



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# A NEW PATH FORWARD: A PROGRESS REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EQUITY COMMISSION'S RECOMMENDATIONS

UPDATE 2024



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## Message from the Secretary



*Secretary Tom Vilsack*

On February 28, 2022, nearly two years ago, the Equity Commission held its first inaugural meeting, beginning a process of setting clear and intentional goals to design and transform a better system for all producers and for all Americans. In that time, members of the Equity Commission and its two Subcommittees on Agriculture and Rural Community Economic Development dedicated hundreds of hours of their time and expertise. Members heard from their communities and those often left behind throughout the country. They brought forth these voices and the issues still being felt as a result of a system that has not been equitable for generations. They convened six public meetings across the country to put pen to paper on a clear vision that charts the future of the Department. This brings us to where we are today.

To the Equity Commission and its Subcommittees, this Department thanks you and so do the people of America. The Equity Commission, through its resulting set of recommendations, made forward-looking progress, and identified ways to rectify the system and prevent wrongdoings in the future. Where there are issues, this report gives us a path forward to find solutions and to implement them.

Simultaneously throughout this Administration, USDA has been working day in and day out to advance justice, equity, and opportunities for the farmers, ranchers, landowners, communities, families, and business owners we serve, and for all Americans. We remain committed to acknowledging USDA's historical challenges in doing so, and to writing a new story for the future.

As part of this work, we conducted internal reviews to analyze how we are realizing equity at the mission area level. As a result, each USDA mission area and the Department as a whole produced individual Equity Action Plans to ensure we are taking the appropriate steps to achieve equity, with each mission area and staff office's specific roles and stakeholders in mind. Last week, USDA released its 2023 updated [Equity Action Plan](#). We also hired our first-ever Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer to lead USDA in our ongoing efforts to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) across the Department and to oversee the implementation of USDA's first-ever [DEIA Strategic Plan](#).

Establishing the Equity Commission in February 2022 was an important step USDA took towards implementing the Executive Order President Biden issued on his first day in office. Last February, on the one-year anniversary of its launch, the Commission and its Subcommittee on Agriculture presented me with an Interim Report that included 32 recommendations. We took those recommendations very seriously and began to implement those that fall within USDA's authority, and we are working through those that require legislative or budgetary action.

With the release of the Equity Commission’s final report, which includes a total of 66 final recommendations including additions from the Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee, USDA will continue to exhaust every tool available to us to implement these recommendations so we can continue to advance equity for all.

I believe we are at a pivotal moment, where we must make an active choice to create, not diminish, opportunity. To that end, with a consistent focus on equity, USDA is ushering in a new era at the Department, one that values farms of every shape and every size and creates a better and stronger America, especially for those that have been too long and too often left behind. This requires tangible and meaningful actions and a steadfast approach:

- **We are advancing equity.** We are taking actionable steps to make USDA’s programs and resources accessible for everyone.
- **We are listening.** We are committed to establishing an open line with you to foster dialogue and collaboration.
- **We are being transparent.** We are sharing our progress—and our challenges—along the way.
- **We are being held accountable.** We want you to hold USDA accountable to continued progress now and into the future.
- **We are setting the standard.** We are working to ensure equity is normalized and ingrained as part of the daily operations of the Department.

We recognize that work of this significance requires ongoing commitment, and while there is more work to do, we believe we have made a strong start towards this effort. On behalf of the Department, and all those we serve, I thank the Equity Commission and our USDA team as we strive to live up to the moniker of the “People’s Department” and improve the lives of Americans for generations to come.

THOMAS J. VILSACK  
*Secretary*

## Executive Summary

In February 2022, in support of President Biden’s Executive Order 13985, with funding authorized by the American Rescue Plan Act and amended by the Inflation Reduction Act, USDA launched the Equity Commission to provide USDA with an analysis of how its programs, policies, systems, structures, and practices that contribute to barriers to inclusion or access, systemic discrimination, or exacerbate or perpetuate racial, economic, health and social disparities and recommendations for action.

The Commission was asked to be forward-looking and make recommendations for lasting change to ensure a more equitable future. Over the course of the two years, USDA provided numerous resources, reports, and briefings to the Commission as they worked to identify opportunities for improvement. USDA leadership asked the Commission to “go bold” and include recommendations that may require legislative, policy, regulatory and/or budgetary changes.

In February 2023, the Equity Commission released its Interim Report with 32 recommendations related to how USDA works with farmers and ranchers, its need for Department-wide change, the commitment to farmworkers and their families, and the re-evaluation of other programs such as those focused on research, extension and nutrition security.

At that time, USDA issued a response that mirrored the structural organization of the report to highlight a subset of actions already underway within the Department. Of the 32 interim recommendations made, the Department is taking active steps to fully implement 60% of them. USDA is taking action on the other 40%, which have significant legislative or budgetary barriers, or will require partnerships federal agencies to fully implement them. USDA is currently analyzing the additional 34 recommendations that were voted in the Commission’s public meeting in October 2023. The Department is weaving these recommendations in its everyday operations and have included more than 50% of the recommendations in its 2023 Equity Action Plans.

This document expands on that initial response and provides updates that have taken place since – and in some cases as a result of – the Interim Recommendations. Additionally, this document includes a subset of actions that are underway that relate to the new recommendations passed by the Equity Commission in October 2023.

As such, this document mirrors the Final Report and is organized as follows:

1. How USDA Advances Department-Wide Equity
2. How USDA Works with Farmers and Ranchers Day-to-Day
3. How USDA Supports Farmworkers and their Families
4. How USDA Strengthens Research and Extension Programs
5. How USDA Ensures Equitable Nutrition Assistance to those in Need
6. How USDA Recognizes Immigrants and their Families
7. How USDA Can Enhance Rural Development Operations

8. How USDA Supports Rural Communities
9. How USDA Supports Rural Economies

The efforts identified in this document do not reflect the totality of the work USDA is doing to support equitable service delivery. The USDA [equity website](#) provides a more comprehensive look at Departmental activities since January 2021 that are aligned with advancing equity.

## USDA's Commitment to Civil Rights and Equity

USDA can only succeed in its mission to help America thrive—and can only live up to President Lincoln's description of it as the "People's Department"— if it ensures the Americans who most need its services adequately receive them. Equity is not an add-on to what we do. It is central to the Department's [mission](#), "To serve all Americans by providing effective, innovative, science-based public policy leadership in agriculture, food and nutrition, natural resource protection and management, rural development, and related issues with a commitment to delivering equitable and climate-smart opportunities that inspire and help America thrive."

“ *Equity means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment.* ”

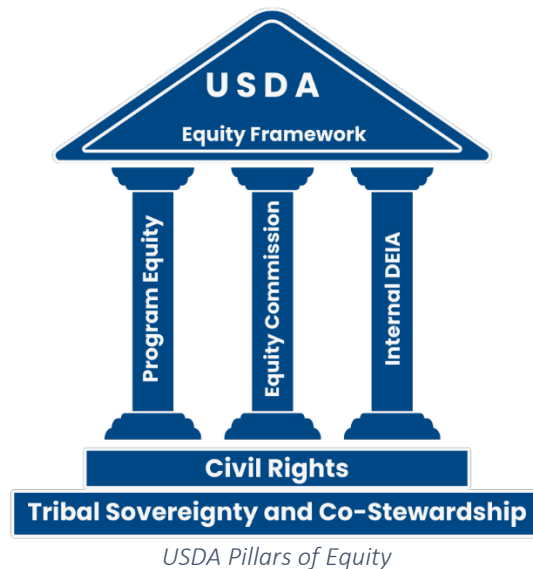
To accomplish this mission, we must, together, build and maintain public trust and confidence among USDA stakeholders. We are working to:

- Identify and **root out systemic discrimination** in USDA programs;
- Ensure **equitable access** to USDA programs and services for all communities, including by **removing barriers** to access and working to **repair past mistakes** that have resulted in economic, social, and racial disparities; and
- Promote nutrition security, a healthy environment, and the **opportunity for a good life** for every person, in every community in America.

Our consistent efforts over the last three years have yielded tremendous progress in this important and ongoing journey.

At USDA, we recognize that achieving equity means building trusting relationships with the people we serve. First and foremost, this requires acknowledging the wrongs of the past and committing to being responsive to the needs of **all** our stakeholders and partners. We also recognize that to best serve all our customers, we must strengthen the Department's internal capacity to deliver on our mission efficiently and effectively. Additionally, we recognize that our commitment to achieving equitable outcomes at USDA requires that the Department be: (1) focused on learning and improvement, (2) fair, transparent, and accountable to stakeholders and partners, (3) diverse and inclusive in our workforce; and (4) outcome-oriented and committed to learning from others. This is the path that we have followed since January 2021 and continue to follow into the near future.

The Department’s racial justice and equity work has three pillars: the Equity Commission, Program Equity, and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA). The Equity Commission’s work has been crucial in providing recommendations to the Secretary on policies, programs, and actions needed to address equity and racial justice issues. The Program Equity pillar describes USDA’s external-facing equity initiatives, which is a commitment to ensure USDA programs and services are accessible to all customers and are reaching customers who have historically benefitted less from USDA programs and services. The DEIA pillar describes USDA’s internal strategy to hire, support, and retain a diverse and talented workforce that is representative of the American public we serve. All three pillars rest on the obligation to uphold civil rights as well as the Department’s trust and treaty responsibilities with Tribal Nations and Indian country.



**USDA has committed to seven Department equity strategies in the Department Equity Action Plan<sup>1</sup>:**

1. Ensure agricultural resources and assistance are broadly accessible, while creating new, more, and better market opportunities so USDA policies and programs advance agriculture for all who want to participate, not just a few.
2. Promote rural prosperity and economic security by connecting business owners to new markets, empowering people with modern infrastructure, and supporting community-driven opportunities and solutions to build brighter futures in rural America.
3. Promote nutrition security and health equity through USDA nutrition assistance programs to ensure all Americans have access to the nutrition they need.

<sup>1</sup> As appropriate, these seven strategies are referenced throughout the document.



4. Ensure equitable access to forest resources, funding opportunities, and outdoor experiences; and target wildfire prevention and conservation investments where they are most needed.
5. Advance equity in federal procurement by providing underserved and disadvantaged businesses tools and resources to increase access to funding opportunities, and by helping promote safe and secure provision of services and supplies.
6. Empower Tribal sovereignty and uphold treaty responsibilities to Indian Tribes, removing barriers to access USDA programs and incorporating indigenous values and perspectives in program design and delivery.
7. Commit unwaveringly to civil rights by improving tools, skills, capacity, and processes to more effectively and efficiently, enforce them.

**USDA is operationalizing our equity strategies through the following four approaches:**

1. Reducing administrative, economic, historical, and other barriers to program access, and ensuring our programs include processes to assess, understand, and remove or mitigate such barriers.
2. Partnering with trusted technical assistance providers to ensure that underserved producers and communities have the support they need to access USDA programs.
3. Continuing USDA's effort to help those in need of assistance with the resources available and advocate for sufficient resources that people in need are not denied.
4. Operating transparently and accountably, providing the information on Department programs that Congress, stakeholders, and the general public need to hold us to account on our equity agenda, and working systematically to collect and take account of public feedback, including input from underserved communities.

In partnership with the important work of the Equity Commission, USDA has made progress on our equity commitment through concerted internal efforts. A major part of this effort included conducting internal reviews of 18 agencies within USDA, involving more than 60 of our programs and over 160 equity actions, to uncover and address gaps between where we are and where we aim to be.

The result was the creation of the [Department's Equity Action Plan](#), updated in February 2024, along with [15 Equity Action Plans](#), covering each mission area and its agencies, as well as the Department's staff offices. The plans go above and beyond the requirements of the President's Executive Order, laying out tangible steps that propel us on our journey towards true equity.

Each of the USDA Equity Action Plans are available at [Equity Action Plans | USDA](#).

## USDA's Progress in Advancing Equity for USDA Agencies, Employees, and Stakeholders

Equity is at the core of what USDA does; **institutionalizing equity** is a top priority of the Biden-Harris Administration. There are many steps necessary to integrate equity into the Department's culture, policies, and processes. Changes in structure, leadership responsibilities, and accountability measures are all underway, and the Commission's recommendations are a key part of that process.

Following the release of the Equity Commission's Interim Report in 2023, USDA hired its first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer (CDIO), reporting directly to Secretary Vilsack. The Office of the CDIO was established and funded as a permanent program office in USDA, leading USDA's internal work to institutionalize best practices for a diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive organization. It prioritizes developing a workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities USDA serves, bringing the best talent to USDA, investing in that workforce, and creating a culture where everyone feels welcome. A well-trained, robust and diverse field staff is also essential to providing the service producers deserve.

A diverse and inclusive organization requires instituting diversity at the leadership level, and just as importantly, creating a pipeline of professionals who can grow into leadership roles in the future. In FY24, of all Department permanent hires, 27% were from minority backgrounds and 18% were early career hires. Early career hires are employees who are younger than age 26 (Gen Z) with less than three years of Federal service experience, who were hired into a position below the general schedule 9 grade level and have promotion potential (data as of January 2024).

Through the initial DEIA efforts and those planned for 2024, USDA is strengthening its ability to recruit, hire, develop, promote, and retain our nation's talent, with development and implementation of tools and resources aimed at promoting inclusive hiring.

Given that USDA programs touch every American, the Department supports and agrees with the Equity Commission's recommendation on Advancing Environmental Justice and believes we are well-positioned to provide protection from environmental harms through equitable investment by USDA programs and services, and the development of inclusive, sustainable economies. President Biden's [Executive Order 14096](#), *Revitalizing Our Nation's Commitment to Environmental Justice for All*, defines environmental justice as "the just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of income, race, color, national origin, Tribal affiliation, or disability, in agency decision-making and other Federal activities that affect human health and the environment." At USDA, we strive to create opportunities to improve human health and the environment in all communities that may be affected by our work while striving to ensure that environmental burdens do not fall disproportionately on underserved communities.

In order to continually make progress in advancing Environmental Justice, USDA is actively developing an Environmental Justice Strategic Plan. This plan focuses on ensuring equitable access to the Department's programs and services; avoiding disproportionate and adverse

impacts to communities with environmental concerns; increasing workforce development, training, and market opportunities; promoting meaningful engagement and outreach; and increasing internal capacity within USDA to support work related to environmental justice. USDA also publishes an annual [Environmental Justice Scorecard](#) outlining progress in advancing environmental justice.

USDA has 70 programs covered under the Justice40 Initiative. This initiative, launched through [Executive Order 14008](#), *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, establishes a government-wide goal of directing 40% of the overall benefits of certain federal investments from covered programs to flow to disadvantaged communities. The U.S. Forest Service, for example, has 19 covered programs spanning legacy pollution mitigation, environmental remediation, wildfire risk reduction, urban and community forestry, and much more.

To promote USDA's progress in enhancing how benefits from Justice40 programs flow to disadvantaged communities, in FY22 and FY23, USDA required agencies to develop Implementation Plans for each covered program. These plans outline the modifications agencies are implementing to enhance how program benefits flow to disadvantaged communities. To promote accountability, agencies' progress is being tracked iteratively using an internal tracking system. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Forest Service, for example, have modified the evaluation process of the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Program to include criteria weighing the benefits of the proposed project to underserved communities. Vital documents for multiple NRCS covered programs have also been translated into several languages, including Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Hmong, and made available to States to better serve NRCS customers.

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*Department-wide equity strategy: Empower tribal sovereignty and uphold treaty responsibilities to Indian Tribes, removing barriers to access USDA programs and incorporating indigenous values and perspectives in program design and delivery.*

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USDA has been strengthening **Tribal Consultations and Nation-to-Nation relationships** in a variety of ways. USDA has restored and empowered the Office of Tribal Relations to a free-standing office within the Office of the Secretary that can maintain the Nation-to-Nation relationship as is required both by law and by treaty. The Office of Tribal Relations has collaborated with USDA agencies on work that fits broadly into three impact areas:

- Removing the unique barriers to Indigenous and Tribal access to USDA programs and services.
- Promoting Tribal self-determination throughout USDA.
- Adapting USDA's programs to include Tribal/Indigenous values and perspectives.



*USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack delivers remarks alongside Chef Sean Sherman of the North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems, at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Food is Medicine Summit.*

In 2023, the Office of Tribal Relations:

- **Established the Inaugural Tribal Advisory Committee (TAC).** The USDA Tribal Advisory Committee is a permanent committee created by the 2018 Farm Bill to ensure Tribal perspectives are well represented at USDA and to ensure the Department’s policies and decisions are informed by the unique Nation-to-Nation relationship. The TAC includes an 11-member board, with eight members appointed by the Chair and Ranking member of Senate Indian Affairs and House and Senate Agricultural Committees, and three appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture. USDA is honored to coordinate with these House and Senate Committee leaders to seat and announce the inaugural USDA Tribal Advisory Committee.
- **Moved the Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) Program to the Office of Tribal Relations.** To meet the requests and recommendations of Tribal leaders and Tribal colleges and universities presidents’ USDA moved the Tribal College Program to the Office of Tribal Relations on January 29, 2023. This realignment ensures that USDA staff with extensive Tribal experience are available to respond to the immediate and long-term needs of Tribal Colleges and Universities.
  - **Hiring new Tribal/TCU Liaisons.** Additional Tribal College and University Program Tribal Liaisons will serve Indian Country working with Tribal Colleges and Universities and Tribes in the regions they will serve. The Office of Tribal Relations is in the middle of the hiring process for upwards of six positions.
- **USDA Renewed Memorandum of Agreement with Tribal Colleges.** In February 2023 the Secretary renewed USDA’s commitment to TCU through a memorandum of agreement with 1994 Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities with land-grant status, to ensure

they have equitable access to the Department's employment, programs, services, and resources.

- **USDA Re-Established the Tribal College Faculty Fellowship (Terra Preta do Indio).** The Tribal College Faculty Fellowship program seeks to strengthen tribal college and university research capacity and introduce faculty and staff to USDA programs and services. Five fellows participated in the summer of 2023.
- **USDA Expanded Existing Tribal College 1994 Student Scholars Program.** All 1994 Tribal Land-Grants may now participate in the scholarship. Additionally, the scholarship may now follow a student from a two-year degree school to a four year-degree granting institution. The USDA 1994 Tribal Scholars Program provides full tuition, fees, books, a housing stipend, and paid workforce training to any interested and eligible student pursuing degrees in agriculture, food, natural resource sciences, or related academic disciplines at a TCU. Eligible applicants include graduating high school seniors, full-time students currently enrolled at a 1994 Land-grant Tribal college or university, or recent TCU associate degree graduates.
- **USDA Established a New Tribal Internship for Students Interested in Indian Country Agriculture and Food.** USDA and the Partnership for Public Service have collaborated to create the Future Leaders in Public Service Internship Program – Department of Agriculture: Tribal Agriculture and Food. Undergraduate and graduate students will be recruited to work on Indian Country agriculture and food portfolios.
- **USDA Increases Research Cooperative Agreements with TCUs.**
  - **ARS Indigenous Traditional Knowledge & Foods Seed Propagation Research Collaborations.** The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) created collaborations with 1994 Tribal Colleges and Universities (1994 TCU) to promote Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK) and Food Systems. Cooperative agreements between ARS and United Tribes Technical University and ARS and Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College have been implemented to restore traditional cultivars and develop propagation techniques for culturally important native plant species. This information provides a building block to replicate ITEK systems.
  - **Native Grasses and Forbs Research – Institute of American Indian Arts.** USDA's Office of Tribal Relations has entered into two Cooperative Agreements with the Tribal Alliance for Pollinators (TAP) and the Institute of American Indian Arts to expand native grass and forbs seeds for pollinators, grasslands, and working lands restoration. The TAP agreement includes work to improve access to USDA's resources and programming for our tribal partners and producers through educating consumers, agency staff, and federal policy decision makers about native grasses and forbs that complement native grassland conservation and livestock consumption. TAP will partner with NRCS to update the NRCS state

foraging seed lists to incorporate more native grasses and forbs and amend Environmental Quality Incentives Program reimbursement for seeding as appropriate.

- **Established a Tribal Public Health Resource Center.** USDA’s Office of Tribal Relations received an appropriation to develop a Tribal Public Health Resource Center at a land-grant university with existing Indigenous public health expertise to expand current partnerships and collaborative efforts with Indigenous groups, including Tribal colleges to improve the delivery of culturally appropriate public health services and functions in American Indian communities focusing on Indigenous food sovereignty. The Office of Tribal Relations is working with North Dakota State University to develop a center focused on the intersection of Tribal food sovereignty and public health. The first project will be a summer program for students to engage with leaders and experts in the food sovereignty field, providing them with the tools to improve public health in their communities.

USDA is actively working to better serve our customers through tools like the AskUSDA Call Center, run by the Office of Customer Experience (OCX), a service that answers calls on any manner of USDA topics in more than 10 languages. The Commission’s recommendations on ways to improve **customer experience** coincided with the OCX’s recently proposed Departmental Regulation that establishes an inaugural Department-wide Voice of the Customer policy. This policy is designed to listen from and better serve USDA customers and take into account the needs of underserved communities as they interact with the USDA. In 2023, after over 130 hours of research, that included stakeholder interviews, data and recommendation analysis, and feedback sessions at cooperator-hosted events, OCX proudly launched an initiative dedicated to Create, Assist, Rebuild, Empower and Strengthen (CARES) known as [USDA CARES](#). This initiative aims to better connect underserved producers and our partner organizations who serve them, sometimes known as cooperators, with relevant programs and services by increasing access to helpful resources.

## Language Access in FPAC

The Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Mission Area has translated more than 730 products spanning 30 languages and created 200 new Spanish-language webpages on [farmers.gov](#).

Additionally, OCX developed and submitted their annual Department-wide Customer Experience (CX) Action Plans in conjunction with USDA’s [High Impact Service Providers \(HISPs\)](#) annual CX Action Plans. USDA has six HISP, the highest number of HISPs government wide, due to the scale and critical nature of our public-facing services. These plans identify priorities for improving designated services, build USDA’s CX management capacity, and continuing to improve service delivery through digital modernization efforts, with an enhanced focus on

equity. The USDA Staff Office Equity Action Plan outlines additional actions that OCX is working towards to ensure that we put our customers first.

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*Department-wide equity strategy: Commit unwaveringly to civil rights by improving tools, skills, capacity, and processes to more effectively and efficiently enforce them.*

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Rebuilding civil rights capabilities is critical and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) is setting the stage for a more inclusive future. Civil Rights is the bedrock that allows USDA to commit to its equity work. Civil rights is at the foundation of USDA's work to improve the equitable delivery of USDA's programs and services. As such, Secretary Vilsack issued a mandate that OASCR take proactive decision-making steps for the purpose of rebuilding the transparency, accountability and integrity of operations and programs to find solutions to challenges while building a roadmap for effective sustainable change that could be institutionalized for decades to come.

In the last year, significant improvements have resulted from **transforming USDA's program complaints processing** by engaging in aggressive inventory reduction initiatives, yielding a decrease in inventory age and processing times. In line with the Equity Commission's recommendation to transform the office in FY23, OASCR increased the speed of processing filed program complaints of discrimination, and increased capacity so that it can meet an ambitious target of resolving new complaints within 225 days.

OASCR increased staffing capacity and expertise by onboarding 59 employees in FY23. In FY23, OASCR received 275 equal employment opportunity (EEO) complaints of discrimination, and there were an unprecedented 18 findings of discrimination due to an increased efficiency of staff.

Moreover, OASCR has initiated 31 process improvements projects to address a variety of challenges, including information technology modernization, the development of an Equity Action Plan, Anti-Harassment Departmental Regulation and Training and the development of a Departmental comprehensive language access program. Through the completion of 19 of the 31 Process Improvement Projects, USDA has seen tremendous progress in the delivery of compliance measures which provide the framework to institutionalizing USDA's DEIA work. USDA agrees with the Equity Commission's assessment that language is a barrier for linguistically and culturally diverse communities trying to access programs and services; **language access** is a key part of ensuring communities are aware of USDA's programs and services. USDA has been working diligently to improve access for members of the public whose English proficiency is limited.

The Equity Commission's recommendations were included as a key source of input during the development of USDA's Department-wide [Language Access Plan](#). Published in November 2023, the plan seeks to ensure individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) receive meaningful

access to USDA’s resources, programs, and activities. This plan aims to reduce the burden to language access services and creates a robust language access system for all by ensuring that USDA-conducted and assisted activities provide services equivalent in scope, quality, and effectiveness to people LEP. It ensures LEP persons are appropriately informed of the availability of translation and interpretation services and do not experience unreasonable delays in services related to translation and interpretation.

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*Department-wide equity strategy: Advance equity in federal procurement by providing underserved and disadvantaged businesses tools and resources to increase access to funding opportunities, and by helping promote safe and secure provision of services and supplies.*

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The Commission’s recommendation focused on **procurement** and supplier diversity included several actions that were taken into consideration as USDA invests in local procurement and leverages its buying power to ensure small and disadvantaged businesses have a fair shot at being able to do business with the Department. In 2023, a number of enhancements were made to the USDA Procurement Forecast process. USDA is currently gathering FY24 and FY25 forecasts which are viewable by vendors at [Forecast of Business Opportunities | USDA](#).

The Office of Contracting and Procurement (OCP) has also linked the Forecast Tool referenced above to the procurement requisition and contract award information. This will ensure all USDA contract needs are added to the Forecast Tool, and vendors visiting the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU) page have current information on procurement opportunities.

Recently, [USDA Vendor Capabilities Portal](#) deployed a [Vendor Survey](#) to allow companies to share their capabilities statements with USDA. The tool has the potential to provide immediate and widespread access to vendor information and easily identify new entrants interested in doing business with USDA.

USDA exceeded all small business goals established by the Small Business Association (SBA) in FY23. Although final figures are not published by SBA until later in the year, USDA’s approximate small business goal achievement in FY23 was:



<b>USDA's Approximate Small Business Goal Achievement (FY23)</b>			
<b>Program</b>	<b>USDA Percentage Obligated</b>	<b>USDA Goal</b>	<b>USDA Goal Delta<sup>2</sup></b>
Small Business	68.95%	55%	+13.95%
Small Disadvantaged Business	28.26%	22.40%	+5.86%
Woman Owned Small Business	11.69%	5%	+6.69%
Service-Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business	5.43%	3%	+2.43%
Historically Underutilized Business Zones (HUBZone)	6.66%	3%	+3.66%

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<sup>2</sup> Each year USDA is given a goal by the Small Business Administration (SBA). The delta is the percentage of total USDA procurement spent above the goal set by SBA.

## USDA's Progress in Advancing Equity for Farmers and Ranchers

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*Department-wide equity strategy: Ensure agricultural resources and assistance are broadly accessible, while creating new, more, and better market opportunities so USDA policies and programs advance agriculture for all who want to participate, not just a few.*

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The Equity Commission report details a set of recommendations focused on advancing equity for farmers and ranchers. Since the start of the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA has engaged agricultural producers in new and more effective ways, streamlining the delivery of its programs, opening the doors of agriculture to all, and providing a more effective and holistic farm safety net. USDA is helping producers increase their revenue sources and income opportunities so their operations—and the agricultural economy—can become more sustainable, resilient, and profitable.

The first recommendation within this section of the Equity Commission's report addresses issues of **heirs' property and fractionated land**. Heirs' property and other land tenure issues have long been substantial barriers preventing access to USDA programs for historically underserved producers, including farmers, ranchers, and other landowners.



*USDA Secretary Vilsack met with producers and partners in Arkansas to discuss the investment of up to \$2.8 billion into 70 selected projects for the first funding pool of the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities funding opportunity; 20 of those projects are expected to impact Arkansas.*

Through the [Heirs' Property Relending Program](#) (HPRP), USDA provides \$10.6 million in loan funding to assist heirs with resolving title issues related to property and with resolving land ownership and succession issues on agricultural land. Through a competitive process,

intermediary lenders are provided loan funds for relending to heirs for purposes such as financing the purchase or consolidation of property interests, financing costs associated with a succession plan, buying out fractional interests of other heirs to clear the title, title searches, mediation, and legal services. This relending program provides access to capital to help producers find a resolution. The program's benefits will keep farmland in farming, protect family farm legacies, and support economic viability.

- To amplify awareness of the relending program, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) has partnered with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives /Land Assistance Fund to conduct outreach and technical assistance to ensure eligible heirs learn about the program and receive programmatic and general support when applying to the HPRP. FSA plans to continue to utilize agreements to partner with experienced organizations to deliver legal services.
- In addition to the relending program, outreach and education efforts regarding heirs' property issues have been implemented. Through an Agriculture Food and Research Initiative (AFRI) grant, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) funded a collaborative effort led by the Southern Rural Development Center to develop a training curriculum on heirs' property and fractionation issues.
- The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program funded a project with the Center for Heirs Property Preservation Program in South Carolina leveraging the AFRI training. This project is working on increasing landowners' knowledge of how to resolve heirs' property issues to benefit from USDA cost share programs and establish succession plans.
- FSA entered into a cooperative agreement with the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFR) Policy Research Center at Alcorn State University. The agreement helped to enhance and implement the training curriculum while supporting Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) as they work with underserved farmers and ranchers who are disproportionately impacted by these land tenure issues.

Looking forward, USDA has made a commitment in the [FSA Equity Action Plan](#) to continue expanding opportunities for heirs and Tribal producers impacted by heirs' property and fractionated land issues by improving the Heirs' Property Relending Program and Highly Fractionated Indian Land Program.

With respect to the Commission's recommendation on **community-led land access and transition projects**, with authority and funding provided through the American Rescue Plan, as amended by section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act, FSA announced a grant and cooperative agreement program making up to \$300 million to assist underserved producers through the [Increasing Land, Capital and Market Access Program in August 2022](#). Recognizing the importance of land access to agriculture and opportunity, this program is designed to help underserved producers by increasing land, capital, and market access. The program announced the selection of 50 projects in June 2023 that helped underserved producers go from surviving to thriving.

In addition to land access, USDA recognizes the need to support farmers' and ranchers' access to better markets and the need for future food systems to be fair, competitive, and resilient.

We are working to support Tribal producers through The Bison Purchase Pilot, which is an interagency pilot made possible by USDA's Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). It is aimed at offering more localized ground bison meat for Tribal communities while increasing market opportunities for local Tribal and bison operations.

Additionally, in May 2023, USDA announced that 12 organizations will be new USDA Regional Food Business Centers. These centers will provide national coverage, coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building to help farmers, ranchers, and other food businesses access new markets and navigate federal, state, and local resources.

A resilient system requires an examination of the barriers to success and finding solutions. USDA is in alignment with the Commission's recommendations on **climate change, conservation, and risk management** and is incorporating an equity lens in the programs that touch these areas. The Department is committed to a climate-smart agriculture and forestry approach that is voluntary, incentive-based, and collaborative; one that expands and creates new markets for climate-smart commodities and greenhouse gas reductions rewarding farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners for their stewardship.

### Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements

In FY22, the Natural Resource and Conservation Service administered a \$50 million investment in 118 partnerships to improve equity in access to conservation programs through [Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements](#) and invested another \$70 million in 139 projects in FY23.

USDA has made significant investments in partnerships to support diverse farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners through the [Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities](#). USDA incorporated stakeholder concerns into the program design and made equity a factor in award selection, encouraging partnerships with underserved producers. These efforts will finance the production of climate-smart commodities through partner-led pilot and demonstration projects that help expand and create markets for climate-smart agricultural commodities and will provide new sources of revenue for producers. As a result of the \$3.1 billion Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities effort, USDA is investing in 141 projects.

All Partnerships for Climate Smart Commodities projects require meaningful involvement with underserved producers. Climate investments have been made across 53 states and territories and over 20 Tribes and Tribal groups. These investments will reach 60,000 farms and have a high focus on supporting small and underserved farmers and ranchers to reach expanded markets and revenue streams. Among the partners are more than 20 Minority Serving

Institutions, more than 20 Tribal partners, and many partner groups with small and underserved producers.

The Natural Resource and Conservation Service (NRCS) has outlined five actions in its [Equity Action Plan](#) that incorporate the Commission's recommendations, with a focus on conservation related recommendations. For example, NRCS has been working to increase awareness for **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Advance Payments** through training of State Outreach Coordinators. NRCS established a supplemental payment to assist producers to continue implementing existing EQIP contracts in light of current inflation. As part of these Post-Inflationary Supplemental Payments (PISPs), the agency conducted an economic analysis to determine which conservation practices were most impacted by inflation and to what extent. In evaluating options to determine which practices should receive PISPs, NRCS heavily weighted the impacts to underserved producers.

As a result of guidance at the USDA 2023 National Tribal Consultation, NRCS recently added three conservation practices to the list of Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry core practices. For 2024, prescribed burning, brush management, and restoration of rare and declining communities (through floodplain hydrology and connectivity improvement) will be recognized for their climate change mitigation impacts, and these practices are also eligible for NRCS Inflation Reduction Act conservation funding.

In alignment with the Commission's recommendations to modify **conservation programs standards** to ensure the use of Indigenous Knowledge and land management practices, FSA modified the [Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program](#) (CREP) to allow for added staffing capacity and to increase eligibility to a broader array of entities including Tribes. In 2022, FSA signed historic CREP agreements with three Tribal Nations in the Great Plains: Cheyenne River, Oglala, and Rosebud Sioux Tribes. These partner agreements will help enroll eligible grassland, pastureland, and other agricultural lands within the boundaries of their reservations. USDA's Regional Climate Hubs are also working with Tribal stakeholders to include their knowledge and priorities as they deliver science-based climate-smart agriculture tools and programs. Specific examples include the Native Climate Project and the Collaborative Conservation and Adaptation Strategy Toolbox, which includes co-developing the Drought Severity Evaluation Tool for use by the Navajo Nation.



*Administrator Zach Ducheneaux and Assistant Director, Division of Conservation, Steve Frost conducted a review of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) incentives to remove land from irrigation and received a briefing on grazing alternatives.*

Through a series of stakeholder engagements, and as part of [the Risk Management Agency \(RMA\) Equity Action Plan](#), RMA leadership has worked to identify programs gaps by continuously evaluating existing programs leading to the **expansion of coverage to a variety of specialty crops**. In response to the recommendation in the Interim Report, the Micro Farm maximum allowable farm revenue has been raised to \$350,000 from \$100,000. In March 2023, RMA implemented a five-year contract to provide grant writing and project management assistance to nonprofits serving young, new and beginning, small-scale, underserved, and specialty crop farmers. And, in August 2023, USDA announced it is improving crop insurance options for small and diversified farmers as part of RMA's efforts to increase participation and access to crop insurance.

In January 2023, FSA announced updates to the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) that improves access to this important risk management tool. These updates provide free basic NAP coverage, including financial assistance to producers of non-insurable crops when there are low yields, loss of inventory, or when planting was prevented due to natural disaster, and waiving the NAP service fee for producers who have certified as socially disadvantaged, limited resource, beginning or veteran farmers or ranchers occur due to natural disasters. While this change is recent, we expect it to help expand enrollment, allowing more producers to receive coverage and better manage risk. FSA has established a NAP advisory group and a working group to identify administrative program changes and flexibilities that will streamline and simplify producer participation to continue improving on access to NAP.

Within its **technical assistance and outreach** recommendation, the Equity Commission highlighted stakeholder difficulties navigating USDA’s programs and services. USDA is helping to ensure that underserved farmers, ranchers, and foresters have the tools, programs and support they need to succeed in agriculture. Through funding from the American Rescue Plan Act and as amended by section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act, NIFA has invested over \$100 million in more than 30 community-based organizations, universities, and nonprofits to foster producer resilience and success. With the establishment of the American Rescue Plan Technical Assistance Investment Program (ARPTAI), USDA is empowering trusted organizations to carry out tailored outreach and technical assistance programs that reduce barriers to accessing USDA programs and ensure underserved producers can thrive. The goal is to provide targeted

support for at-risk producers to avoid land loss, develop sound business plans, expand revenues and markets, and unlock access to capital. Establishing cooperative agreements with trusted technical assistance providers is an important step in building trust with producer communities.

### Cohort 1 Cooperator

The Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC), a Cohort I Cooperator, is supporting underserved agricultural producers and their communities by increasing access to USDA programs; improving economic viability and market conditions for veteran-owned farms and ranchers; enhancing the knowledge and skills of beginning farmer veterans; and offering technical assistance to over 35,000 farmer veterans nationally. FVC is accomplishing this by hosting expert-led training workshops and webinars, followed by a veteran-to-veteran peer learning model approach, and concluding with individualized technical assistance administered by FVC’s veteran service providers.

[Two cohorts of organizations](#) have been selected to serve as partners to USDA based on their proven track records working with underserved producer communities, such as veterans, new farmers, limited resource producers, and producers living in high-poverty areas. NIFA partners with agencies across USDA to substantially engage the Cooperators to ensure their success. Since the inception of ARPTAI, Cooperators have reported over 70,000 meaningful interactions with underserved producers to achieve equitable participation in USDA programs through responsive outreach and technical assistance.

The Department also agrees with the Commission’s recommendation to increase technical assistance and financial support for young and beginning farmers and has identified [Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coordinators](#) for each state from state office staff of the FSA, NRCS, and Rural Development, and regional staff of RMA. These coordinators are tasked with leading the development and implementation of a beginning farmer education, outreach, and technical assistance plan for their state. They are

supported by regional coordinators and the USDA National Beginning Farmer Coordinator. This work includes targeting small, minority, and specialty crop producers through a variety of outreach channels including online education and outreach.

RMA has invested \$13 million since 2021 in its Risk Management Education (RME) partnerships. The goal of RME is to educate underserved, small-scale, and organic producers on farm risk management and climate-smart farm practices. In FY24, USDA announced an additional \$3 million in funding. For farm programs, this includes improved assistance and capacity training on the skills involved in successful farm management, such as business planning, market development, financial knowledge, and more.

Additionally, USDA's NRCS led a multi-agency effort to create and publish the ["Get Started!" Guide](#), designed to help underserved farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners better understand and access the programs and resources available to help them. The guide is available in multiple languages and includes information on farm loans, crop insurance, conservation programs, disaster assistance, and more, supporting producers to improve their operations and reach their goals.

Lastly, USDA's Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) has funded 615 grants since 2010, totaling more than \$194 million through the 2501 Program. The objective of the 2501 Program is to show USDA's commitment to ensuring that underserved and veteran farmers, ranchers, and foresters can equitably participate in USDA programs. Grants are awarded to community-based and non-profit organizations, higher education institutions, and eligible tribal entities with at least three years of experience in working with socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers or veteran farmers and ranchers. 2501 Program partners are based in local communities and rural areas where they serve a critical role in maximizing USDA's outreach efforts by identifying systemic barriers that need to be removed and working to increase equitable participation in USDA's programs and services. In FY23, approximately \$28 million was awarded to 42 grantees in 25 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Projects funded under the 2501 Program include, but are not limited to, conferences, workshops and demonstrations on various farming techniques and other efforts to connect underserved farmers and ranchers to USDA local officials to help communities increase their awareness of USDA's programs and services.

## Cohort 2 Cooperator

Virginia State University (VSU), a Cohort II Cooperator, is equipping underserved farmer communities with the tools and skills needed to make informed decisions that lead to profitable farm businesses, while increasing their participation in USDA programs and Soil and Water Conservation District programs. VSU provides educational workshops and farm visits to assist producers with implementation of best practices. This work is successfully positioning Virginia's small and underserved farmers to move from "Plants to Profits."





*The Blackfeet Indian Reservation, a 1.5-million-acre reservation on the Rocky Mountain Front located east of Glacier National Park in northeast Montana and one of the largest Tribes in the US.*

The Commission's Report includes a recommendation that recognizes the many forms of **traditional agriculture**, including Tribal and Native American, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian agriculture. The Department values and respects the diversity of traditional agriculture. Last year, FSA updated the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) payment rates to recognize traditional Tribal animals, better reflecting the true market value of non-adult beef, beefalo, bison, and dairy animals.

In 2023, USDA announced the first recipients of Indigenous animals meat processing grants. USDA created the Indigenous Animals Harvesting and Meat Processing Grant Program with direct input from Tribal leaders. This program acknowledges the unique role of Indigenous animals as an important protein source for tribal communities. Learn more at [www.usda.gov/iag](http://www.usda.gov/iag).

The Equity Commission notes the complexity of **FSA loan programs and processes challenges** and how this can present a barrier to accessing USDA programs and services. USDA provides credit for agricultural real estate and operating expenses through direct and guaranteed loans to approximately 115,000 borrowers who cannot obtain sufficient commercial credit.

FSA has a significant initiative underway to streamline and automate Farm Loan Programs' customer-facing business processes, to improve access to capital. With efforts dating back to FY22, FSA has embarked on a seven-year digital transformation plan. This plan creates efficiencies for employees to improve return time, better assisting customers, and focusing on reviewing and processing new loans and servicing requests.

Since 2021, FSA has made many improvements, including:

- The [Loan Assistance Tool](#) on farmers.gov provides customers with an interactive online, step-by-step guide to identify the direct loan products that may be a fit for their business needs. The tool then guides customers to take an eligibility assessment, use a document gathering checklist to prepare for completing a loan application, and navigate the application process.
- A paperless [Online Loan Application](#) through farmers.gov that provides helpful features including an electronic signature option, the ability to attach supporting documents such as tax returns, and to complete a balance sheet and build a farm operating plan. Once submitted the customer can monitor the loan application's review status.
- A simplified direct loan paper application form was reduced from 29 pages to 13 pages and the average customer completion time reduced by 50%.
- [Pay My Loan](#) provides an online direct loan repayment option available through farmers.gov allowing loan payments to be made 24/7 for most borrowers at their convenience. Pay My Loan saves time for borrowers and minimizes manual payment processing activities for farm loan employees.
- Application Fast Track (AFT) reduces processing timeline and improve delivery of the program. For FSA's direct loan customer with a low probability of default, AFT accelerates the underwriting process. This process improvement reduces the staff hours committed to underwriting by loan staff which allows more time to be provided to customers who may need more technical assistance.

USDA remains committed to supporting family farms and to providing them with the credit needed to start and grow their operation. Farm Loans are a cornerstone of the assistance that is provided, but cumbersome processes and antiquated technology have been barriers to more effectively and efficiently meeting the needs of customers who expect and deserve streamlined processes and online technology to obtain credit and service their loan. This streamlining effort will expand access to credit by reducing direct loan application withdrawn and rejected rates, particularly among underserved customers.

The Inflation Reduction Act provided \$3.1 billion in funding for USDA to provide expeditious relief for distressed borrowers with at-risk agricultural operations with outstanding direct or guaranteed FSA loans. [Section 22006](#) of the IRA helps keep our farmers farming and providing a fresh start for producers in challenging positions.

- As of February 20, 2024, FSA has provided approximately \$2.2 billion in IRA 22006 assistance to more than 39,500 distressed direct and guaranteed loan borrowers. This will continue to increase in the coming weeks as previously announced assistance is deployed.
- To date, approximately 36% of FSA's direct loan borrowers have received assistance and 9% of all guaranteed loan borrowers have received assistance.

- Over the course of the implementation of IRA assistance, FSA direct loan delinquency has decreased from 16.5% to 9.5% and continues to decline. Guaranteed loan delinquency has decreased from 1.64% to 1.46%.
- Section 22006 has provided timely assistance to 543 direct borrowers who had been flagged for liquidation, and in the coming weeks will assist an additional 210 guaranteed borrowers flagged for liquidation.
- IRA assistance has so far reduced the number of accelerated accounts by 74% with continued reductions monthly.

IRA also directed USDA to provide financial assistance to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners who experienced discrimination in USDA farm lending programs prior to January 2021 through Section 22007. Congress provided a total of \$2.2 billion for this program.

USDA established the Discrimination Financial Assistance Program (DFAP) to implement this directive. As specified in the law, qualified nongovernmental entities administered the assistance using standards set by USDA. The Department worked diligently to design it in accordance with the law and with significant stakeholder input. USDA took immediate steps to convene listening sessions and seek public comments about the design of the program to make sure farmers, advocates, academics, legislators, tribal governments, and other experts were heard.

USDA is working closely with the nongovernmental program administrators who were conducting outreach, assisting with the financial assistance application process, processing applications, managing program call centers, and operating 30 local offices across 26 states. USDA also worked with the eight trusted community partners who were also providing outreach and application support. The entities involved in the DFAP application process engaged in outreach at the local, state, and national levels. Program administrators and cooperators hosted roughly 4,000 events across every state, territory, and the District of Columbia. This includes more than 3,000 outreach events by program administrators and more than 800 by cooperators. The program administrators also hosted over 6,500 office visits and over 4,500 technical assistance sessions. USDA officials also amplified the program, at events ranging from Farm Aid to the Intertribal Ag Council's Annual Meeting, to the National Black Growers Council Annual Meeting.

Applications were accepted from July 7, 2023, to January 17, 2024. Tens of thousands of applications were accepted over this period. Applications are currently being reviewed by the third-party administrators that are managing the program in consultation with agricultural experts. USDA is moving aggressively to provide financial assistance because the Biden-Harris Administration recognizes that the impacts of discrimination are cumulative, and that it is essential to get the money into the hands of applicants as soon as possible. By taking these important steps to fulfill the mandates of Section 22007, USDA hopes to recognize and acknowledge the discrimination suffered by individuals, take steps to rebuild trust with communities, and create a better and stronger U.S. agriculture that is more diverse and resilient.

The Equity Commission called attention to the disparities in farm program benefits paid to underserved producers. USDA acknowledges these disparities and welcomes further research, discussion, and work with Congress to address systemic inequities. Among the programs raised by the Equity Commission are those programs connected to **base acres**. The designation of base acres and the crops identified are specified in USDA statutes or explicitly identified in the Farm Bill.

Early in 2021, USDA briefly paused the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 2 (CFAP 2) to make significant improvements to the program and to better meet the needs of producers and industries left out of earlier pandemic assistance programs. In addition to making substantial improvements to CFAP 2, USDA created several new programs through the Pandemic Assistance for Producers initiative to support those producers who experienced substantial losses due to the pandemic but who had not been included in previous rounds of assistance. The Pandemic Assistance for Producers filled gaps in previous assistance, making sure that USDA was reaching a much broader set of producers, including those in underserved communities, small- and medium-sized producers, farmers and producers of non-commodity crops, and other agricultural businesses.

FSA focused on making sure the assistance helped address every producer's comprehensive loss. This meant creating new programs to support transitioning organic producers, cotton and wool apparel manufacturers, biofuel producers, producers who sold hogs through a spot market sale, livestock producers impacted by insufficient access to processing, timber harvesting and hauling businesses, dairy farmers who received a lower value due to market abnormalities, and more. It also meant reimagining and improving USDA's approach to disaster assistance. This initiative provided an opportunity for the Department to evaluate and adjust how it delivers programs based on feedback from the agriculture industry and add mechanisms, such as looking at an operations overall revenue decline, to target assistance to farmers with more severe impacts instead of the normal crop-by-crop approach that is less holistic.

In 2023, USDA implemented the Pandemic Assistance Revenue Program, the final program of the Pandemic Assistance for Producers initiative, and Emergency Relief Program Phase 2, one of the first times FSA programs were able to leverage revenue loss data as a mechanism for providing assistance. This innovation in program delivery provided a nexus for new producers to engage with FSA, establish working relationships, and receive assistance. Through these programs, the Department has demonstrated that disaster assistance can be made available for all producers irrespective of base acres.

The Equity Commission is critical of the **County Committee (COC) system**, a longstanding and statutorily required structure. Given its statutory status, the COC system cannot be removed or substantially changed absent Congressional action. The Department is working to recruit Committee members who reflect the full diversity of American agriculture, improve Committee trainings, and develop strategies to increase engagement with farmers who have not been represented in the past.

FSA is working to advance equity in COCs. Prior to 2023, socially disadvantaged (SDA) County Committee (COC) members appointed by the Secretary served one year before entering the next election cycle. FSA has extended the 12-month appointed term to 36 months. This action provides better continuity and ensures that each SDA appointed voting member can exercise the same authority as elected COC members. To ensure proper implementation at the field level, FSA provides training and directives to field staff. Trainings are provided in three sessions throughout the election process to emphasize the importance of outreach to underserved participants throughout the election year.

- Session 1. Provide outreach to underserved producers and underserved groups to obtain nominees for the election.
- Session 2. Recruit and appoint an SDA Advisor from an underserved group. (If there is a county that has underserved nominees who were not elected, recruitment efforts are prioritized).
- Session 3. Locations identified as lacking full voting representation through the regular election process must provide a recommendation to the Secretary. This enables USDA leadership to identify and address issues of potential underrepresentation more quickly and effectively.

All COC members are required to complete training on unconscious bias, the NO FEAR Act, and working effectively with Tribal Governments. New COC members are also required to complete a six-module orientation guide that includes modules on collaboration, proper decision making, and respecting other members of the committee even through disagreements. The orientation training also includes the appeals process and highlights the additional roles of the non-voting minority advisor. The Equity Commission has raised concerns regarding accountability, COC members are considered intermittent part-time Federal non-civil service employees. As such, when conduct issues arise the FSA Administrator and Deputy Administrator for Field Operations have reviewed them as employee actions.

Finally, FSA is in a pilot stage to implement Urban County Committees and is leveraging the pilot to improve access to USDA programs in urban and suburban areas. FSA appreciates the Equity Commission recommendations and is committed to improving the accountability of the County Committee system.

## USDA's Progress in Advancing Equity for Farmworkers and Their Families

While **farmworkers** have long been the key to the success of the Nation's food and agriculture industries, they have been a fundamentally neglected, and too often exploited, population. Farmworkers are essential to the Nation's food security, and USDA recognizes the critical need to address challenges of labor instability, increase labor protections, and provide access to nutrition.

In working to find financial relief for essential workers during the pandemic, USDA established the Farm and Food Worker Relief (FFWR) Program which provided \$600 relief payments to eligible farm and food workers who incurred expenses preparing for, preventing exposure to, and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. USDA awarded approximately \$670 million through

### Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Outreach

FNS is encouraging States to conduct outreach to inform low-income households of all communities, including farmworkers and their families, about the opportunity to apply for SNAP. In FY24, 48 States are conducting SNAP outreach activities based on FNS-approved outreach plans.

competitive grants to fourteen nonprofit organizations and one Tribal entity with proven track records of partnering at the community level and conducting outreach with trusted worker serving organizations.

Together, these partners issue relief payments to eligible farm and food workers nationwide. To further address challenges farmworkers face and in recognition with the Commission's recommendations to support farmworkers, in September 2023 USDA, in coordination with other federal agencies, announced the availability of up to \$65 million in grants for the Farm Labor Stabilization and Protection Pilot Program (FLSP Program).

The FLSP Program will help address workforce needs in agriculture, promote a safe and healthy work environment for farmworkers, and aims to support expansion of lawful migration pathways for workers, including for workers from Northern Central America, through the Department of Labor's seasonal H-2A

visa program. The program makes good on a commitment made and announced as part of the [Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection](#) and is funded by President Biden's American Rescue Plan. FLSP Program will help ensure that workers know their rights and the resources available for them and will promote fair and transparent recruitment practices. The program incentivizes participating employers to engage in stronger workplace protections and benefits for farmworkers. The strong research component in the program will allow USDA and its stakeholders to take lessons learned to address severe gaps in knowledge about the experiences of domestic and H-2A farmworkers, and those of employers.

USDA's OPPE established a new internship program for students from migrant and farmworker backgrounds starting the summer of 2023 at USDA headquarters in

Washington, D.C. This new internship is part of USDA's commitment to ensuring equitable access to the Department's programs, services, and resources by underserved groups. Additionally, employees will learn from the unique experiences of the interns, and the experience for the interns will create career pathways in the Department and will ensure that USDA continues to institutionalize equity and culture change across the agency.

While USDA has made significant strides to improve the living and working conditions for farmworkers and their families, USDA recognizes and validates the recommendations of the Equity Commission that there is more to do. USDA is currently exploring the feasibility of the recommendations that address recognition of farmworkers' needs within intergovernmental processes, programs, services, funding, and policies.

On the Commission's **farmworker nutrition recommendation**, FNS has been working to translate its public-facing nutrition assistance program materials into Spanish and other languages, including the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\) Eligibility](#) page, a prototype school meals application, the Child and Adult Care Food Program Meal Benefit Eligibility Form, and Women, Infants, and Children Breastfeeding Support resources. In 2022, FNS published a [Non-Citizen Communities](#) webpage that provides information on what FNS programs support eligible non-citizens and family members. As part of FNS' technical assistance efforts to assist Puerto Rico in the conversion from the Nutrition Assistance Program to SNAP, FNS has translated 11 key documents, materials, and handbooks into Spanish. FNS also issued four retailer reminders, including a SNAP retailer compliance notice about Electronic Benefits Transfer card skimming to over 240,000 SNAP retailers in six languages (English, Spanish, Arabic, Haitian Creole, Chinese – Traditional, and Chinese – Simplified).

## USDA's Progress in Advancing Equity in Research and Extension Programs



*Students of “The Next Generation – A Diversity of Motivations” at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Science, Technology and Math (STEM) symposium, “America the Bountiful”*

The Department appreciates the Equity Commission’s recommendations to invest in and advance federal agricultural **research, development, and deployment**. USDA understands that investments today will define innovation for decades to come. USDA’s Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area is committed to enhancing equity across all aspects of our work through applying an equity lens when designing our research, programs, trainings, outreach, and partnerships. USDA is making substantial investments at MSIs so that those institutions can address the challenges their communities are facing through increased targeted research and extension capacity while advancing equity in educational opportunities and workforce development for diverse communities. In [REE’s Equity Action Plan](#), there are clear steps outlined that aim to diversify and expand funding for research, education, extension activities, and external partnerships as well as efforts to engage communities.

We acknowledge the Equity Commissions recommendation on **matching requirements** for historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs or 1890) and Tribal Land Grant College and Universities (TCU or 1994) Institution programming. We recognize that these requirements have often limited the participation of those institutions in competitive and capacity programs as well as perpetuated the inequities in some states’ support to 1890 compared to Land Grant Universities (LGU or 1862) institutions for providing matching funding. In efforts to reduce historical barriers to program access, the [Secretaries of Education and Agriculture](#) jointly issued letters to relevant state governors encouraging 1:1 matching. Currently, 1890 Institutions have been able to apply for waivers for matching requirements. The 1994 Institutions have been allowed to use endowment and other non-Federal funding to meet the matching requirements. USDA also has raised awareness of these barriers with Congress through the technical assistance process.

To deliver on our commitment to operate with transparency, USDA launched [a public dashboard](#) in FY23 that provides historic data (from FY18 onward) on matching requirements



and outcomes for grant programs where a match is required. Staff are currently evaluating the impacts of this dashboard and identifying any applicable enhancements.

USDA has been listening to stakeholders about the need to build capacity and investment at MSIs and has taken action by providing tailored technical assistance and increased research, education and extension funding for MSIs. Across NIFA's portfolio, the agency invested \$528 million in FY23 in 1890 HBCUs, non-LGU HBCUs, Insular LGUs, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) and 1994 TCUs. This represents a more than \$260 million increase from the FY21 total investment of \$253 million. NIFA has invested nearly \$30 million in HSIs during the past two years to build the capacity of more than 220 HSIs to carry out higher education programs that attract, retain, and graduate outstanding students capable of enhancing the nation's food and agricultural workforce. OPPE has also entered into six cooperative agreements with HSIs to expand USDA's outreach and recruitment efforts.

USDA has been making multiple efforts to build capacity for MSI institutions to be **competitive for grants** that fund research and extension and to better assist those institutions in managing federal grant awards once they receive them. In 2023, NIFA revamped its grants writing workshops to enhance access to NIFA programs and improve grants management. Currently, NIFA includes language in all Requests for Applications (RFAs) that encourage collaboration with minority serving institutions/organizations. As USDA's extramural and intramural research agencies, NIFA and ARS have partnered to conduct a series of capacity-building workshops for 1890 and 1994 institutions to enhance their financial and project management capacity. NIFA and ARS continue to explore collaborative efforts to help build research capacity at 1994 TCUs and NIFA is discussing allocating resources within the Tribal Colleges Research Grants Program to support building research capacity and research collaboration.

There is no doubt that institutional capacity building and sustained investments will impact the future agricultural workforce for generations. USDA recognizes the value of investing in inclusion, diversity, and inspiring future generations through formal and informal learning. Further expanded on in the [REE Equity Action Plan](#), REE will continue their commitment to equity and evolve their research and data portfolio to integrate and reflect American diversity. The following examples are just some of the many ways these program investments in educational equity can support a diverse range of students and the future of agricultural workforce:

- HSI Education Grants: Promote and strengthen the ability of HSIs to carry out higher education programs in food and agricultural sciences. Examples of recent funded projects, include: Mentoring and training a cohort of Hispanic students in the field of bioderived organic materials; providing students with learning opportunities involving genetic engineering of plants and microbes to improve soil health and plant productivity; and creating a regional microbiome innovation center to train a diverse highly skilled workforce in the food, agriculture and natural resource field.

- **Scholarships for Students at 1890 Institutions Program:** Provide scholarships to support recruiting, engaging, retaining, mentoring, and training of undergraduates at the 1890 Land-grant Institutions in the fields that lead to a highly skilled food and agricultural systems workforce. Approximately 1,200 undergraduate students receive scholarships through this program each academic year at 1890 Institutions.

USDA is committed to diversifying and strengthening the education and workforce development in the food and agricultural sciences. Through *The From Learning to Leading: Cultivating the Next Generation of Diverse Food and Agriculture Professionals (NextGen)* program, funded through the Inflation Reduction Act, USDA seeks to enable institutions to engage, recruit, retain, train, and support students, ranging from grade school to graduate education. NextGen scholars will be prepared to be leaders and innovators for food, agriculture, natural resources, and human sciences supporting a future workforce that represents the diversity of this country and all the communities USDA serves.

The 33 funded NextGen projects being delivered by over 60 MSI partners will provide training and support to more than 20,000 future food and agricultural leaders. NextGen projects are led by HBCUs, TCUs, Alaska Native-serving Institutions and Native Hawaiian-serving Institutions, HSIs, or institutions of Higher Education located in the Insular Areas. Most projects collaborate with other MSIs, other academic institutions, nonprofit organizations, state and USDA agencies, and a myriad of other organizations.

## “From Learning to Leading” Program

In 2022, USDA announced \$250.262.5 million for the “From Learning to Leading: Cultivating the Next Generation of Diverse Food and Agriculture Professionals” (NextGen) program to Create Career Development Opportunities for Next Gen Scholars at Minority-Serving Institutions. This competitive funding opportunity is aimed at attracting, inspiring, and retaining diverse and talented students at eligible minority-serving institutions for careers in food, agriculture, and related disciplines, with an emphasis on federal government sector employment.



*U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Under Secretary for REE Dr. Chavonda Jacobs Young participate in a groundbreaking ceremony for a new Plant Sciences Building that will house scientists from the USDA's Agricultural Research Service.*

In addition to the NextGen Program, the Research and Extension Experiences for Undergraduates (REEU) program promotes research and extension learning experiences to support career pathways into the food and agricultural science industries. In 2023, REEU provided \$15 million in funding to colleges and universities to provide opportunities for students, including those from underrepresented and economically disadvantaged groups. Project focus areas include innovative agricultural technologies, such as data science and artificial intelligence, robotics and automation, gene editing, and nutrition security. Investments have already supported 19 college and university projects across the country working to develop a more diverse and well-trained next generation of research, education, and extension professionals across the food and agricultural sciences.

## USDA's Progress in Advancing Equity for Families Needing Food Assistance

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*Department-wide equity strategy: Promote nutrition security and health equity through USDA nutrition assistance programs to ensure all Americans have access to the nutrition they need.*

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USDA appreciates the Equity Commission's recommendations to better **ensure equitable nutrition assistance for all those in need**. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) leverages its 16 nutrition assistance programs to ensure children, income-eligible individuals, and families have equitable access to healthy, safe, and affordable foods that promote optimal health and well-being, while building a more resilient food system. FNS accomplishes this by partnering with more than 175 Tribal organizations, states, and U.S. Territories, that operate federal nutrition programs. Together, over the course of a year, these programs serve one in four Americans.

The USDA Equity Action Plan and the FNS Equity Action Plan provide detailed roadmaps on the steps taken to achieve health equity and include actions that support six Equity Commission recommendations. Through these actions, FNS is actively working to bridge gaps and reduce barriers to access by increasing language access, focusing on our customer experience, and continuing to review and update our nutrition programs to better serve all those in need. While we are proud to share some of the results of our efforts thus far, we have more work ahead.



*Students and a teacher at North Lauderdale Elementary, Florida, grow vegetables in the school's garden.*

Investing in **outreach, innovation, and modernization to ensure that the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)**

meets the needs of today’s busy families. WIC modernization is focused on enrolling and keeping enrolled all eligible families while making WIC accessible for all. This includes making shopping simple and convenient with remote benefit delivery options so that families do not need to travel to a physical clinic location to receive services.

FNS is partnering with the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition to pilot online shopping in eight WIC State agencies (Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Nevada, South Dakota, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Washington, and Massachusetts). FNS is making [available waivers and funding to support WIC State agencies in moving toward online shopping](#) more broadly. Through rulemaking, FNS is proposing to remove regulatory barriers to online shopping in WIC and support a modern food delivery experience. FNS is currently analyzing comments received on the proposed rule and developing the final rule to implement changes.

Through a cooperative agreement with the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), FNS has awarded \$16 million in funding from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to 36 projects aimed at testing innovative **outreach strategies to increase participation and equity** in WIC. The WIC Community Innovation and Outreach Project (WIC CIAO) subgrantees include WIC State and local agencies and community-based organizations, including four subgrants led by Tribal nations or entities. FNS is continuing to support the FRAC as it develops a RFA for a second round of Community Innovation CIAO Grants expected later in FY24.

In 2021, FNS re-evaluated the **Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)**, the basis of the maximum SNAP benefit allotment, helping put healthy food within reach for over 40 million SNAP participants. The increase to SNAP benefits kept 2.3 million people out of poverty, reducing overall poverty by 4.7% and child poverty by 8.6%.

In July 2023, FNS published updated TFP Cost Estimates for Alaska and Hawaii in a report that summarizes the evaluation of existing price indexes and food price data sources, identification of the most appropriate data source, and FNS’ approach for using this data source to calculate TFP cost estimates. In preparation for the next Congressionally directed TFP reevaluation in 2026, FNS has initiated a contract for a study to explore alternatives to the current TFP

## Farm To School Grant Program

For the 2023-24 school year, the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program is supporting 103 grants, serving nearly 3,000 schools in 40 States and the territory of Guam. Farm to School grants help students eat more tasty, nutritious foods while supporting farmers and producers in their local and regional communities. Some grants are also focused on promoting Tribal food sovereignty and the integration of traditional food ways into Tribal meal programs. An estimated 59% of the children served in the participating schools are eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

optimization model and has started a food waste systematic review project. In January 2024, FNS is working to draft the performance work statement to collect food price data to estimate the cost of TFP for U.S. Territories.

We acknowledge and agree with the Commission’s recommendation that **SNAP programs should be designed to be customer service-centered**. FNS expanded SNAP online shopping to 50 States and the District of Columbia in 2023, enabling 99% of SNAP recipients to use their benefits to purchase food online. As of January 2024, over 300 retailer chains have SNAP online purchasing representing thousands of physical storefronts. This has allowed for nearly four million SNAP households to consistently shop online each month making it easier for

## Incentivizing Fruit and Vegetable Purchases for SNAP Participants

In June 2023, USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service announced that [Colorado](#), [Louisiana](#), and [Washington](#) will receive a total of \$25 million to establish an electronic healthy incentives pilot (eHIP) program to make it easier for SNAP households to access fruits and vegetables. The eHIP pilots aim to test incentive models that reduce administrative costs, allowing more incentive dollars to reach SNAP participants, enabling them to buy more nutritious fruits and vegetables.

participants to access their benefits. Additionally, as part of a mobile payment pilot, SNAP participants in Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Oklahoma will have the option to use mobile payments methods – like tapping or scanning their personal mobile device – as an alternative to their physical SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card.

FNS provided training, technical assistance, and arranged four state site visits to educate Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) leadership and staff about SNAP program regulations, requirements, disaster response, and operations. A collaboration through The Opportunity Project with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Puerto Rico Department of Economic Development and Commerce resulted in the launch of digital tools for job seekers with a focus on individuals in underserved communities. As a result of these efforts, Puerto Rico is implementing a modified SNAP Employment and Training program pilot. FNS ensured translation of key financial and program documents and handbooks to assist Puerto Rico in the administration of SNAP.

USDA agrees with the Equity Commission’s request to **review the nutrition programs** and act to reduce barriers to access. Starting in summer 2023, with new authority from Congress, FNS allowed certain rural areas to distribute summer meals to kids outside of the typically required group (congregate) settings through the SFSP and NSLP Seamless Summer Option. This action will help close the summer hunger gap and ensure equitable access to nutritious food for children in all parts of the country during the summer months. FNS is also partnering with

States and stakeholders to stand up a permanent summer EBT program starting in summer 2024, which will provide benefits to purchase groceries over the summer to families with children who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. On December 29, 2023, the Interim Final Rule (IFR) entitled “Establishing the Summer EBT Program and Rural Non-Congregate Option in the Summer Meals Program (0584-AE96)” was published on the Federal Register website. As of February 16, 2024, 37 States, District of Columbia, five territories, and four Tribes have submitted Letters of Intent and Plans of Operation and Management to implement Summer EBT in 2024, estimated to reach nearly 21 million children. USDA expects additional states and Tribes will provide Summer EBT in 2025 and is working closely with partners to get to nationwide implementation as quickly as possible. On January 29, 2024, FNS announced that it will provide a higher Summer EBT benefit amount for families in Puerto Rico, Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), American Samoa, US Virgin Islands, Alaska, and Hawaii as compared to the contiguous United States due to the higher cost of food. Additional actions include:



*A WIC participant points to signage and speaks to her two young children as they shop at the Ann Arbor Farmers Market in Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

- **The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR):** Provides USDA Foods to income-eligible households living on Indian reservations and to Native American households residing in designated areas near reservations or in Oklahoma. During FY23, FNS implemented several enhancements to the FDPIR food package, supporting healthy dietary patterns and cultural preferences. These changes were informed by Tribal feedback and based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans as well as the cost of a healthy diet. Specifically, the food package now includes increased amounts of eggs, vegetables, and meat/poultry/fish items and added two new foods – frozen strawberries and bison stew meat.
- **FDPIR Self-Determination Project:** In August 2023, FNS awarded a total of \$4.4 million to eight Tribal Nations participating in round two of the project, which allows Tribes to directly select and purchase foods for the FDPIR food package, instead of USDA selecting and purchasing foods. Over the coming years, Tribes will share feedback about their projects helping FNS understand impacts on program access, participation, and Tribal procurement, ensuring successful implementation.
- **Bison Purchase Pilot:** FNS has awarded a bison pilot solicitation for the procurement of bison from native-owned producers for direct delivery to Indian Tribal Organizations participating in FDPIR. Deliveries began in November 2023. This pilot responds to

feedback from across Indian Country and from small producers by aligning purchase timeframes with indigenous informed principles of infrequent animal handling, traditional field harvests following a nature-based purchasing calendar and allowing either USDA or state inspection. This pilot will also explore smaller packaging and purchase orders to meet small- and mid-sized enterprises at scale and exclusively target Historically Underutilized Business Zones purchase preferences benefiting economically distressed areas, of which all Tribal reservations qualify. All producers announced through this pilot operate on Tribal lands.

FNS has also continued to make progress to connect more students with healthy school meals, fueling their success in the classroom and beyond, and to support schools in procuring and incorporating traditional Indigenous foods. On January 18, 2024, FNS released a RFA for a cooperative agreement for Supporting the Use of Traditional Indigenous Foods in the Child Nutrition Programs. In FY24, USDA FNS will award \$2 million in total funding to up to four organizations to provide regionally focused training and technical assistance to school nutrition professionals on procurement, preparation, and crediting of traditional Indigenous foods, including the use of cooperator and FNS-developed resources and tools. The cooperators, with FNS guidance and approval, will also develop culturally relevant nutrition education materials for students to accompany the traditional Indigenous foods that are served, and the cooperators will train school nutrition professionals and other school staff on providing nutrition education to students.

FNS also simplified access to school meals for families by giving an estimated 3,000 more school districts in high-need areas the option to serve breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost, and allowing more states to do the same with the expansion of direct certification with Medicaid. These efforts allow schools to automatically connect students to free or reduced-price school breakfast and lunch meals – without their families filling out an application – by using existing data from SNAP, Medicaid, and other income-based program.

USDA must take a cross-departmental approach to support health equity and to help ensure all Americans have access to the nutritious foods they need. In addition to reducing barriers to access our nutrition programs, USDA is working to promote nutrition security by translating research into action. In FY23, ARS and NIFA partnered to establish a pilot Nutrition Hub at the 1890 institution Southern University in Louisiana as part of USDA's new Agricultural Science Center of Excellence for Nutrition and Diet (ASCEND) for Better Health. Informed by community conversations and launched in partnership with trusted local partners, the Nutrition Hub will be an engine for providing science-based, nutrition-related information at the community level, particularly in underserved communities disproportionately impacted by diet-related chronic diseases such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers. Future hubs will concentrate their efforts on additional high-need communities. USDA will leverage the Nutrition Hub to increase the impact of its collective human nutrition research programs, develop more precise science-based solutions and resources, and advance the public's understanding of real-world opportunities and challenges around food, nutrition, and diet-related health disparities. Through this pilot, USDA is reexamining the food landscape with the goal of ensuring



communities have equitable access to the tailored resources they need to enjoy a healthy lifestyle.

## USDA's Progress in Advancing Equity for Rural Communities

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*Department-wide equity strategy: Promote rural prosperity and economic security by connecting business owners to new markets, empowering people with modern infrastructure, and supporting community-driven opportunities and solutions to build brighter futures in rural America.*

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USDA is deeply committed to improving the economy and quality of life in rural America and ensuring all communities can thrive regardless of zip code. The establishment of the Subcommittee on Rural Community Economic Development (RCED) within a year of the launch of the Commission was a critical step to ensure rural voices, issues, and solutions could be elevated and considered by the Department. While the recommendations from this subcommittee have yet to be formally delivered to the Secretary, USDA has been actively engaged with the members during public meetings and has been making progress along the way. The RCED organized its recommendations into three broad categories: How Rural Development Operates, How USDA Supports Rural Communities, and How USDA Supports Rural Economies. The following examples broadly reflect those groupings.

Both the USDA Equity Action Plan and the Rural Development Equity Action Plan showcase USDA's commitment to these issues by outlining actions that are being taken to support communities that have been underserved throughout rural America. These actions focus on comprehensive measures meant to promote significant, long-term, systemic change. These changes, taking into account 14 Equity Commission recommendations, directly benefit stakeholders through enhancing localized outreach and technical assistance, increasing funding to essential services, and reconsidering our current measures for success to ensure all rural America can thrive.

USDA appreciates the recommendations on how to improve equity in the way **Rural Development operates**. Federal programs often have burdensome and unrealistic requirements, including complicated processes, inconsistent rule implementation, and delays. The Department acknowledges there has been insufficient outreach in some communities, and people without prior knowledge or experience with Rural Development can be unintentionally excluded. That is why Rural Development is working to reduce barriers to all our programs. For example, in 2023, the agency entered a contract to provide telephone interpretation and document translation to assist Rural Development customers who have limited English proficiency.

As the Commission noted, **staffing** has been a significant challenge. In support of the Commission's recommendation, Rural Development has outlined in their equity action plan to provide place-based staff who will serve as navigators of federal development resources and assist communities in building smart plans and strong applications. In 2023, Rural Development exceeded its hiring goal including additional staff for the Rural Partners Network and for high-speed internet and clean energy programs. Rural Development has also made a

concerted effort to build up the capacity of the field offices through increased hiring and by adding more opportunities for promotion to higher grades in the General Service system to attract and retain qualified staff. Rural Development has added a Deputy State Director position that participates fully with the Rural Development State Director in formulating and implementing Rural Development programs within the State. Through the Department's Quarterly Strategic Review process, Rural Development is examining data to better understand and address root challenges in staffing. In terms of **staffing skillset**, USDA appreciates the Commission's recommendations on ways to build trusted relationships with rural communities. Rural Development instituted a Tribal Training Program, a virtual staff training built around four core principles: trust responsibility, Tribal consultation, Tribal sovereignty, and the historic relationship between Tribes and the federal government.

Working in **partnership** with rural communities, stakeholders, and stakeholder groups across the country are at the core of what Rural Development does. Through partnerships, USDA can support solutions to complex and deep-rooted challenges such as receiving program benefits on **Heirs' Property and Fractionated Land**. With the partnership of a Water and Environmental Programs grantee raising concerns for their stakeholders, Rural Development was able to make it easier for applicants to establish the required occupancy needed to be eligible for their programs. Through these types of collaborations Rural Development can reduce burden for customers and help ensure everyone has access to clean and reliable water and waste disposal services.

USDA is partnering with other federal agencies on a number of projects to leverage federal resources and tools. In August 2022, Rural Development launched a partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), several states, and the Tribal Nations of Santo Domingo Pueblo and San Carlos Apache, to create the [Closing America's Wastewater Access Gap Community Initiative](#). The new initiative is being piloted in 11 communities whose residents lack basic wastewater management essential to protecting their health and the environment. EPA and USDA are jointly providing technical assistance resources to help underserved communities identify and pursue federal funding opportunities—including from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law—to address wastewater needs and eliminate harmful exposure to backyard sewage by conducting community wastewater assessments. This assistance includes developing solutions, identifying and pursuing funding, and building long-term capacity. This partnership is one of the ways USDA promotes a healthy community and environment by making sure families and children have clean water and safe sewer systems that prevent pollution and runoff.

[USDA and the U.S. Small Business Administration \(SBA\) announced](#) in November 2023 that they were strengthening their partnership to create jobs and economic growth in rural America. Through a [memorandum of understanding](#) (MOU), USDA and SBA are committing to increase investments in small and underserved communities to help grow the rural economy and create good-paying jobs for people nationwide. USDA is collaborating with several federal agencies including SBA, Department of Treasury, Department of Transportation, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, and

the EPA on aligning investments in historically underserved communities.

Further described in the Department's Equity Action Plan, USDA is taking action to target investments into rural areas through a data-driven approach paired with stakeholder engagement and agrees with the Commission's recommendation to grow the [Rural Partners Network \(RPN\)](#). RPN works to ensure underserved and sparsely populated communities receive the support they need. This all-of-government place-based program brings together federal agencies and regional commissions to help rural communities expand rural prosperity through access to resources, funding to create jobs, build infrastructure, and support long-term economic stability on their own terms. Since its launch in April 2022 and expansion in November 2022, it now includes 36 community networks across 10 states and Puerto Rico. It also includes [\\$2 billion](#) in loans and grants to help RPN counties access good-paying jobs, improved infrastructure, affordable housing, and quality health care. The funding will support 111 projects across Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Puerto Rico. We are placing additional federal staff on the ground to clarify local priorities, assist communities in navigating programming, connect to assistance providers and funders, and develop strong applications.



*Gary Magrino, the Director of Business Development for the Cocopah Tribe, poses for a photo at the Cocopah Museum on the Cocopah Reservation near Yuma, AZ. The Cocopah Tribe have a solar power project that with the help of the Rural Partners Network (RPN).*

USDA appreciates the Commission's recommendation on ways to use **technology** to increase access to Rural Development programs. Rural Development is taking action to modernize and improve the **customer experience** for our all our stakeholder by working to ensure **data** and evidence are embedded into program design and delivery. In February 2023, Rural Development launched the Rural Data Gateway. With 20 new integrated Rural Investment Dashboards and visualizations, the Gateway makes more than a decade of Rural Development's investment history instantly accessible to the public. Its simple interface allows users to easily

sift through obligations data from more than 65 of the loan, grant, and loan guarantee programs Rural Development administers. The dashboards highlight potentially underserved areas. Rural Data Gateway information is updated monthly and can be downloaded. Rural Development's field offices are using specialized data mapping and outreach tools to engage the most socially vulnerable, distressed, and underserved communities across rural America. Additionally, to help support Americans find and better access the programs they need, a recent update to Rural.gov included an enhanced search feature that prescribes program offerings across the federal government based on the nature of the customer and the needs.

Through the Creating Opportunities Through Rural Engagement Program (CORE), Rural Development is leveraging lessons learned from new technology and data tools to conduct targeted engagements with CORE communities that have not received funding from field-based programs in the last 5-years to better understand why, and target investments. To date, Rural Development has engaged over 600 communities and has invested more than \$350 million through a variety of Rural Development programs.

Rural Development is also working to give farmers and rural communities relief through clean energy that will lower energy bills and reduce pollution. Consistent with the direction from Congress, USDA has allocated all Inflation Reduction Act funds, which total nearly \$38 billion over 10 years, for spending under programs that invest in communities and producers nationwide. Demand from rural communities for USDA's clean energy support is very strong.

USDA appreciates the Commission's recommendations to consider a "whole of household" approach to community development and is committed to the breadth of services and programs to support rural communities. USDA is investing in **rural housing**, including underserved communities. RD is committed to helping people stay in their own home and keep them in good repair. Homeownership helps families and individuals build savings over time, supporting families and their communities.

Through programs like the **502 Direct Loan Program and the 504 Grant Program**, there is a path to homeownership for low- and very-low-income families living in rural areas, and families who have no other way to make affordable homeownership a reality. RHS uses cooperative agreements and collaborative partnerships to market/train and help identify potential 502/504 direct loan and grant applicants. Providing these affordable homeownership opportunities promotes prosperity, which in turn creates thriving communities and improves the quality of life in rural areas. USDA will consider the Commission's recommendation to modify aspects of these programs. Through the Single-Family Home Repair Loans & Grants in Presidentially Declared Disasters Pilot program, over [\\$55 million](#) will be provided to loan and grant recipients that considered very-low-income homeowners to repair disaster related damage caused to their homes. Additionally, the Native Community Development Financial Institution (Native CDFI) Relending Demonstration Program is designed to improve homeownership opportunities for Native American Tribes, Alaska Native Communities, and Native Hawaiian Communities in rural areas. Program funds provide direct loans to recipients to buy, build, rehabilitate, improve, or relocate a primary residence on eligible Tribal land. In 2023, the program was

expanded to fund a total of nine Native CDFIs to improve homeownership opportunities for Tribal community members.

The Department's equity action to continue to work towards 100% connectivity highlights

## Expanding Broadband

In June 2023, the Department announced \$714 million in grants and loans to connect thousands of rural residents, farmers, and business owners in 19 states to reliable, affordable high-speed internet. The Department also announced \$20 million to help rural communities access broadband technical assistance resources and support for the development and expansion of broadband cooperatives.

USDA's agreement with the Commission that **broadband** services are essential to rural prosperity. USDA has been expanding broadband services nationwide access through the [ReConnect Program](#). This program provides loans, grants, and loan-grant combinations to bring high-speed internet to rural areas that lack sufficient access to broadband. In FY22, in the program's third round of funding, RD [authorized](#) 100% grants (without matching requirements) for Alaska Native Corporations, Tribal Governments, Colonias, Persistent Poverty Areas, and Socially Vulnerable Communities. For the fourth round, an additional no-match funding category was added in August 2022 for projects where 90% of households lack sufficient access to broadband. Scoring of applications emphasizes equity.

When determining the areas which are eligible to receive funding under the USDA's

Telecommunications Programs, USDA assesses the

level of service that is available at the household level. This approach ensures this determination is done at a granular level and does not rely on census tracts. More granular information is now available from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) through the [Broadband Availability Map](#) and [Broadband Funding Map](#) which were both published this last year and provide information for each Broadband Serviceable Location which is defined as a residential or business location where fixed broadband internet access service is or can be installed, as determined by the FCC.

USDA has also been investing in **rural community facilities** and essential services across the country as well as Puerto Rico and Guam. In 2022, over [\\$1 billion](#) of investments to nearly 800 projects in infrastructure funding went to increase access to health care, education and public safety while spurring community development and building sound infrastructure for people living in rural communities. These programs include [Community Facilities Direct Loans and Grants](#), [Community Facilities Loan Guarantees](#), [Community Facilities Technical Assistance Training Grants](#), [Community Facilities Disaster Grants](#), and [Economic Impact Initiative Grants](#). For example:

- In Alabama, Medical West Hospital Authority will use \$360 million in Community Facilities program funding to build a state-of-the-art, 200-bed hospital. This hospital will

feature a 26-room emergency department, 12 operating rooms, eight labor and delivery rooms, and eight multi-purpose rooms. This 405,186- square-foot facility will be strategically located to serve rural west Jefferson County, rural west Tuscaloosa County and other surrounding rural communities. This project will benefit approximately 333,000 rural people in these communities.

- In Iowa, the city of Sabula is receiving a \$225,000 Community Facilities Disaster Grant to purchase a fire tanker/pumper truck. The city's current pumper truck is nearly 20 years old, beyond its useful life and has expired equipment. This project will help the city purchase a new truck and new equipment to improve fire protection services for the city's 576 residents.
- In Michigan, Munising Memorial Hospital will use a \$63,000 Economic Impact Initiative Grant to purchase a mobile x-ray room. The medical equipment will include a computer interface and processing software, as well as the automatic transfer of patient information and reports. This equipment will benefit more than 9,600 rural people.

Additionally, USDA has been expanding **access to healthcare** in rural communities. Emergency Rural Health Care Grants (ERHC) to provide immediate relief to support rural hospitals, health care clinics and local communities. Rural Development has announced more than \$488 million to 724 facilities to support rural health care and nutrition assistance. These investments expanded access to critical health care facilities for more than 22 million people across 39 states. As a result of these investments, regional partnerships, public bodies, nonprofits, and Tribes will be able to address rural health care challenges, building a more sustainable rural health care system for small towns and communities across the nation and work to ensure every person and family has access to high-quality health care.

The Commission's recommendations related to **financing for Native agriculture producers** brings to light how communities can still face barriers in accessing affordable capital through USDA's existing programs. To address some of these challenges, USDA has invested over \$86 million in [more than 200 projects](#) to improve infrastructure, housing, and economic conditions for underserved, rural, and Native American communities. USDA is making in six programs specifically designed to help people and businesses in rural areas. These programs include [Tribal College Initiative Grants](#), [Rural Community Development Initiative Grants](#), [Housing Preservation Grants](#), [Delta Health Care Grants](#), [Socially Disadvantaged Groups Grants](#) and [Water and Waste Disposal Grants](#). The projects will benefit hundreds of thousands of people in 42 states, Puerto Rico, and the Marshall Islands. The investments also include more than \$19 million to help low-income and very low-income residents in every part of the country repair and rehabilitate their homes. Examples of these investments include:

- The Keystone Development Corp. in Lancaster, Pa., is receiving a \$173,288 Socially Disadvantaged Groups Grant to provide business development technical assistance. It will support women who own agricultural cooperatives that grow flowers and various types of fibers. The project is expected to help 25 women farmers in three counties in Pennsylvania and five counties in New Jersey.

- Central Florida’s Habitat for Humanity/Lake-Sumter is receiving a \$351,135 Housing Preservation Grant to help 42 low- and very low-income people make health and safety repairs to their homes. These investments will support healthier and happier lives for all 42 homeowners.
- The Skagway Development Corp. in Alaska is receiving a \$121,825 Rural Community Development Initiative grant to help small businesses develop five-year growth and operating plans. It will provide the services to businesses with 50 or fewer employees and less than \$1 million in gross revenues. This investment will help new entrepreneurs and small business owners succeed and create jobs in their communities.
- Minnesota’s Red Lake Nation College is receiving a \$175,448 Tribal College Initiative Grant to purchase computers, a 15-passenger van and lawn maintenance equipment. The college will replace the 30 computers in the learning center and computer lab, and 32 assigned to faculty and staff.

**Cooperatives** serve as one of our most important partners in delivering critical goods and services to rural communities. USDA has invested more than \$1.2 billion in loans and grants to spur economic development, catalyze rural prosperity, and advance equity through rural cooperatives in 36 states and Puerto Rico. USDA is making the investments through a suite of business, utilities and cooperative programs and services such as the [Business and Industry Loan Guarantee Program](#), [Electric Infrastructure Loan and Loan Guarantee Program](#), [Food Supply Chain Guaranteed Loan Program](#), [Rural Cooperative Development Grant Program](#), [Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program](#), [Socially-Disadvantaged Groups Grant Program](#), and [Value-Added Producer Grant Program](#). Examples include:

- In the West, EHC Bullhead City LP is receiving a \$10 million Business and Industry Loan Guarantee to build a micro-hospital and urgent care facility in Bullhead City, Mohave County, Arizona. The facility will increase the availability of the emergency room, urgent care, and hospital services in this rural community and create 40 jobs.
- In the Midwest, Wayne-White Counties Electric Coop Inc. is receiving a \$93,600 Rural Economic Development Loan to allow the Union Drainage District in Illinois to replace its old, inefficient drainage water pump and diesel motor. This investment will help protect over 9,000 acres of farmland from flood waters and make the agriculture economy more resilient to climate change.
- In the North, Keystone Development Center (KDC) Inc. is receiving a \$200,000 Rural Cooperative Development Grant to improve the economic condition and quality of life of rural communities in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and Maryland. This investment will help KDC host the Cooperative Academy and support the development of at least 17 cooperative projects.
- In the South, the Mississippi Minority Farmers Alliance is receiving a \$175,000 Socially Disadvantaged Group Grant to assist small socially disadvantaged groups in farm business plans, leadership development, and strategic planning outreach activities that will enhance agricultural enterprises for 75 producers from six counties located in rural northeast Mississippi.



Through the **Justice40 Initiative** covered programs [Rural Energy for America Program](#) (REAP), the Department announced in August 2023 that it is awarding \$266 million in loans and grants to agriculture producers and rural small businesses to make investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency improvements that will lower their energy costs, generate new income, and strengthen the resilience of their operation. The award was made possible with funding from the Inflation Reduction Act.

Through **REAP**, USDA is also lowering energy costs for rural business owners and agricultural producers. In July 2023, the Rural Business-Cooperative Service [announced \\$21 million in technical assistance grants](#) to help agricultural producers and rural small businesses access federal funds for renewable energy and energy efficiency improvements. This investment is part of the Biden-Harris Administration's [Investing in America Agenda](#) to help agricultural producers and rural small businesses transform rural power production and spur economic growth.

USDA Invests to Improve Renewal Energy Infrastructure. Under the [Rural Energy Pilot Program](#) (REPP) Rural Development has granted \$10 million to support solutions to address high energy costs and pollution through renewable energy systems. A portion of the awarded funds may also be used for community energy planning, capacity building, technical assistance including efficiency improvements and weatherization to help rural and underserved communities.

## Next Steps for USDA Equity



*At the 2023 Administrative Conference in Washington D.C., Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) employees and stakeholders gathered from around the world to discuss the future of global agriculture.*

USDA celebrates the significant progress made to advance equity for all while recognizing that this work is ongoing and requires continued commitment to ensure support, especially for the people who need it the most.

To that end, USDA plans to continue implementing the 32 recommendations from the Equity Commission's Interim Report and to begin implementing the additional 34 recommendations from the Equity Commission's Final Report released in February 2024. Through the strategies in the Department's Equity Action Plan and agency action plans, the Department has a clear path forward towards advancing equity, focusing on improving the customer experience and strengthening the USDA workforce and operations. USDA is committed to measure and communicate progress along the way.

USDA thanks the Equity Commission for contributing significantly to the goal of advancing equity for all and look forward to continued engagement with the Commission and key stakeholders to achieve this vision.