents for Black Student Engagement and Hispanic Servicing Institutions (Dr. Franco) on how to expand the Native FORGE into a BIPOC college program. Mr. Ellerman was joined by FORGE’s Marketing and Communications Manager – Ms. Erica Vatnik.

Wednesday, March 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 Harvey Reed, commenced meeting with a recap of the prior day.

The day’s slate of speakers began with Dr. Dewayne Goldmon, a senior advisor and member of USDA’s Equity Commission (EC), who delivered departmental updates. He affirmed the importance of the work of the ACMF and how it will factor into what the EC is seeking to do in the broad area of equity, delving into the distinctions and similarities between the ACMF and the EC. Dr. Goldmon referenced the EC’s recently released Interim Report and visited some of the ACMF’s recommendations particularly with regard to Farm Service Agency issues (e.g., county committees—structure, access), disparate crop acreage bases (subsidies), and more.

Next, the members heard from Messrs. Trent Teegerstrom and Levi Esquerra, of University of Arizona’s Native American Investment and Tribal Engagement program who

delivered a presentation on the extension offices in all thirteen counties throughout the state. The outreach is extensive and highly effective. They also spoke about the partnerships developed with the various tribes—not only in agriculture, but with tribal communities’ public health initiatives.

Farm Service Agency’s (FSA) Messrs. Ducheneaux (Administrator) and Graham (Deputy Administration Field Operations) dialogue with the ACMF members began with the topic of county committees—an area that this committee has spent years exploring. FSA is considering installing equity officers acknowledging the fact that FSA and the USDA have been party to discriminatory practices in the past. The primary inquiry centered on systemic racism in FSA’s 2100 county offices and how they are working to address situations where representation does not align with the population breakout. Receipt for services remains another area of concern.

Mr. Astor Boozer, West Regional Conservationist, delivered a presentation on the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) which provides technical and financial assistance for landowners. As a voluntary agency (versus regulatory), NRCS is science based and deliver programs from that perspective, like EQIP (environmental quality incentive program), or CSP (conservation easement program), and the RCPP (regional conservationist partnership program). Mr. Boozer discussed distinct pools of funding for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and NRCS is working with local and state technical organizations to reach those communities. There are also plans afoot for NRCS to build on their equity action plan, a critical part of the NRCS Chief’s (Cosby) vision.

Dr. Gbenga Ajilore, Senior Advisor, presented updates from the Rural Development (RD) agency’s programs, policies, and procedures around its business cooperative service, rural housing, and rural utilities service, which RD provides for rural communities throughout the country. Notably, RD implements much of its work via grants, loans, and loan guarantees, through community development entities, minority depository institution to reach underserved communities. Dr. Ajilore also discussed RD’s new strategic engagement division which collaborates with external stakeholders to meaningfully reach more underserved communities. And finally, he introduced its new data analytics division which collects data for all RD programs, to check itself on performance and evaluate the effectiveness of program delivery and parallels it with existing census and demographic data, when focusing on equity inquiries. These new initiatives comprise RD’s innovation center endeavors which keeps RD accountable and transparent. The Committee had follow-up inquiries to which Dr. Ajilore will respond.

The final presenter for Day 2 was Ms. Marsha Bunger, Administrator for USDA’s Risk Management Agency (RMA). Ms. Bunger shared her experiences as a farmer rancher in South Dakota and has endured the hardships of farming and ranching like many who live and work in rural America. RMA is one of four branches that comprise the FPAC mission area, including Farm Service Agency, the Natural Resource and Conservation Service, and the Business Center. Crop insurance is RMA’s primary regulatory responsibility over liability covering more than 600 types of policies. Administrator Bunger was joined by Ms.

Chola Richmond of RMA's Risk Management Education Division which works to strengthen the safety net for the historically underserved producer.

Thursday, March 30, 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 Harvey Reed, commenced meeting with a recap of the prior day.

The first speaker of the day was Dr. Lisa Ramirez, Director of the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) who gave an overview of OPPE's portfolio and its mission to develop and maintain solutions-focused partnerships for the benefit of rural and underserved communities throughout the country. We connect those communities to tools and resources offered through USDA programs and initiatives, like our 2501 program which encompasses both the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers programs, our Education Initiatives division. We also manage an Education Initiatives Division, including the 1890 National Scholars Program and the Hispanic-Serving Institutions National Program. And, finally, OPPE holds and manages both the Minority Farmers Advisory Committee and the Beginning Ranchers and Farmers Advisory Committee.

Administrator Hubert Hamer of the National Agriculture Statistical Service (NASS), accompanied by Mr. David DeWalt, Arizona State Statistician with NASS, delivered the next presentation exploring how NASS might support this committee. NASS is the data collection arm of USDA that provides useful statistics on US agriculture. NASS annually generates about 450 statistical reports on all segments of agriculture and is willing to do statistical analysis on inquiries that the ACMF may submit to complement its recommendations report being prepared for the Secretary's consideration. Administrator Hamer described in significant detail the various kinds of data mined in U.S. agriculture. These data are valuable and may be used to support narratives that bolster grants or reveal how discrete communities make great contributions to American agriculture. These data also reveal significant disparities among communities that are compelling enough to spur action.

Ms. Monica Range, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, gave the next presentation of the day and began with her observations while visiting county offices and those of the public customers who have also experienced disparate service. Ms. Range explored the notion of "*justice for all*" and whether the USDA is indeed "upholding civil rights" and "building trust" and whether the USDA is "increasing investments in underserved communities". Ms. Range finished with a 5-year lookback on the USDA's inventory of cases, resolutions, and trends and the Office's vision for finding efficiencies and more effective means of tracking its data.

Next the ACMF members heard from Mr. Gary Barrett, Forest Service National Partnership Office, and the Forest Service's (FS) efforts to change its communications strategies for greater and more direct outreach. People usually deal with its partners rather than directly with the agency, and FS wants to change that. For starters, there's the Trillion Trees Challenge and the Replant Act. Mr. Barrett opined that *"the lands that the Forest Service is stewarding are not Forest Service lands, these are the nation's forests. And part of what [FS] is trying to do is . . . to invite Black and brown folks, tribal communities, back to forests, enjoying the national benefit that you get from the recreational opportunities in our forests."* He went on to say that *"the Forest Service is the largest organization within USDA. [FS] [staffs] 35,000 employees. . . but . . . only has 27,000 jobs filled . . . we are building new community—the new workforce, from the ground - up. We are looking at historically marginalized communities. We are looking at tribal communities. We are looking at the conservation boards. . . . We are going to communities in Puerto Rico. We are going to communities in the Pacific Islands."* Mr. Barrett also touched upon heirs' property, land valuation, generational wealth, the cultural value of land, and more.

Mr. Vance Owens, of USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture's (NIFA) Sustainable Agricultural Research and Education (SARE), spoke broadly about other programs in addition to NIFA's SARE. NIFA is an extramural funding agency for research and its SARE is a regionally run program. The SARE model funds institutions that run their own calls for proposals, 5-year cooperative agreements. Grants may be 1- to 3-year projects and administered at the grassroots level in areas like sustainable agriculture, prototypes, demonstrations, education projects, and on-farm research. Mr. Owens' presentation featured links to key websites and contacts. This and all presentations shared throughout the meeting will be available for review on the ACMF's website.

Next up there was Mr. Torey Powell, Deputy Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) which is primarily responsible for developing international and domestic marketing opportunities. Mr. Powell shared about a significant project - in partnership with the University of Maryland and Florida A&M – that aims to better understand the inequities within AMS' grant programs from the application process throughout the outreach and technical assistance provided by AMS. AMS is also examining the current food system transportation framework and what the food supply chain of the future may look like. Mr. Powell opined that, *"the real intent [of AMS] is to ensure [that] local food producers, markets and communities have access to the up-to-date ideas, innovations, and research that is specifically focused on growing and sustaining productive businesses."* He asks the ACMF members to consider, *"How can we [AMS] do better? We know there are barriers to accessing our funding programs?" "How can we make these funding pots distributed more equitably?"* Mr. Powell ended with asking the Committee for their *"ideas on how we [USDA] can diversify our boards and committees"?*

The last speakers were Mr. Joe Parsons, Director of Methodology, National Agriculture Statistical Service, and chair of the Agricultural Statistics Board, joined by Drs. Virginia Harris and Struther Van Horn. This inquiry before the ACMF was very narrow and specific to Statistical Policy Directive 15 (SPD 15) around standards for collecting, maintaining, and presenting federal data on race and ethnicity. OMB is currently reviewing the language around, for example, ethnic inquiries around the Hispanic or Latino diaspora and the need for a distinct category for them to self-identify; Middle Eastern and North African respondents view their identity as distinct from the white racial category. And their inquiry focused around disaggregating other ethnicity categories. The presentation ended with a question posed as to whether the majority - minority distinction in the standards might be managed. Is that language still valuable to keep in the standards. Consider "Minority" Farmer Advisory Committee which recognizes an important community that had been traditionally underserved by different federal agencies, for instance. The members gave their feedback on the forms and the OMB's efforts to revise language that may not reflect the "truth anymore or the population" and invited to respond to the SPD 15 registry notice which are still taking comments. They would also like to schedule another session to engage with the Interagency working group later this year, perhaps in August or September. The DFO will follow up on that.

After discussing next steps, the plan for building recommendations, and the preliminary schedule for work sessions, acknowledgements were shared, and the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

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

Date

Harvey Reed III
Chairperson
Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers

Date