

# **USDA Equity Commission and Agriculture Subcommittee Public Meeting #5: Meeting Minutes**

June 27<sup>th</sup>, June 28<sup>th</sup>, and June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Equity Commission was convened for its fifth meeting on June 29, 9:00 am Eastern Standard Time, at the United Tribal Technical College in Bismarck, North Dakota. Co-Chairs Ertharin Cousin and Arturo S. Rodriguez presided over the meeting along with Designated Federal Officer, Cecilia Hernandez.

In accordance with the provisions of Public Law 92-463, the meeting was open to the public from 9:00am to 4:30pm CST on June 27, 9:00am to 4:30pm CST on June 28, and 9:00am to 4:30pm EST on June 29.

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# Day One – June 27, 2023

## **Equity Commission Members Present:**

- Co-Chair Cousin
- Co-Chair Rodriguez
- Shorlette Ammons
- Todd Corley (Virtual)
- Elizabeth Lower-Basch
- Yvonne Lee
- Dr. Mireya Loza
- Charlie Rawls
- Dr. Ronald Rainey
- Dr. Hazell Reed (Virtual)
- Shirley Sherrod
- Poppy Sias-Hernandez
- Rick Smith

## **Agriculture Subcommittee Members Present:**

- Dr. Gina Eubanks
- Janssen Hang
- PJ Haynie III
- Savi Horne (Virtual)
- Michelle Hughes
- Kari Jo Lawrence
- Erica Lomeli Corcoran
- Gary Matteson
- Dr. Alexis Racelis
- Russell Redding
- Shari Rogge-Fidler
- Dr. Jennie Stephens
- Sarah Vogel

## **USDA Staff in Attendance:**

- Dr. Dewayne Goldmon, Senior Advisor for Racial Equity
- Gloria Montaña Greene, Deputy Under Secretary for Farm, Production, and Conservation
- Zach Ducheneaux, FSA Administrator
- Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
- William Henry, Team Lead for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights

## 1. Opening of the Meeting

- **Designated Federal Officer (DFO) Hernandez** called to order the 5<sup>th</sup> Public Meeting of the Equity Commission and took attendance.

## 2. Introduction

- **Janet Alkire (Chairwoman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe)** welcomed the Equity Commission to the United Tribal Technical College and emphasized the importance of the Commission's work.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** thanked Chairwomen Janet Alkire for her inspiring opening remarks and thanked the public for joining virtually. He stated that he is looking forward to the robust discussions that will take place during the three-day meeting.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** thanked Chairwomen Janet Alkire and expressed gratitude to all Equity Commission and Subcommittee members for working hard on the development of the interim and Rural Community Economic Development (RCED) recommendations.
- **DFO Hernandez** reviewed the agenda and informed the public that the RCED members will be joining for day two and day three of the meeting. She also encouraged the public to read the Equity Commission Interim Report.

## 3. Presentation: USDA Official Response to Interim Report

- **Dr. Dewayne Goldmon (USDA Senior Advisor for Racial Equity)** provided an update of USDA's ongoing efforts to implement the Equity Commission's interim recommendations.
- **Member Smith** asked if Dr. Goldmon could provide his presentation notes.
- **Dr. Goldmon** agreed.
- **Member Rainey** asked USDA to provide details on the newly appointed voting members of the county committees such as the number of appointees by state.
- **Dr. Goldmon** responded that USDA may be able to provide more details at a later date. He also shared that USDA has internal tools to look at gaps in county committee representation and that the Secretary is committed to closing all gaps.
- **Member Corley** asked if there are plans to audit the impact of the newly appointed members.
- **Dr. Goldmon** replied that he is open to auditing however, impact should be seen by increased program participation rates by minority farmers and ranchers.
- **Member Sherrod** asked how USDA will ensure minority voting members stay in place during future administrations.
- **Dr. Goldmon** responded that USDA is looking at how to institutionalize the appointments and encouraged Equity Commission (EC) members to share any thoughts or ideas on ways to make the positions permanent.
- **Deputy Undersecretary Montaña Green** added that Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) is focused on rolling out new programs based on legislation as well as improving current programs to make sure they are streamlined and accessible. She also explained

how FPAC is capturing data throughout the program implementation lifecycle and using that data to inform the budget process.

- **Administrator Ducheneaux** expressed his support to the Secretary for appointing more minority voting members to the county committees. He stated that USDA is working on improving the process to make it timelier such as using trend analysis to predict where appointments will need to be made. Additionally, USDA should explore the flexibility of offering multi-year appointments.
- **Member Horne** asked how non-government organizations (NGO) may be able to help with training the new members on county committees, particularly on increasing access to programs by minority farmers.
- **Administrator Ducheneaux** agreed with Member Horne.
- **Dr. Goldmon** also agreed that USDA needs to look at ways to utilize NGOs' services.
- **Member Lee** expressed her support for the ongoing work on improving equity in procurement. She shared that USDA should be actively reaching out to vendors in disadvantaged communities and removing barriers to accessing USDA contracts.
- **Dr. Goldmon** agreed and shared that USDA is working on removing barriers for vendors.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked if USDA could provide a report that summarizes the status of the interim recommendations. She also asked about the agencies' Equity Action Plans and how those actions align with the interim recommendations. Lastly, she spoke about the matching requirements for 1890 institutions, and asked why USDA is not focusing on removing the requirement altogether rather than just lowering the requirement.
- **Dr. Goldmon** responded that USDA should be able to provide a report on the status of the interim recommendations and mentioned that the FY24 Equity Action Plans will be made publicly available soon. He also reported that agencies reviewed the Equity Commission's interim recommendations prior to drafting their Equity Action Plans.
- **DFO Hernandez** added that the Equity Commission's interim recommendations should also be reflected in the Equity Action Plans. The only recommendations that may not be reflected are those that require legislative or budgetary change.
- **Deputy Undersecretary Montaña Greene** shared that FPAC did use the interim recommendations to draft their Equity Action Plan and are also using the recommendations in budget planning. She also mentioned that the mission area has been exploring ways to eliminate matching grant funds, especially in cases where federal regulations do not mandate it.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked if/how USDA is prioritizing the Equity Commission's interim recommendations given the limited time before a potential change in administrations.
- **Dr. Goldmon** responded that USDA is working hard to implement the recommendations and show progress. In terms of prioritization, he said that the administration does have priority areas outlined such as equity and climate change.

#### 4. Presentation: FPAC Implementation Progress Update

- **Deputy Undersecretary Montaña Greene and Administrator Ducheneaux** provided

an update on FPAC's progress implementing the interim recommendations.

- **Member Haynie** shared that the base acres policies have created big disparities in the South.
- **Administrator Ducheneaux** agreed and stated that FPAC will continue to work with him and other members of the Equity Commission to address this issue.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** added that she hopes USDA will be able to engage in discussions around this with congressional members and extend the invite to Equity Commission members.
- **Member Rainey** also added that USDA needs to focus on policy changes but also needs to provide resources and support to farmers that are struggling.
- **Member Lee** asked how easy it would be to update FPAC's job descriptions to ensure each position has the necessary skills and is held accountable to serving stakeholder groups.
- **Deputy Undersecretary Montaña Greene** responded that FPAC can update some job descriptions. She shared that state executive directors are being encouraged to work with cooperators to help with job recruitment. Lastly, she stated that FPAC is testing out bundling hiring and leveraging stakeholders to advertise and promote those positions.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** suggested that USDA equity staff also work on updating the position descriptions.
- **Member Reed** asked what the criteria is for serving as minority appointment on County Committees.
- **Administrator Ducheneaux** responded that you need someone who isn't afraid to show up to the meeting and talk equity. He stated that the challenge people face is the fear of retribution, and that USDA is open to working with stakeholders to select farmers to be appointed.
- **Member Lower-Basch** reiterated the benefits of long-term cooperative agreements.
- **Administrator Ducheneaux** shared that FPAC is looking at ways to make the cooperative agreements for technical assistance five-year agreements and ensure continuous funding.
- **Member Ammons** stated that she appreciates FPAC staff investing in changing the mindset as much as they are investing in changing the model.
- **Member Haynie** spoke about the impact county committees have on farmers and asked about the election process for the recently appointed 90 county committee minority members.
- **Administrator Ducheneaux** replied that he will look into the process and get back to Member Haynie.
- **Deputy Undersecretary Montaña Greene** shared that the county committee election process for land areas started last week, and individuals can nominate themselves to go on the ballot or nominate others. She said that she can share the toolkit with the members of the Equity Commission.
- **Member Haynie** added that the issue in rural communities is farmers can get on the ballot, but they don't receive enough votes to be part of the committee. He asked how USDA can communicate to farmers in rural America that the process has changed.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** expressed her concerns regarding the progress USDA is

making regarding diverse representation on County Committees.

## 5. Presentation: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Update

- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights)** provided an update on the Office of Civil Rights' work on implementing comprehensive changes to improve the Civil Rights Complaint Process.
- **William Henry (Team Lead for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights)** provided a more detailed summary of the timeframe for new investigations.
- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** concluded the presentation with a detailed summary of the Fast Track Initiative, a new program complaint process that aims to reduce processing time.
- **Member Haynie** expressed his concern that USDA has not held its field staff accountable for civil rights violations. He asked if USDA has identified any employees that were terminated or needed to be terminated for previously committed civil rights violations.
- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** acknowledged Member Haynie's concern and summarized the current evaluation processes underway, which has been the priority for establishing accountability and addressing civil rights violations.
- **Member Haynie** sought clarification on whether violators have been identified and if they have already been terminated. He stated that from Dr. Brown Reynolds' statement, he gathered there have not been any instances where violators have been identified or terminated.
- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** clarified that she does not have the exact information to provide a full response to Member Haynie but will ensure she gets a detailed answer. She clarified the process on identification and evaluation of individuals that were found to be involved in discriminatory practices. She asked Member Haynie to provide the requested timeframe in which he is seeking information regarding the number of individuals that have been terminated as a result of engaging in discriminatory practices at USDA.
- **Member Haynie** reiterated his concern of whether the individuals have been identified and if they need to be. He offered his assistance in helping to identify said individuals and offices as well as provide resources to help evaluate customer service through USDA loan programs.
- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** acknowledged Member Haynie's comments and ensured that she will bring the issue to the attention of the right decision makers to create next steps and provide answers.
- **Member Horne** asked that the Office of Civil Rights provide a more detailed breakdown of the civil rights complaints and resolutions based on state and county.
- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** acknowledged Member Horne's request and stated that her team will ensure they provide a detailed answer.
- **Member Corley** commented that a lot of change is happening and acknowledged that the reflection of this will take time for the actions to sync together. He encouraged the members to pause and reflect on how far the improvements have moved from before to its current state of progress.
- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** acknowledges and agrees with Member Corley's comment.

- **William Henry** added that, given the current atmosphere, individuals who file a complaint today will have a different experience from those who encountered the system about ten years ago.
- **Member Rainey** stated that, regardless of the changes made internally to the civil rights process, many farmers and ranchers still do not have confidence or trust in the Office of Civil Rights. He asked how USDA plans to ensure the internal changes are communicated to the public.
- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** shared that the Office of Civil Rights is building an external engagement plan that will include sending staff out into the field.
- **Member Reed** asked how many decisions Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds has signed since starting her position.
- **Member Sarah Vogel** asked if the investigation process that was put in place has been updated to include subtle discrimination encounters such as face-to-face conversations. She also clarified that with a National Appeals Division (NAD), they do not just look at records but also have people testify under oath. She asked for confirmation if the step of requiring testifying under oath is currently embedded in the investigative process.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** commented that she hopes to see a representative from NAD to be part of the engagement in offering justice to customers and that siloing NAD from the initiatives will not fulfill the holistic approach to full justice. She also shared her collaborative work with Member Vogel in researching how USDA across the board can work better for the customer. She pointed out the issue of individuals having to choose between going through a NAD appeal or a civil rights appeal instead of going through one appeal including both sides, which would ultimately weaken the case of the individual seeking justice.
- **Member Cousin** stated that additional data is needed to continue to build back the trust and confidence of underserved farmers and ranchers. She also asked how the Office of Civil Rights could decentralize to process cases more geographically rather than having all cases go to D.C. She also expressed her support for the fast-track program; however, she asked how USDA can reduce the 60-90 day fast-track program to 30 days.
- **Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds** acknowledged all questions and stated that due to a strict timeframe, she will highlight answering a few of them. In response to Member Vogel's question related to processing procedures, she replied that as part of Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)'s remaining audit recommendations, they are in the process of updating the departmental manual and that intake processing will be part of the next phase. In response to Member Stanger-McLaughlin's recommendation that NAD be invited to the table in improving customer service, she agreed and will invite individuals from NAD to be part of the panel. In response to Member Cousin's request to reduce the 60-90 day fast-track program to 30 days, she clarified that the expert recommendation is to keep the track between 30 to 90 days, depending on the need of the customer. She also stated that the overall goal is to help get the request reconciled in a timeframe that is early enough for the individual.

## 6. Discussion on Amendments to Interim Recommendations Passed in February 2023

- **DFO Hernandez** reminded the members of the ground rules for discussing and presenting the changes to the interim recommendations.  
(Please note: Below are the recommendations as presented during the meeting with red text indicating amendments)

### **Recommendation 2f:**

- **Member Stephens** presented on the amendments to sub-recommendation 2f: *Provide direct family loans to close heirs' property estates and be inclusive of **land improvement and legal costs**.*
- **Co-Chair Cousin** expressed appreciation for adding land improvement to the costs covered to close heirs' property estates. She asked if the Member recommendation should add or specify any limitations on land improvement.
- **Member Reed** replied that land improvement should include leveling of land, irrigating land, and other improvements that will allow a farmer to remain on the land and farm.
- **DFO Hernandez** asked if member Reed would be willing to include those examples in the recommendation.
- **Member Reed** replied yes.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** stated that Member Reed should look at the amendment made to sub-recommendation 7b that specifically outlines what land improvements would be appropriate for inclusion in the cost sharing so that it's consistent with sub-recommendation 2f.
- **Dr. Goldmon** stated that landowners should always have the choice to improve their land, regardless of whether they have a clear title or not.
- **Member Haynie** commented that the funding in sub-recommendation 7b. only relates to cost share and 2f does not.
- **Member Horne** agreed with the amendment for sub-recommendation 2f and said that the EC should consider the historical perspective of how shut out heir's property landowners have been to USDA land improvement programs such as Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs. She shared that she views this sub-recommendation (2f) as a "catch up" provision and the recommendation language on funding comes once they receive a clear title.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked if language should be added to 7b to remove the cost share burden of the individual. She also stated that the EC should not use any language that includes "minority" because it would be subject to litigation.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** asked for more clarity on the 2f amendments.
- **Dr. Goldmon** provided a thorough explanation.
- **Member Stephens** stated that heirs' property issues are not exclusive to minorities and therefore, the language "minority" is not written into the recommendation.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** replied that most NRCS land improvement programs such as leveling and fencing are cost share programs. She reiterated that if the EC wants to reduce the financial burden for that participant, then they should not use the language "minority" for a waiver.



### Recommendation 2b:

- **Member Horne** provided an update to the amendments made to 2b: *Upon receipt of appropriations, the agencies would implement land-access related data gathering, including the Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land survey that includes data collection on farmer demographics and economic data by county. Report data by county publicly and include median and average rates of participation by race, gender, and ethnicity.*
- **Member Horne** stated that it is critical to know how much land is in heirship and that data should be as granular as possible to allow for targeted technical and legal assistance.
- **Member Stevens** expressed concern reporting the data publicly. She shared that The Center for Heirs' Property did receive a small grant to collect and map some heirship data however, once the nonprofit board saw the map, they strictly prohibited sharing it publicly due to the risk of families being found out and taken advantage of.
- **Member Horne** reiterated that during USDA's land survey, absentee landownership does need to be included.
- **Member Loza** asked if this data is being collected through the Ag Census.
- **Member Horne** replied that some of it is but it's not specifically identifying heirs' property, absentee, etc.
- **Member Loza** shared that in historical records, you can track fractionated land through past census studies. She asked Member Horne if this information is already available.
- **Member Horne** replied that some of this information is available, but it still does not target absentee land ownership and land in undivided interest.
- **Member Haynie** expressed concern that the data USDA collects could be inaccurate. He stated that many producers don't want to provide data to Natural Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) because they believe it will make them a target for predatory lending tactics. He added that USDA needs to focus on not only providing land, but also opportunities to make the land productive.
- **Member Rainey** commented that the public can collect heirs' property data locally by going to the county courthouse and searching their databases. He agreed with Member Haynie that even if USDA does put out a survey on heirs' property, it will not be properly completed. Therefore, he believes USDA should focus their efforts on working with local and state organizations that are engaged in this issue and know where targeted assistance is necessary.
- **Dr. Goldman** proposed that 2b and 2c be combined into one sub-recommendation.
- **Member Horne** replied that the subcommittee will continue to re-work the language.
- **Member Ammons** stated that the Equity Commission needs to advocate for transparency while also being conscious of the vulnerable positions we may be putting communities in who have been historically disenfranchised.

### Recommendation 3f:

- **Member Horne** provided an update to the amendments made for 3f: *Require an*

*analysis of the voluntary producer demographic data on an annual basis to identify any trends in the utilization of conservation programs by young, new and beginning, women, and BIPOC produce.*

- **Member Rainey** expressed support for the recommendation and suggested that data compliance and participation across all USDA agencies should be included, not just data for conservation programs. He stated that there is language in the 2008 Farm Bill on this topic that has never been implemented.
- **Member Horne** agreed.

#### **Recommendation 7b:**

- **Member Reed** presented on the amendments made for 7b: *Allow cost-shared improvements such as land leveling, installing irrigation systems, and providing resources to improve overall acre production to inferior base acres based on their base calculation and acreage discrepancies in comparison to neighboring farms to significantly inferior base acres in a prioritized format.*
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked if the land improvements added are examples.
- **Member Reed** responded that the land improvements outlined in the recommendation are examples and do not limit USDA.

#### **Recommendation 12b:**

- **Member Loza** provided an update on the amendments made to 12b: *Cultivate a sustainable department-wide culture of equity and inclusion by investing in long term financial partnerships with women and BIPOC servicing educational institutions and Tribal, territorial and community service organizations to build Language Access capacity for current and next generation of agricultural partners, farmworkers, stakeholders, and department workforce.*
- Members did not have any questions or comments about this recommendation.

#### **Recommendation 18e:**

- **Member Lee** presented on the new sub-recommendation 18e: *Promote increased procurement of local foods supplied by small agriculture businesses from underserved and underrepresented communities through training, technical assistance, and funding opportunities.*
- **Member Hainey** suggested that the recommendation language be modified to mandate USDA to increase procurement of underserved suppliers or for set asides.
- **Member Lee** stated that the original language did request set asides, but it was removed because members were concerned about potential legal challenges.
- **Member Hainey** recommended that the language be changed to mandate or require USDA to spend 30% of their funds on procurement for underserved suppliers.
- **Member Lee** agreed and expressed concerns that if the language is changed to be stronger such as mandate a percentage of funds or set asides, then it won't be accepted during the internal and external review phase.
- **Dr. Dewayne Goldmon** asked if 18e is a new recommendation.
- **DFO Hernandez** replied that it is new, however it replaces a combination of two

- interim sub-recommendations.
- **Member Lee** explained that previously the interim recommendation asked for 50% set asides in procurement dollars for underserved suppliers.
  - **Member Hainey** asked who pushed that recommendation back.
  - **Member Sias-Hernandez** responded that ideologically, the EC supports more explicit incentives, requirements, and mandates. However, there are concerns about what language will be agreed upon for policymaking.
  - **Member Hainey** stated that we shouldn't be discouraged from making the recommendation language strong.
  - **Member Lee** apologized for not remembering how the 50% set aside or pilot program language was changed but reiterated that she is in full support for adding specific percentage language for set asides. However, she is still concerned about the recommendation no longer being supported by all. She also stated that there aren't baselines established so determining a target number can be challenging.
  - **Member Hainey** stated that the Small Business Administration (SBA) has their own set aside program. He also shared that if USDA is mandated to 50% set asides, then it will increase the number of minority suppliers. He also requested information as to why SBA pushed back on the recommendation.
  - **Member Lee** responded that she is in support of tabling and reworking the recommendation.
  - **Co-Chair Cousin** agrees that the language is important and stated that we cannot have a race-based set aside program because the general counsel may not support the recommendation..
  - **Member Racelis** suggested adding more detail to the recommendation to reconcile some of the concerns of Member Hainey. He recommends adding in parameters on who the funding can be awarded to such as they have to meet certain benchmarks.
  - **Member Hainey** replied that most often, when funding opportunities arise for training and technical assistance, that money goes to a university or a non-government organization and does not make its way back to the producers. He questioned why training and technical assistance is included in the recommendation when the focus of the recommendation is purchasing from agricultural producers.
  - **Member Lee** encouraged Member Hainey to review recommendation 18c, which asks USDA to limit competition. The goal of this is to create specific procurement opportunities for underserved communities.
  - **Member Lower-Basch** asked if the commission should put this recommendation on hold until the next meeting to allow for USDA staff to provide input on how to ensure the recommendation is actionable.
  - **DFO Hernandez** responded that the commission could wait until the next meeting to vote.
  - **Member Reed** asked what the expected outcome is. He stated that if the expected outcome is to get more minorities in the procurement process, then you need to be explicit about that language. He understands the legal issues but believes the commission should go bold and use specific language.

### Recommendation 26:

- **Member Rainey** presented on the updates to the recommendation 26: *Increase funding and support to expand Cooperative Extension Service programming to marginalized communities through grants/cooperative agreements and more descriptive language within Requests for Applications (RFAs) for competitive funding to facilitate collaboration with minority serving agricultural colleges and universities.*
- **Member Vogel** recommends changing the slash between grants and cooperative agreements to “and or”.
- **Member Rainey** agreed to changing the language for clarity.

### Recommendation 29, 30, 31 and 32:

- **Member Lower-Basch** provided an update to the amendments made for:
  - **29d:** *The time limit on benefit receipt for unemployed people who are not living with dependent children and the option to deny benefits for failure to participate in SNAP Employment and Training programs (mandatory SNAP E&T).*
  - **30:** *Continue to review and update the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) to reflect the needs of today’s consumers, explore options for boosting the minimum benefit and increasing benefits more than annually during periods of high inflation, and consider basing SNAP benefit levels on the Low-Cost Food Plan.*
  - **31:** *Continue to encourage state SNAP agencies to administer SNAP in a way that treats applicants and participants with dignity and respect and to consult with those with lived experience of poverty as they administer the programs and provide technical assistance on how to do so. USDA should seek legislative authority to hold states accountable for barriers to access and require states to develop processes for beneficiaries to be involved in program and systems design and evaluation. USDA should report SNAP participation data among eligible individuals disaggregated by race and ethnicity.*
  - **32c:** *Review meal pattern requirements under Child Care and Adult Feeding Program (CACFP) for inclusion of culturally appropriate foods, the ability of underrepresented community providers to participate as sites, and access by small home childcare providers (many of whom come from disadvantaged communities). Review and update meal pattern and nutrition standards for school meals to reflect the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and in consideration of cultural and traditional foods preferred by program participants.*
  - **32d.** *Implement proposed changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food packages to better support access to culturally appropriate foods, in consideration of comments received; and continue supporting the participation of underrepresented community providers as WIC vendors.*
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** suggested that the commission focuses on ways to remove barriers to access programs such as removing the need for applicants to apply in person, eliminating eligibility and language barriers, etc.
- **Member Lower-Basch** replied that she is supportive of this language however, she believed that there were members working on a new recommendation on this topic. If not, she agreed to add the language. She also directed Member Stanger-McLaughlin

- to refer to recommendation 32, which focuses on removing barriers.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked for clarification on the amendment made in recommendation 31 and why “encourage” was used instead.
  - **Member Lower-Basch** responded that the amendment was made because USDA can only encourage state SNAP agencies to provide customer-centered service. She shared that the second part of the recommendation does seek legislative authority to hold states accountable.
  - **Member Ammons** asked for clarity regarding recommendation 32c if Member Lower-Basch is proposing a review of meal requirements or recommending that USDA provides culturally appropriate foods.
  - **Member Lower-Basch** replied that the goal is for USDA to provide those foods, but the recommendation asks for a review because USDA is currently in the middle of the rulemaking process about this. She said she is open to other amendments members may have.
  - **Member Vogel** asked if the semi-colon could be removed and “and” added instead.

## 7. Open Discussion

- **DFO Hernandez** opened the floor to discuss any recommendations that were presented on.
- **Member Horne** asked for the FPAC and NRCS language to be removed from recommendation 2b. and suggested that NASS include heirship in their total land survey. This would ensure that the data wouldn’t be granular enough to pinpoint minority producers.
- **DFO Hernandez** recommends that the commission tackle this recommendation tomorrow when Member Hughes can attend the meeting.
- **Member Corley** asked if the EC could deliberate from the bottom to the top of the recommendation list.
- **Member Lomeli-Corcoran** shared that when she spoke with Member Lee previously about the procurement recommendation, they agreed to add in language regarding labor standards. She recommends that this be added to protect farmworkers.
- **Member Rainey** suggested an amendment to recommendation 14, which originally stated “annual compliance reviews” as the title. He recommends the title be changed to “annual compliance reviews and program application and participation data”. He also recommended language be added to the recommendation requiring collection and reporting on data related to program participation in applications by socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** reminded members that these recommendations are still interim, and the commission will continue to have dialogue to further clarify and refine.
- **Member Rainey** proposed a new sub-recommendation to the county committee’s recommendation to make the County Executive Director position a federal employment grade employee to ensure transparency, oversight, and accountability of county committees.
- **Member Sherrod** stated that the commission needs to be more specific about what type of oversight should be provided.
- **Member Hainey** agreed with Member Rainey and said that because the county

- committee hires the County Executive Director, they can sometimes be a puppet for the committee. He added that if the County Executive Director is a federal employee, then they will be overseen by another federal position.
- **Member Sherrod** understands this point of view but wants to know what will make a difference. She asked what type of oversight will be provided and who will oversee that position. She believes the Equity Commission needs to be specific in the recommendation such as mandating USDA have compliance officers.
  - **Member Smith** asked if this change would require legislation.
  - **Member Horne** replied that she believes so.
  - **Dr. Goldman** agreed that it would require legislation. He also reminded members that in previous public meetings, there were discussions to have all county officials that work with FSA become federal employees, not just the County Executive Director.
  - **Member Horne** agreed with Dr. Goldman and Member Sherrod. She reiterated that Federal Law must hold the system accountable. She also stated that the lowest hanging fruit was to appoint minority members to the County Committees but that it's important for the EC to use strong language and use all authorities, including legislative change, to change the system and federalize key positions.

## 8. Equity Commission Deliberation and Voting on Amendments to the Interim Recommendations Passed in February 2023

- **DFO Hernandez** opened this portion of the meeting and explained that the Members of the Equity Commission will deliberate each recommendation, make any necessary edits, and vote before moving to the next recommendation.

*(Please note: Below is the final recommendation language presented during the deliberation period. Red text indicates amendments.)*

**Recommendation 8f: County Executive Directors should be moved to a federal employment grade in order to ensure transparency, oversight, and accountability of county committee disputes in order to build trust and confidence in agency decisions.**

- **Member Rainey** made a motion to table the recommendation until the next meeting.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of tabling recommendation 8f.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** requested additional information from USDA Office of General Counsel.

**Recommendation 14: Annual Compliance Reviews and Program Application/Participation Data.** The Equity Commission supports the USDA's adherence and execution of Section 14006 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill), that mandates USDA prepare an annual report on each of its agency's **program application and participation rate data regarding socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers, civil rights complaints, resolutions, and actions.** By designating a responsible party for administering reports, providing the related data to inform compliance and customer service, and authorizing funding to conduct audits, USDA can increase trust, transparency, and

accountability to its stakeholders.

**14d: Annually collect and publicly report program application and participation data for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.**

- **Member Corley** asked for clarity on the amendments to the recommendation.
- **Member Rainey** replied that that the Farm Bill requires the collection of demographic data at the county level however, it's not always being done. He stated that this data would help drive policy decisions and shine light to civil rights issues for further investigation.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggests that the Commission amends the language to 14d. to say “annually, collect and publicly report program application and participation data for socially disadvantaged.”
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 14 with amendments.

**Recommendation 32: Review the nutrition programs at the federal, state, and local levels to identify barriers to vendor and procurement opportunities for disadvantaged and underrepresented communities,; and remove barriers within federal control and provide technical assistance to states and localities on best practices.**

**32c: Review meal pattern requirements under Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP) ~~for~~ to ensure inclusion of culturally appropriate foods, the ability of underrepresented community providers to participate as sites, and access by small home childcare providers (many of whom come from disadvantaged communities). Review and update meal pattern and nutrition standards for school meals to reflect the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and in consideration of cultural and traditional foods preferred by program participants.**

**32d. Implement proposed changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food packages to better support access to culturally appropriate foods, in consideration of comments received; and continue supporting the participation of underrepresented community providers as WIC vendors. Remove barriers to WIC access, including by supporting full funding to WIC and extending waivers of physical presence requirements.**

- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 32 with amendments.

**Recommendation 31: Continue to encourage state SNAP agencies to administer SNAP in a way that treats applicants and participants with dignity and respect and to consult with those with lived experience of poverty as they administer the programs and provide technical assistance on how to do so. USDA should seek legislative authority to hold states accountable for barriers to access and require states to develop processes for beneficiaries to be involved in program and systems design and evaluation. USDA should report SNAP**



**participation data among eligible individuals disaggregated by race and ethnicity.**

- **Member Corley** asked if after discussing this recommendation with USDA if there are any concerns the EC should be aware of.
- **Member Lower-Basch** responded that USDA has some questions regarding the disaggregated data and informed her that many states have a lot of missing data. However, this issue seems like it can be solved.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 31 with amendments.

**Recommendation 30: Continue to **review and update** the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) to reflect the needs of today’s consumers, explore options for boosting the minimum benefit and increasing benefits more than annually during periods of high inflation, and consider basing SNAP benefit levels on the Low-Cost Food Plan.**

- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 30 with amendments.

**Recommendation 29: Support legislative action to remove ~~the~~ **any** eligibility restrictions on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that disproportionately limit access to nutrition supports by BIPOC, including:**

**29d. The time limit on benefit receipt for unemployed people who are not living with dependent children **and the option to deny benefits for failure to participate in SNAP Employment and Training programs (mandatory SNAP E&T).****

- **Co-Chair Cousin** requested that “any” be added to recommendation 29.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 29 with amendments.

**Recommendation 26: Increase funding and support to expand Cooperative Extension Service programming to marginalized communities through grants ~~or~~ cooperative agreements. **Include ~~and~~** more descriptive language within Requests for Applications (RFAs) for competitive funding to facilitate collaboration with minority serving agricultural colleges and universities.**

- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 26 with amendments.

**Recommendation 18e: Promote increased procurement of local foods supplied by small agriculture businesses from underserved and underrepresented communities through training, technical assistance, and funding opportunities.**

- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of tabling recommendation 18e.

**Recommendation 18g: Ensure that spending for employer grants and procurement promotes improved laborers living and working conditions by requiring that employers throughout the supply chain demonstrate labor law compliance and meet “high road”**



**workplace standards, such as collective bargaining and other metrics for improved workplace protections, to qualify for such funding or procurement.**

- **Member Rainey** asked if high road workplace standards are commonly understood standards?
- **Member Loza** replied yes. She added that low road standards are ones that bad actors follow that have a bad track record with Department of Labor.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked if ‘high road workplace standards’ is an accepted term by Department of Labor.
- **Member Loza** responded that it is not a Department of Labor term but instead, it’s a term that labor rights activists and supporters use.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked if the EC should use Department of Labor’s language to ensure the recommendation is actionable.
- **Member Loza** is supportive of that change.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** requested the recommendation be tabled.
- **Member Loza** agreed.
- **Member Stanger- McLaughlin** suggested that the EC look at the language used at other agencies or departments such as the Small Business Association.
- **Member Lee** added that large businesses often hide behind the contractors therefore, the types of contractors specified in the recommendation may need to be clarified.
- EC Members unanimously voted in favor of tabling recommendation 18g.

**Recommendation 12b: Cultivate a sustainable department-wide culture of equity and inclusion by investing in long term financial partnerships with women and BIPOC servicing educational institutions and Tribal, territorial and community service organizations to build Language Access capacity for current and next generation of agricultural partners, **farmworkers, agricultural workers**, stakeholders, and department workforce.**

- **Member Lee** requested that agricultural workers be included in the recommendation.
- **Member Loza** agreed to make that amendment.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** stated that he is not in favor of including processing workers in the recommendation.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 12b with amendments.

**Recommendation 7b: Allow cost-shared improvements **such as land leveling, installing irrigation systems, and providing resources to improve overall acre production to inferior base acres based on their base calculation and acreage discrepancies in comparison to neighboring farms** to significantly inferior base acres in a prioritized format.**

- **Co-Chair Cousin** requested that the recommendation be tabled until stronger language can be added.
- **Member Reed** said that based on the discussion earlier, Co-Chair Cousin indicated that this recommendation should move forward, and the EC can strengthen the language later.

- **Co-Chair Cousin** removed her suggestion to table the recommendation.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 7b with amendments.

**Recommendation 3f: Require an analysis of the voluntary producer demographic data on an annual basis to identify any trends in the utilization of conservation programs by young, new and beginning, women, and BIPOC produce.**

- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 3f with amendments.

**Recommendation 2b: ~~Authorize mandatory, recurring funding for land access related gathering~~ Upon receipt of appropriations, the agencies would implement land-access related data gathering, including the Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land survey that includes data collection on farmer demographics and economic data by county. Report data by county publicly and include median and average rates of participation by race, gender, and ethnicity.**

- **Member Corley** made a motion to table the recommendation.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of tabling recommendation 2b.

**Recommendation 2f. Provide direct family loans to ~~resolve~~ heirs' property estates, ~~and be inclusive of~~ including **land improvement** and legal costs.**

- **Co-Chair Cousin** requested that “and be inclusive of” be replaced by “including”.
- **Member Stephens** requested that “resolve” be added to the recommendation.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked if there are any other legal costs involved.
- **Member Stephens** responded that “legal costs” is a broad term and could include a title search, a survey, etc.
- **Member Vogel** asked that instead of “legal costs”, can it be amended to “closing costs”.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** responded that she likes keeping it “legal costs” because it’s so broad.
- **Member Reed** agreed to keeping the language “legal costs”.
- **Member Vogel** added that there are lawyer fees, which is a narrow piece of loan closing costs.
- **Member Stephens** reminded members that heirs’ property is not the typical closing on real estate. To resolve heirs’ property, it may require more costs for a title search, appraisal cost, etc.
- **Dr. Goldmon** shared that he is concerned with the word “closing costs” and prefers “land improvement and legal costs” because it covers a broad range of issues.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** agreed and said that using the word “including” in the recommendation also does not limit other costs that may be associated.
- **Member Stanger- McLaughlin** asked if it can be amended to say “improvements and legal and any ancillary costs.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** replied that by adding the word “resolve”, the EC is already encompassing everything.

- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of passing recommendation 2f with amendments.

## **9. Closing:**

- Co-Chair Rodriguez and Co-Chair Cousin provided closing remarks.

**DAY 1 MEETING AJOURNED**

## Day Two – February 1, 2023

### **Equity Commission Members Present:**

- Co-Chair Cousin
- Co-Chair Rodriguez
- Shorlette Ammons
- Todd Corley
- Toni Stanger-McLaughlin
- Yvonne Lee
- Elizabeth Lower-Basch
- Dr. Mireya Loza (Virtual)
- Charlie Rawls
- Dr. Ronald Rainey
- Dr. Hazell Reed (Virtual)
- Shirley Sherrod
- Poppy Sias-Hernandez
- Rick Smith

### **Agriculture Subcommittee Members Present:**

- Dr. Gina Eubanks
- Janssen Hang
- PJ Haynie III
- Savi Horne
- Michelle Hughes
- Kari Jo Lawrence
- Erica Lomeli Corcoran
- Gary Matteson
- Dr. Alexis Racelis
- Russell Redding
- Shari Rogge-Fidler
- Dr. Jennie Stephens
- Sarah Vogel

### **Rural Community & Economic Development Subcommittee Members Present:**

- Cheryal Hills
- David Carrasquillo-Medrano
- Calvin Allen
- Lakota Vogel (Virtual)
- Valerie (Mann) Beel (Virtual)
- Latonya Keaton
- Curtis Wynn (Virtual)

- Terry Rambler
- Larry Holland (Virtual)
- Nils Christoffersen
- Shonterria Charleston
- Doug O'Brien

### **USDA Staff in Attendance:**

- Cecilia Hernandez, Designated Federal Officer
- Rick Gibson, Senior Council
- Deb DuMontier, Office of Tribal Relations
- Dr. Dewayne Goldmon, Senior Advisor for Racial Equity
- Margo Schlanger, USDA Senior Advisor
- Dr. Carlos Ortiz, National Program Leader, Division of Community and Education
- Xochitl Torres-Small, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture
- Steffanie Bezruki, Chief of Staff of Rural Development
- Andrew Berke, Rural Utilities Service Administrator
- Gbenga Ajilore, Senior Advisor for the Office of the Undersecretary for Rural Development

### **1. Opening of the Meeting**

- **Designated Federal Officer (DFO) Hernandez** called to order day two of the 5<sup>th</sup> Public Meeting of the Equity Commission meeting and took attendance.
- **Deb DuMontier (Acting Director of the Office of Tribal Relations)** provided opening remarks and welcomed the Equity Commission to the United Tribal Technical College. She expressed her support for the Equity Commission's focus on Tribal Relations and provided an overview of USDA's ongoing Tribal Relation work.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** provided opening remarks and encouraged members of the public to submit written comments to the Equity Commission. He also welcomed the Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee and emphasized the importance of their work.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** expressed her excitement for incorporating the Rural Community Economic Development's (RCED's) work. She encouraged all members of the Equity Commission and the Subcommittees to remember that all rural communities are different and to think about ways to empower each community.
- **DFO Hernandez** then provided an overview of the day's agenda and introduced the next presenters.

### **2. Presentation: Inflation Reduction Act Update – Section 22006-22007**

- **Dr. Dewayne Goldmon (Senior Advisor for Racial Equity)** provided an update on progress made by USDA in delivering debt relief to historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

- **Margo Schlanger (Senior Advisor)** presented a detailed breakdown of the actions taken by USDA, through regional partners, to provide technical assistance, and support to applicants for financial assistance from the 22007 Program. She emphasized that all farmers/ranchers that have experienced discrimination from USDA in the past are eligible for this financial assistance.
- **Dr. Carlos Ortiz (National Program Leader, Division of Community and Education)** provided an overview of the NextGen Program at USDA. Specifically, he highlighted the wide range of NextGen grants and the diversity in programs supported by the NextGen Program.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked whether there would be any moratorium on foreclosures while decisions are being made on the 22007 Program.
- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** responded that pursuing a discrimination claim through 22007 will not impact ongoing civil rights claims.
- **Member Lee** asked whether applicants were aware that they do not have to give up their rights to pursue civil rights claim against USDA when opting to take temporary relief through the 22007 Program.
- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** responded that she was not sure and would take this question as a suggestion to ensure applicants were aware.
- **Dr. Goldmon** shared that there is a temporal difference between civil rights claims and the 22007 Program. The 22007 Program only applies to discrimination faced prior to 2021.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked Dr. Ortiz for more information on the role of leading institutions in the NextGen Program.
- **Dr. Ortiz** stated that the leading institutions are not too different from other partner institutions. They act as the stewards of funds and can award some of award funds to their partners.
- **Member Rainey** asked when the announcement date and first payments are anticipated to go out.
- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** responded that the announcement should be just after July 4<sup>th</sup> and the payments are expected to go out in early 2024.
- **Member Rainey** asked whether payments will be taxable.
- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** stated that in general, the payments will be taxable.
- **Dr. Goldmon** added that USDA cannot make any payments until the full number of claimants in the 22007 Program is realized.
- **Member Haynie** asked how USDA determines the value of the loss from discrimination.
- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** stated that this program is not intended to reimburse claimants but rather to provide financial assistance.
- **Member Haynie** responded that he has heard, from the presenters, that the 22007 Program does not include enough funds and expressed his concern about how the program is being communicated. He stated that he does not feel like farmers/ranchers who have experienced discrimination are being prioritized in terms of disseminating payments.

- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** responded that more time is needed to ensure technical assistance is provided to claimants and that around 5 percent of funds are planned to be used as administrative costs to support outreach efforts.
- **Member Haynie** expressed the need for USDA to be able to explain this to a farmer. However, he stated that he feels he still cannot explain how to receive 22007 funds to underserved farmers and ranchers.
- **Member Holland** encouraged USDA to ensure that students in the NextGen Program can see and hear from underserved farmers. Additionally, he asked how many 1890 institutions are participating in the NextGen Program.
- **Dr. Ortiz** responded that about 17 out of the nineteen 1890 institutions are participating in the program.
- **Dr. Goldmon** added that 7 of the lead institutions in the NextGen Program are 1890 institutions and stated that he agreed with the need to ensure participants in this program are exposed to unserved producers.
- **Member Holland** asked about the representation of Southern HBCUs in the NextGen lead institutions.
- **Dr. Ortiz** stated that he would provide a list of the institutions participating in the NextGen Program.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked if the Next Gen program included anything with the growing number of agricultural high schools across being established across the country and if the scholarships and outreach programs include introducing students to the systems in the agricultural space—processing, warehousing, and trucking – to provide career opportunities for students of color. She also asked if the institutions leading the farm loan program include minority-led organizations and if former farmers who have experienced discrimination in the past are also eligible for receipt from resources of the 22007 Program.
- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** responded that 2 out of three are minority-led organizations and that former farmers are eligible to apply for the 22007 Program.
- **Dr. Ortiz** stated that many projects have activities in the elementary and high school levels as well as other communities of learning and that NextGen program disciplines train students for a variety of careers that all support the agricultural enterprise.
- **Member Rainey** asked for the sign-up process of a farmer in rural areas, how USDA is going to communicate this, and if there are organizations who have lived-in experiences of serving these marginalized communities that will be involved in the communications strategy.
- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** responded that the plan is to share this information on the website and through several other communications channels. Cooperative organizations have lived-in experiences and regional hubs will be partnering with community partners who have had experience serving rural farmers to communicate the process.
- **Member Stanger- McLaughlin** requested a certified list of those engaged directly through the USDA funding and shared on the USDA website.
- **Senior Advisor Schlanger** acknowledged Member Stanger’s suggestion.
- **Member Lee** shared that given the geographical status situation for the Pacific

- Islands, Hawaii and Puerto, institutions leading the NextGen program will need to take into consideration the needs of these territorial communities.
- **Dr. Ortiz** responded confirming that National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) staff are aware of the needs for these geographic locations and have technical assistance available for NextGen institutions to help address these needs.
  - **Member Haynie** asked why the 22007 Program cooperators located in the DC Beltway were chosen and how they are qualified to represent farmers in the South.
  - **Senior Advisor Schlanger** responded with the selection of these vendors were chosen through a procurement process. They are going to have a significant presence in the Beltway. She also mentioned that these vendors are bringing in team members with regional knowledge and experience as well as lived-in experience in farming and anti-discrimination work.
  - **Dr. Goldman** added that this process is designed to operate without the aid of attorneys and encouraged Equity Commission and USDA colleagues to help explain the process to others. He also stated that other concerns discussed will be taken into consideration.
  - **Member Rainey** replied that the communication of this process needs to be clear and transparent and needs to get out quickly.
  - **Member Rawls** stated that tribes be part of the outreach and requested notes from the Tribal Relations presentation. He suggested local/regional based offices help with relationships between the tribes and USDA and that it would be very helpful to also open up access to the tribes.
  - **Member Vogel** recommended that USDA checks with the attorneys from the Keepseagle case on how to conduct outreach in Indian country. She also commented on the need to file disciplinary complaints on lawyers making initial outreach targeting farmers who have faced discrimination that are charging up to 20-30%.

### 3. Presentation: Rural Development Update

- **Xochitl Torres-Small (Deputy Secretary of Agriculture)** provided an update on Rural Development's role in advancing rural prosperity.
- **Steffanie Bezruki (Chief of Staff of Rural Development)** presented on the definition of equity and how Rural Development is advancing equity through its programs such as the Rural Partners Network.
- **Andrew Berke (Rural Utilities Service Administrator)** provided an overview of USDA's utility programs, the challenges to serving rural areas, and key activities USDA is engaged in to close the water and broadband access gap.
- **Gbenga Ajilore (Senior Advisor for the Office of the Undersecretary for Rural Development)** presented on the Rural Energy for America program and Higher Biofuels Infrastructure Investment program. He also presented on the Rural Data Gateway.
- **Member Hills** asked Steffanie Bezruki if the signature projects have been implemented or if they are in the planning phase for the Rural Partners Network. She also asked Andrew Berke for clarification on the utility scale used for the Rural Utilities Powering Affordable Clean Energy (PACE) program. She lastly asked



- Gbenga Ajilore if the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) program is going to address the lack of auditors that are needed to participate.
- **Steffanie Bezruki** responded that most of the projects for the Rural Partners Network are in the planning and development phases. She stated that some may require additional federal funding.
    - **Administrator Berke** replied to Member Hills' comment that PACE funding is between one million to one hundred-million dollars. Projects under a million dollars should go to REAP program, which is aimed at smaller commercial scale and projects over one hundred-million-dollars should go to the Department of Energy.
  - **Senior Advisor Ajilore** responded that he will follow up with Member Hills regarding her question on auditors.
  - **Member Ammons** expressed concern that REAP funds are going to large-scale factory farms that are investing in large manure livestock biogas projects that end up in vulnerable, minority communities. She asked what USDA is doing to address this issue.
  - **Senior Advisor Ajilore** responded that USDA is still trying to figure out how to ensure they are not incentivizing those projects.
  - **Member Ammons** asked if USDA could share the proportion of funds publicly that are going to those projects.
  - **Senior Advisor Ajilore** responded that he is not sure and will get back to Member Ammons.
  - **Member Sherrod** commented that she was surprised to learn that housing has been centralized and there's no longer a housing representative in area offices. She asked why this service has been centralized.
  - **Steffanie Bezruki** replied that single family housing programs are administered at state offices and multi-family housing programs are administered at the national office. She recommended asking this question to the state employees who will present later in the day.
  - **Member Sherrod** added that these communities are very poor, and housing is a critical need.
  - **DFO Hernandez** stated that if members need more information on housing, she will get in touch with the housing experts at USDA.
  - **Member Carrasquillo-Medrano** shared concerns that the programs in the Rural Partners Network heavily depend on non-governmental and volunteer labor, which is particularly challenging in Puerto Rico due to many of these groups still being involved in hurricane cleanup efforts. He also mentioned that many of these groups have poor reputations with the communities they serve. Additionally, he shared that the Puerto Rico Rural Partners Network staff are not aware of how specific projects were selected. Lastly, he spoke about the possibility of mass displacement of the population in Puerto Rico if the government rushes to spend \$1 billion dollars on energy improvements without a thorough analysis of the consequences and impact on land cost.
  - **Administrator Berke** stated that there is a focus from the Biden Administration on ensuring energy in Puerto Rico is reliable. He said that other federal agencies are

playing a greater role in spending the Inflation Reduction Act funding and USDA has a smaller role, which is to supply smaller communities with reliable and affordable power. He also shared that because this money is funded by statute, all funds must be spent and utilized by September 2031.

- **Member Carrasquillo-Medrano** reiterated that policies must be in place to prevent displacement and that local government land use plans are taken into consideration to prevent development where it's not needed or wanted by the communities.
- **Administrator Berke** responded that every project USDA funds must have a community benefits plan associated.
- **Member Corley** asked how USDA engages with the private sector to ensure projects continue beyond administrations.
- **Administrator Berke** responded that USDA often partners with the private sector for the PACE program because the funding award amounts are large. Then these companies work with rural co-ops to provide the services to the community. He shared that his greatest concern is having long-term funding opportunities, which is needed to truly make a clean energy transition.
- **Member Corley** agreed that building long-term funding streams must be a priority.
- **Senior Advisor Ajilore** added that there was a recent announcement by the Administration about a 1-billion-dollar initiative to have the private sector invest in underserved communities. He shared there is also a recent interagency initiative announced with USDA, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Transportation, SBA, and others to align investments and utilize the Rural Partners Network to facilitate private sector investment into those projects.
- **Member Wynn** asked for more information on community benefit plans and how they ensure underserved communities are getting their fair share of the funding.
- **Administrator Berke** replied that it is critical for the financial benefits to be tangible to people. He stated that every applicant for funding must provide USDA with a plan that shows either how they are lowering costs for residents or how the cost would have been greater without intervention. He added that USDA extended the due date of the plans, so companies and organizations had adequate time to engage the community.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** encouraged Rural Development staff to send the Equity Commission any additional information to help answer the questions asked.
- **Deb DuMontier** provided an announcement that the Office of Tribal Relations is establishing its first ever tribal advisory committee.

#### 4. Public Comments

- The Commission heard comments from:
  - Lisa Gonzalez
  - Sherry White-Williamson
  - Cynthia Mompont
  - Hillery Goodgame
  - Janice Smith

- **DFO Hernandez** informed members of the public they could submit written public comments to [equitycommission@usda.gov](mailto:equitycommission@usda.gov) and in future meetings they can register to provide an oral comment by visiting <https://www.usda.gov/equity-commission>.

## 5. Presentation: Reflections from RD State Employees

- **Erin Oban (North Dakota State Director)** presented reflections on Rural Development from a North Dakota perspective.
- **Mark Wax (North Dakota Deputy State Director)** provided a historical context on the organizational and staffing strategy of Rural Development in North Dakota.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** commented on her experience with seeking demographic information on how many tribes were supported by funding programs. She asked how to gain this information on minority demographics and how North Dakota Rural Development tracks this data.
- **State Director Oban** provided an example of working with tribal relations in North Dakota and discussed how North Dakota has been working on this process and noted factors to consider, including leadership. She also provided a snapshot of the numbers of investments in state-administered programs in tribal areas.
- **Member Loza** commented that the population breakdown is missing data on Latino representation and asked what Rural Development is doing to serve this community in North Dakota.
- **State Director Oban** responded that she would find out where the majority of Latinos are living in North Dakota but suspects that they are in highly populated cities, which Rural Development does not serve. She stated that she will find out accurate information from the census and will address the resource gaps where needed.
- **Member Loza** added that even if the Latino population is living in a heavily populated city, it should be reflected in the data so that Rural Development can note this.
- **Member Lee** noted that from what she has heard anecdotally, more Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders are moving into rural areas but because the numbers are small, their representation is not visible and therefore not getting enough attention and support. She commented that the census showed 1.7% representation of Asian Americans, but the poverty rate was the highest of all communities that are living in rural agricultural areas. She then asked the reason for this disparity and what's being done to help provide resources to this population.
- **State Director Oban** acknowledged Member Lee's comment and agreed that she noted the same data disparity. She stated that she will have to identify the residential locations of Asian Americans in North Dakota and will seek ways Rural Development can serve this population. She added the efforts in forming partnerships across the state, including the North Dakota Department of Commerce.
- **Member Lee** added that one of the fastest growing populations in North Dakota is the Nepalese along with other refugees and immigrant populations and encouraged North Dakota Rural Development to seek out the location of these populations and connect with regional partners to seek linguistic and cultural competency to help serve these communities.
- **State Director Oban** shared that Rural Development in North Dakota will seek resources

to help strengthen cultural competency. She also noted that the primary population of new Americans in North Dakota is in their largest communities where they can gain a concentration of services, although these same groups are also seeking homes in rural communities, causing the need for partnerships with organizations to assist new Americans moving to frontier communities.

- **Member Hills** asked about the level of priority North Dakota Rural Development will have in terms of hiring people who represent the demographics of the aforementioned communities, should staffing numbers start to shift in a new direction.
- **State Director Oban** replied that the Rural Development human resources office has been centralized to the national office and that there have been significant efforts to improve those processes.
- **Deputy State Director Wax** added that currently priority is being given to other populations such as veterans and that North Dakota Rural Development will work with human resources to review the application process and identify outreach efforts needed.
- **State Director Oban** recognized that when veterans are given the preference, that severely limits the diversity in candidates given the demographics of those who serve in the military.
- **Member Rainey** asked to speak on the digital divide in North Dakota in terms of broadband.
- **State Director Oban** noted that North Dakota is ahead of its time in broadband infrastructure, particularly because of the number of providers and that the state prioritized connecting its communities and keeping up with the global economy. She also stated that Rural Development is having conversations with the State on utilizing funds from the Bi-Partisan Infrastructure Law to ensure Rural Development targets underserved communities.
- **Member Sherrod** empathized with the frustration of lack of staffing. She also shared her concern that while States will prioritize investments in larger programs such as broadband, they forget about the basic services agencies can provide. She mentioned the issues with decentralized housing in Georgia and asked about North Dakota's experience.
- **State Director Oban** stated that multi-family housing is no longer administered through the state offices, but single-family housing remains administered by the states, but they have only five offices, requiring Rural Development staff to be creative in providing housing assistance through hosted sessions in different towns. She communicated that there is a need to support specialists dedicated to providing technical assistance in addition to outreach efforts in order to cross these barriers.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked about the challenges from the staff reduction of the six offices, the split between FSA and RD, and if North Dakota RD is co-locating with those offices or with any U.S. government agencies.
- **State Director Oban** responded that North Dakota RD is co-located in some service centers with sister agencies within USDA. She also clarified that the single-family housing programs are administered through every single one of their locations.
- **Member Holland** emphasized the substantial efforts of the North Dakota RD in centralizing services to serve constituents.

- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** gave remarks of appreciation of State Director Oban’s presentation and discussion on the need for resources and staff to implement rural development goals.
- **Dr. Goldmon** noted that the numbers in underserved communities that exceed poverty rates in State Director Oban’s presentation is reflective of the decision the country must make based upon the poverty rates across the country. He emphasized the core of the Equity Commission and the need to make judicious decisions on the distribution of resources so that they eventually become the norm. He also commented that he was encouraged to hear of North Dakota’s efforts in advancing access to broadband since the human resources support continues to be a challenge as staff are being asked to do more with less when carrying out equity initiatives. He then thanked State Director Oban for her presentation.

## 6. Presentation and Discussion of RCED Recommendations

- **DFO Hernandez** provided an introduction and background to the RCED recommendations.
- **Member Holland** and **Member Vogel** provided deeper context on Rural Development
- **DFO Hernandez** opened the floor for RCED members to present recommendations and allow discussion.
- **Member Corley** requested that the members who speak on the recommendations use terminology that is as descriptive as possible to communicate the intention of the recommendation for all members to understand.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked how the RCED recommendations integrate into the Equity Commission recommendations.
- **DFO Hernandez** clarified that the recommendations will be voted on and placed on the website based on FACA ruling that they made publicly available. The committee will still have time after this meeting to update these recommendations. She added that when the commission returns in the fall, the RCED will provide updates and the Equity Commission will vote upon these recommendations to be packaged in the final report.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** asked for clarity that the final report will contain all final Equity Commission recommendations instead of separated RCED and RD recommendations.
- **DFO Hernandez** confirmed that these recommendations will all integrate into the final report of recommendations. While the RCED and RD recommendations will remain separate temporarily due to process, the final Equity Commission report will contain all the recommendations.
- **Dr. Goldmon** emphasized that the recommendations should all be folded in so that there is a seamless set of recommendations from the Equity Commission.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** agreed with Dr. Goldmon’s statement and noted that she was seeking clarity so that all members are aligned in the same direction.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** acknowledged that the Equity Commission has not had enough time to engage with the Rural Subcommittee and that even with the Ag

Subcommittee, there are some recommendations that were tabled. She therefore assured the committees that there still is time to modify recommendations while presenting to the commission today.

## **RCED Focus Area #1: How Rural Development Operates**

### **Recommendation #1.1 Ensure the communities with greatest need have access to critical staff resources.**

- **Member Hills** presented recommendation 1.1 and discussed the intention of conducting a full assessment and re-alignment of staffing in areas that have been underserved particularly in communities that have been socially, economically, and environmentally disadvantaged.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked if an additional recommendation asking the Department for more resources or re-allocation of resources should be included.
- **Member Hills** agreed with Co-Chair Cousin's remark and made note of this.
- **Member O'Brien** noted that it is important to be able to understand how to handle recommendations that impact Congressional action effectively and appropriately. He particularly noted that there is a discretion with the Department on staffing, but Congress has power over Rural Development mission area's salaries and expenses as well as the full-time employment (FTE) ceiling.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked if there are multiple RD offices per state.
- **Member Hills** responded stating that every state has a state director and that there are multiple area offices. In her experience in Indian Country, she noted that in some areas, there is only representative for all programs, and there are about 40-60 programs on average.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** commented that when looking at staffing within the recommendation, it would be beneficial to also include a closer look at the number of offices.
- **Member Hills** acknowledged and thanked Co-Chair Rodriguez's suggestion.
- **Member O'Brien** added in context that there are about 400 field offices and over 2,000 FSA offices that also tend to collocate but also serve a larger scale of the area where it's sometimes not perfectly rationalized.
- **Member Holland** commented that this recommendation is a nuanced exercise in that we are asking the Department to look at the need based on the populations, especially those that have been underserved.
- **Member Hills** agreed and affirmed that this is the reason the data element proposed in the recommendation is important. She added that decisions and recommendations on staffing cannot be made without full understanding of the data that represents the current situation, the highest need, and where the funds are going.
- **Member Ammons** commented that she does not see what happens with resourcing once the assessment has been made.
- **Member Hills** responded that that the funding statement will be clarified in

Recommendation 1.5.

- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** commented on Member O'Brien's question, she noted that the EC did include the language where it will need a Congressional fix. In the original drafting of the language, the EC outlined where a Congressional fix will be needed and there is also a recommendation that mentions where Congressional research or similar report could assist the Department in making those decisions knowing that only Congress can make the decision.

**Recommendation #1.2 Increase the skillset of staff on community economic development, as opposed to only grant management, underwriting, and compliance driven tasks. There should be a core of community economic development specialists to assist other staff in providing rural communities more comprehensive solutions.**

- **Member Hills** presented recommendation 1.2 and discussed the importance of increasing training opportunities and cross-understanding for staff that are allocated in higher degrees to underserved communities and improve impact in these complex rural ecosystems and thoroughly address customer needs.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** commented that many of the recommendations that have been put forward are from an operational standpoint but there is an equity lens missing in the reviews and determinations. She stated that as an Equity Commission, it is important to ensure the recommendations suggested are inside the mandate of the commission.
- **Member Hills** acknowledged Co-Chair Cousin's comment and noted that the equity component in the recommendation speaks to that there is a model of community and economic development that embrace equitable transformation, where professional development of the Rural Development field offices could be enhanced. She noted that the training is focused on equitable systems that create change and can disrupt previous approaches, where field staff are currently taught specifically about program logistics and little about community development models that speak to equity in its total form.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** clarified that she is not criticizing the recommendation. Readers of the recommendation particularly those on the internet will not benefit from the explanation; so it is important the language is clear on the mandated change that the recommendation seeks to address.
- **Member Hills** acknowledged Co-Chair Cousin's clarification and replied that the committee seeks assistance in setting the language for clarity.
- **Member Holland** added context for the RCED subcommittee's goals of looking at the underserved communities and focusing out from that set of data to build a staffing plan.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** commented affirmation that the recommendation is an example of missed opportunity in explicit application of an equity lens and discussed her perspective that when this doesn't exist in the language, she believes the system's level of improvement will only exacerbate the inequities. She acknowledged the language that was used to help stand up to litigation, but she also noted that when it comes to economic development, one cannot dispute the systems and historical and legacy inequities in economic development. She encouraged commissioners to seek those opportunities of missing language to help support this work.

**Recommendation #1.3 Significantly expand partnerships for historically underserved, low-income, and sparsely populated communities by collaborating with communities to identify priorities, design solutions, and secure funds for communities' priorities; draw from successful partnership models, such as NRCS new partnerships in preparation for new funding and the Fish and Wildlife Partnership Program.**

- **Member O'Brien** presented recommendation 1.3 and discussed how USDA staff can help underserved communities through forming partnerships with federal agencies and other departments, expanding and institutionalizing the Rural Partners Network, providing resources to organizations who work directly with underserved communities, engaging new partners for the equitable distribution of resources and build capacity, and ultimately working with Congress to enact the ideas listed in this recommendation.
- **Member Lower-Basch** commented that if the partners should be called do the funding of this work, she encouraged the EC to make this more explicit in the recommendation.
- **Member O'Brien** accepted Member Lower-Basch's suggestion.
- **DFO Hernandez** clarified that notes are currently being taken at this meeting so that all feedback is reflected.
- **Member Lee** asked if the EC could include sharing data collection when expanding partnerships with different groups since each department has a unique subset of research and data collection from the census and that this would be a great way to tap into each other's database tying into the equity lens.
- **Member O'Brien** accepted Member Lee's suggestion to improve metrics.
- **Member Hills** added that the capacity building with partners should be invested in organizations that have cultural context and represent the demographics of the people that the EC is trying to serve.
- **Member Holland** affirmed that the building capacity issue is critical, and that this recommendation is addressing the overall charge of the Equity Commission.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested language for section "d." to specify partners as "particularly those local individuals in organizations serving economically disadvantaged households and communities."
- **Member Corley** asked what defines the lever that audits with increased capacity and how checks and balances will be conducted.
- **Member O'Brien** responded that this recommendation is dependent on the right metrics. As USDA partners with organizations serving underserved communities, the Department will need to set expectations on outcomes to measure success and the outcomes must be appropriate for the community and context – from number of jobs created to income increase. He acknowledged that in generationally and historically disinvested rural communities, expecting those outcomes in a 1–3-year grant is unreasonable. Other metrics are appropriate to helping build a community's ability to build an economic foundation for the future.
- **Member Corley** replied that the efforts being put forward need to be ensured they are taken to the next step so they can continue and be audited on what the EC has promised.
- **Member Rawls** encouraged that during the revision process that this point is made clearly, such as 1-2-page narratives, and impress upon stakeholders the consequences if



the issue is mishandled.

- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** commented on the section that recommended expanding and institutionalizing the Rural Partners Network. She shared that she provided a similar recommendation in the establishment of an entity that is facilitating the relationships between NGOs and other similar entities that can support the work of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and would like to see a similar situation at USDA. She then encouraged Member O'Brien to include in the recommendation what office currently exists to help facilitate that same type of support.
- **Member Charleston** commented on tying capacity to success and noted the need to be able to measure capacity with their success as the ability to perform and comprehend so they can be aware of the resources in the communities and think about how they perform against the challenges in their communities.

#### **Recommendation #1.4 Establish a state advisory committee to support the State RD Director in identifying priorities, building partnerships, and monitoring effectiveness.**

- **Member Hills** presented recommendation 1.4 and intersected how the quantitative information from recommendation 1.1 is tied with the qualitative information in this recommendation, where there are opportunities for real-time movement for state directors and state offices to listen to lived experiences of RD customers to understand service gaps in communities.
- **Member Rainey** commented that instead of a state advisory committee, they should replace the naming of this type of committee with a more targeted name for the EC to get the intended result, with an emphasis on equity.
- **Member Hills** accepted Member Rainey's suggestion to put a deeper intention of the committee.
- **Dr. Goldmon** shared concern, based on his experience, for the creation of another advisory committee focused on equity, for the states that already have advisory committees. He encouraged the Equity Committee to think about how to incorporate equity in existing resources instead of recreating another effort focused on equity.
- **Member Hills** acknowledged Dr. Goldmon's comment.
- **Member Holand** noted that this recommendation has its nuances as well and noted that the question is how to empower the advisory committee to enact and oversee the items related to equity.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** commented that when Dr. Goldmon spoke of integrating equity into already existing resources, she understands this as skill-building, capacity building, and improved services for the resources that already exist, which is nuanced. She clarified her support to this recommendation but encouraged that this recommendation's focus should be to improve the cultural competency of currently existing advisories through training, accountability metrics, and other DEI initiatives. She agreed with Dr. Goldmon's note that the focus should be changing the already existing systems creating inequitable results.
- **Dr. Goldmon** added that the EC should consider that under an administration that equity is not a priority, would abandon an advisory committee. If there is an advisory committee

focused only on equity, that committee will be eradicated. He encouraged the EC to consider recommendations that create systems that will withstand administrative change.

- **Member Lee** suggested delegating authority to USDA regional directors to hold consultations with stakeholder groups. She stated that since the recommendation is advocating for stakeholders and customers and partners to have equal say, directors should have direct input from stakeholders to hold themselves accountable to those who are appointed to state advisory committees to truly represent their communities.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** commented that like NRCS state committees, there are also tribal committees, and through her work with Carrie Jo, she has heard from tribes that they do not necessarily want to be included in a state committee or a cooperative agreement but to have their own or a consortium of their own committee.

**Recommendation #1.5 Assess the distribution of grants and investments currently managed by USDA RD. Regularly analyze and compare the economic, place, and race demographics of where USDA funding or lending is going—and not going. If there is an uneven distribution to some rural areas or populations, evaluate reasons why.**

- **Member Hills** presented recommendation 1.5 and noted how this recommendation addresses why funding investments are not being made in high need locations and if these places need additional RD staff or if those places are experiencing other barriers to RD program participation.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** asked to clarify whether the recommendation seeks to evaluate the reasons why or make changes as needed.
- **Member Hills** clarified that the intention is to alleviate the reasons why and meet the communities where they are per those reasons. She noted that questioning whether flexible spending for those programs is there to address capacity building or for other reasons, as she has heard that some funding for programs remains a barrier for some communities acting upon this.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** suggested that an additional mechanism should be added where identifying a disparity should follow with an action piece.
- **Member Hills** agreed with Member Sias-Hernandez's suggestion that this recommendation's language needs strengthening to focus on the intention to proactively invest more on what a community needs at the time without the assumption that a community is already at a certain point where they are deemed capable of accessing RD programs, which is not always the case.
- **Member Holland** commented that this raises the complex issue of what's the remedy when the solution does not accomplish what was meant to accomplish and noted that this is a struggle. He raised the question of how to hold people accountable after they have been awarded funding.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** replied that discontinuing the award will hold them accountable.

**Recommendation #1.6 Revise definitions and measures of success that build upon multiple forms of community-based assets including quality of life, social capital, and the characteristics of the people they are serving, not just the quantity.**

- **Member Beel** and **Member Hills** presented recommendation 1.6 and discussed the struggle of measuring success predefined by government agencies which have left communities behind, challenging that measuring success should be revised to be based on community-driven metrics.
- **Member Carasquillo-Medrano** commented that USDA should not need to reinvent the wheel but to incorporate measuring success based on international application of sustainable development goals.

**Recommendation #1.7 USDA should ensure Justice40 projects in disadvantaged communities are supported and benefit local communities.**

- **Member Beel** and **Member Lower-Basch** presented recommendation 1.7 and discussed encouraging USDA to implement meaningful community engagement with Justice40.
- **Member Ammons** requested the Equity Commission to revisit the letter she sent to the commission that was submitted by over 150 environmental organizations.
- **DFO Hernandez** stated that she will check where it was sent.

**Recommendation #2.1 Amend USDA policies, programs, and funding mechanisms to prioritize investments in housing.**

- **Member Charleston** presented recommendation 2.1 and discussed the disparity of attention and investment in housing, to include redefining housing as infrastructure.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** suggested the Committee consider including the need for housing as an additional actionable item to reducing barriers of access at USDA.
- **Member Sherrod** shared the narrative of a low-income family that could not close the loan for a new home and commented that the agency should have had the means to help this family.
- **Member Charleston** acknowledged Member Sherrod's comment.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** expressed concern that combining housing into infrastructure would diminish the responsibility USDA to provide housing to all designated citizens. She suggested to begin with an overarching statement that it is crucial to acknowledge that the right to housing is an economic, social, and cultural right and then work down into the how.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked during the deliberation of this recommendation if there was discussion of how the money was going to be budgeted since her understanding is that infrastructure funding is usually earmarked for certain types of infrastructure so even if the language is changed it will not retroactively change the ability of the administration to spend it that way.
- **Member Charleston** replied that they did not focus on the budget piece but on the fact

that when the budgets are being allocated, housing takes a lower priority.

**Recommendation #2.2 Simplify the application process for single-family housing.**

- **Member Charleston** presented on recommendation 2.2 and discussed program standards for single-family housing. She then asked if sub-committee members would like to add additional context.
- **Member Keaton** added a note that the housing program expectations are already being used by other institutions, so while this recommendation isn't a new approach, it is new in terms of single-family housing being funded through grants or loans through USDA.
- **Member Corley** suggested to be specific about partners who support these disaster relief efforts.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** suggested including language under bullet point A around a waiver that would consider persistent poverty instead of focusing solely on disaster relief situations.
- **Member Charleston** agreed that that is a perfect callout.

**Recommendation #2.3 Invest in and ensure equitable and high-quality standards for new and existing affordable multi-family housing in rural communities.**

- **Member Holland** presented recommendation 2.3 and discussed the need for available quality housing in rural America and the demand for housing in rural America and establishing relationships between USDA and HUD.
- **Member Sherrod** commented that the lack of housing results in losing rural population.
- **Member Holland** agreed with Member Sherrod.
- **Member Wynn** added to the comment about quality housing and how poor quality comes with the addition of energy burden that happens from having an inefficient house or dwelling that is going to translate to unintended consequences with energy spending.
- **Member Holland** clarified that there is direct overlay to the quality and absence of housing in rural America to poverty and that there is a direct overlay of poverty to race, so this issue is exacerbated greatly in poorer communities and less populated communities, especially in those that are largely inhabited by disadvantaged populations.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** expressed appreciation for this recommendation and underscored her support of Section H recommending HUD and USDA to form a working group to share information. She then suggested that in the second part of the recommendation to update the language to include "new and existing housing in rural community, particularly in historically underserved and economically disadvantaged communities." She also explained why those in social services and community development moved away from multi-family housing in both rural and urban areas as they were primarily putting people

of color into multi-family housing without adequate support for those families. She expressed that we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge in this recommendation the need for partnership with local community organizations, education and other community services as part of the operations of the multi-family housing units that we would require of the service providers before they receive the grant for constructing housing—they need to build housing that would meet the need for the community.

- **Member Holland** agreed with Co-Chair Cousin’s suggested additional language. He then pointed out section G and highlighted the consolidation of the housing team under rural development into regional offices and the consequence of this structural change being that fewer people in local communities can provide direct service to constituents, including oversight of quality. He emphasized the critical necessity to ensure those under rural development housing have the skills to do their jobs and ensure equitable treatment.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** added that tribes and municipalities are also eligible and requested that tribes are added where the language for “states” occurs.
- **Member Hills** added that she suggested strengthening the language in section D to include a focus on financial punishments including potential program removal. She also suggested reevaluating the 15-day timeline for completing the housing application process which can discourage residents who may have language barriers or limited language access.
- **Member Holland** agreed and said they will include that. He added that when discussing new housing and seeking developers, he stated that it is critical to find diverse developers when funding expansion of housing development again.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** complimented the discussion on seeking developers and agreed that this is an important topic since there is currently not enough incentive for developers to serve rural communities as there is no funding or support for this to happen, causing farmworkers living in these communities to be pushed out further. He emphasized that the recommendations on housing are of utmost importance as the situation is getting worse.
- **Member Holland** acknowledged Co-Chair Rodriguez’s remark and noted the stark difference in the offering of incentives to developers in the 1970’s versus today where the financial arrangements and incentives were more compelling in the 70’s for developers to improve single and multi-family housing.
- **Member Keaton** acknowledged Co-Chair Cousin’s comment around building agency within the communities prior to funding housing and previewed that one of the recommendations being presented tomorrow has an element on building the household infrastructure to support families as the intent of the recommendations is to ensure that basic services such as childcare and emergency services are accessible in these communities. She also said this type of language is a perfect addition to these recommendations to have these prefaced as a foundational requirement for companies interested in helping these communities to fund those projects first.
- **DFO Hernandez** transitioned to yielding the next set of recommendation presentations to tomorrow and turned it over to Co-Chair Rodriguez to provide closing remarks.

## 7. CLOSING

- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** provided closing remarks.

## MEETING ADJOURNED

### Day Three – June 29, 2023

#### **Equity Commission Members Present:**

- Co-Chair Cousin
- Co-Chair Rodriguez
- Shorlette Ammons
- Todd Corley (Virtual)
- Toni Stanger-McLaughlin
- Yvonne Lee
- Elizabeth Lower-Basch
- Dr. Mireya Loza
- Charlie Rawls
- Dr. Ronald Rainey
- Dr. Hazell Reed (Virtual)
- Shirley Sherrod
- Poppy Sias-Hernandez
- Rick Smith

#### **Rural Community & Economic Development Subcommittee Members Present:**

- Cheryal Hills
- David Carrasquillo-Medrano
- Calvin Allen
- Lakota Vogel (Virtual)
- Valerie (Mann) Beel
- Latonya Keaton (Virtual)
- Curtis Wynn
- Terry Rambler
- Larry Holland
- Nils Christoffersen (Virtual)
- Shonterria Charleston
- Doug O'Brien

## **USDA Staff in Attendance:**

- Cecilia Hernandez, Designated Federal Officer
- Dr. Dewayne Goldmon, Senior Advisor for Racial Equity
- Gbenga Ajilore, Senior Advisor for the Office of the Undersecretary for Rural Development

### **1. Opening of the Meeting**

- **Designated Federal Officer (DFO) Hernandez** called to order day three of the 5<sup>th</sup> Public Meeting of the Equity Commission and took attendance.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** provided opening remarks by reflecting on the day prior, including the presentation by Rural Development (RD) State Employees and the presentation by Deputy Secretary Xochitl Torres Small. Rodriguez then recalled the discussions on the recommendations the Rural Community and Economic Development (RCED) Subcommittee will put forward for voting on the final day of the public meeting.
- **DFO Hernandez** provided an overview of the agenda then opened the floor for RCED presentations on their recommendations.

### **2. Presentation: Rural Community and Economic Development Recommendations**

- **DFO Hernandez** provided an overview of the RCED presentation process in the lead up to the deliberation and voting on the recommendations by the Equity Commission in the afternoon then opened the floor for the presentations.

## **RCED Focus Area #2: How USDA Supports Rural Communities**

### **Recommendation #2.4 Ensure access to Rural Housing Service programs for immigrant and mixed-status households.**

- **Member Lower-Basch** presented recommendation 2.4 and discussed the current state of access to Rural Housing Service programs for immigrant and mixed-state households and why this recommendation should be adopted.
- **Co-Chair Rodriguez** inquired if there's an opportunity to address immigration status in the recommendation.
- **Member Lower-Basch** responded noting that immigration status can be addressed in another recommendation that may be more applicable via another program by NRCS.
- **Member Lee** proposed a change to the heading that specifies that regardless of one's immigration status, they should be granted access to housing programs.

### **Recommendation #2.5 Support Congressional efforts to permanently authorize the Native Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) Relending Program for the 502 Direct Home Loan as cited in Title III of S.1369 - the Rural Housing Service Reform Act of 2023.**

- **Member Lakota Vogel** presented recommendation 2.5, detailing the Native Community Development Financial Institutions Relending program and the desire for it to be permanently authorized to improve outcomes for Native communities.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asks for clarity on how much funding the EC should ask for. Member Vogel responded that 50 million dollars would be appropriate and noted that more information can be gathered on the current funding for the 502 Loan Product.
- **Member Corley** commented on including the sharing and teaching of the efficiencies that the Native American communities have learned in their experience with the 502 Loan to extend the program past administrations. Member Vogel responds this can be included if the understaffing of the program can be resolved.

### **Recommendation #2.6 Expand the 504 Grant Program.**

- **Member Vogel and Charleston** presented recommendation 2.6, providing details on expanding the 504 Grant Programs by updating its limits including removing the age restriction on use of the program, revising the population requirements, and updating the income limits to meet the needs of communities who can benefit from the program.
- **Member Sherrod** inquired about the amount of funds that are available as the waitlist is long to get enrolled in this program.
- **Member Charleston** noted that in certain regions, funds go unused due to the restrictions to access the program.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** inquired if there's a population greater than 20,000 that correlates with other program designations. She also noted that as Native American and Alaskan Native groups hold a political status as a tribal government, the recommendation should consider a population exception for their communities.
- **Member Charleston** noted that USDA programs typically limit population requirements to 50,000 or less. Co-Chair Cousin suggested changing the recommendation to include a population greater than 20,000 and up to 50,000.
- **Member Lower-Basch** commented on removing the restrictions on low-income individuals completely since the funds are not being fully utilized by those in need to ensure that very-low-income populations are prioritized. In response, Member Rawls suggested the funding for the program should be increased also if it expands.

### **Recommendation #2.7 Enhance broadband mapping and funding to address underserved census tracts.**

- **Member Wynn** presented recommendation 2.7 that addresses enhancing broadband mapping to address the existing digital and energy divide in rural areas.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** commented to consider adding language to prioritize economically distressed and underserved communities when expanding access and funding to broadband services for rural communities.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** inquired if nonprofits and smaller utility companies and cooperatives are included in the funding that is currently distributed for expanding broadband services.
- **Member Wynn** confirmed that rural electric cooperatives are eligible to receive funding.



- **Member Holland** noted that much of the funding goes to the States which varies on how the broadband funding and resources to individual communities within each state.
- **Member O'Brien** shared that most of the federal funding for broadband is outside of the USDA and there is opportunity for USDA to get involved through its Rural Development Office.
- **Member Wynn** noted that the USDA Reconnect Program could be revamped to be easier to use and sufficiently funded along with support for Middle Mile Services to expand broadband to rural areas.

**Recommendation #2.8 Enhance accountability and incentivize utility cooperatives and companies to support underserved communities through USDA-administered grants and loans.**

- **Member Wynn** presented recommendation 2.8 to improve the mechanism for accountability and incentive utility cooperatives and companies to support underserved communities through grants and loans.
- **Member Ammons** commented that if the goal is for more equitable representation rather than more transparent elections, the recommendation should be more specific in tactics to achieve that goal.
- **Member O'Brien** noted that the overall goal of the recommendation is that USDA resources get to the areas that are in most need and this can be achieved by having the leadership of the utility cooperative understand and represent the community. He clarified that the board members are democratically elected and are independent business utilities. He also noted that special care must be taken to not cut off historic resources provided by cooperatives that are not involved with USDA.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked if it would be burdensome to put a percentage or reporting guideline to the recommendation. Member O'Brien responded that it would be burdensome.

**Recommendation #2.9 Expand Edge-of-Grid lending and investments for underserved communities.**

- **Member Wynn** presented on recommendation 2.9 and detailed the edge of grid lending and investments for underserved communities.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** commented that as a minority-serving body, Native American financial services should also be afforded the opportunity as a new entity to be a part of a pilot and requests that this community is included in the recommendation.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested adding language that includes rural, economically disadvantaged, and underserved communities in the recommendation.

**Recommendation #2.10 Ensure future infrastructure projects account for impacts to local communities.**

- **Member Carrasquillo** presented recommendation 2.10 that details infrastructure projects and the prevention of negatively impacting local communities.

**Recommendation #2.11 Partner with the Farm Credit System to ensure that the Community**

**Facilities Direct and Guaranteed Loan and Grant Programs are eligible for additional financing through the Farm Credit System.**

- **Member Keaton** presented recommendation 2.11 to expand financing options for community facilities projects.

**Recommendation #2.12 Expand access to USDA’s Rural Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Programs.**

- **Member Keaton** presented recommendation 2.12 to expand access to USDA’s Rural Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Programs.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked if there are any restrictions to the farm credit system and if there should be a threshold in the farm bill that might compete with farm credit systems’ ability to participate in USDA programs.
- **Member Rainey** inquired available background information on what the current funding is for the Rural Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Programs and if there are unused funds for communities under 5,500 who’ve received priority points.
- **Member Keaton** shared that communities under 5,500 are not currently receiving funding whereas communities under 20,000 are receiving funding. She raised the importance of receiving both priority points and funding.

**RCED Focus Area #3: How USDA Supports Rural Economies**

**Recommendation #3.1 Develop consistent eligibility requirements and waive matching requirements to enhance access to USDA programs and services.**

- **Member Lakota Vogel** presented recommendation 3.1 on prioritizing waiving matching requirements for grants and loans, communicating the process to request waivers, and establishing a universal application to waive matching requirements for all programs.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** commented that the top line recommendation of 3.1 to ‘develop consistent eligibility requirements and waive matching requirements’ should be updated to include language that asks for the prioritization of funding for underrepresented communities.
- **Member Rainey** commented that the language should address economically distressed communities.
- **Member Carrasquillo** suggested it should say marginalized rather than economically distressed so that the economic metric doesn’t unintentionally leave out those in need.
- **Member O’Brien** noted that the term ‘underserved’ encompasses economically distressed and traditionally marginalized communities along with rural, remote communities in the Executive Order.
- **Member Keaton** pointed to previous recommendations where the language included ‘rural,’ ‘economically disadvantaged,’ ‘underserved,’ and ‘marginalized’ communities and asked for consistent language to be set based on what’s referenced in the Executive Order.

**Recommendation #3.2 Allow products in Rural Business Services to serve agricultural**

operations.

- **Member Lakota Vogel** presented recommendation 3.2 to remove agricultural production as an ineligible loan purpose in RD Instruction for the Intermediary Relending Program.

**Recommendation #3.3 Permanently remove the loan loss reserve (LLR) requirement for intermediary lenders that submit an acceptable strategy for handling defaulting loans.**

- **Member Lakota Vogel** presented recommendation 3.3 to address the existing cash loan loss reserve that locks up capital for 30 years that could be flowing to communities and recipients.

**Recommendation #3.4 Create and include administrative grants with every loan product to intermediary lenders.**

- **Member Lakota Vogel** presented recommendation 3.4 which details the Rural Microentrepreneur Program (RMAP) which offers administrative dollars alongside the loan, based off a formula, and suggests USDA replicate this model across all its loan offerings to offer a more equitable lending framework.

**Recommendation #3.5 Provide robust research, education, and technical assistance for rural people who seek to use cooperatives to access markets, services, and capture economic opportunities.**

- **Member O'Brien** presented recommendation 3.5 that relates to USDA's support for the development and creation of cooperatives for rural people to access markets and services.
- **Member Hills** noted that a cooperative spectrum structure would increase the livelihoods of the people that hold the jobs, such as rural people that work in tourism. This recommendation helps businesses create more ownership and better livelihoods for low-income people.
- **Member Rainey** echoed how transformative this recommendation can be as there's a broader application today due to the needs in underserved communities and it allows a foundational expansion of education and the capacity for training people.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** noted that if the size of grants will increase and be made into multi-year grants, it should be specified that it is particularly for rural, economically distressed, and underserved communities. She also noted that the sub-recommendation C should have language about outreach to communities to ensure people are knowledgeable and that the information is widely available.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** added that a metric should be added in the recommendation for the increased investments in cooperatives for economically distressed communities and there should be a weighted model that funds cooperatives.

**Recommendation #3.6 Expand opportunities for underserved communities to benefit from REAP through assessing where funding is going and refining program requirements to allow for greater access.**

- **Member Beel** presented on recommendation 3.6 that details the Rural Energy for America

Program which was initiated in 2022 to create more opportunities for small businesses and egg producers to utilize renewable energy sources as well as implement energy efficiency programs within their businesses.

- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** asked for clarity on whether the technical assistance will come from USDA or if it can come from NGOs or other bodies that provide technical assistance.
- **Member Beel** responded that either one would be beneficial for producers and small businesses and the more options, the better.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** noted that language should be included in the recommendation.
- **Dr. Goldmon** noted that the audit requirement has caused bottleneck for REAP applications, particularly for underserved communities, and inquired if the recommendation intends to address that.
- **Member Beel** responded that the language in sub-recommendation can be refined to address that issue more clearly by stating that projects at a smaller level will be waived from the requirement.
- **Member Hills** noted that the language should replace ‘change’ to ‘remove’ the requirement for smaller applicants. Member Beel added that the language would also say “change the timing for larger applications.”
- **Dr. Ajilore** shared that the requirement of an audit is necessary for specific programs for energy and others and that with the Inflation Reduction Act, RD has addressed the bottleneck by hiring more people because having more staff available in communities to help people access the applications is more beneficial.
- **Member Hills** agreed that hiring more staff can help remove the barrier for remote communities.

### **3. Conclusion of Presentations on Rural Community and Economic Development Recommendations**

- **DFO Hernandez** welcomed any final comments before the conclusion of the recommendation presentations.
- **Member Carrasquillo-Medrano** raised that while it’s not a recommendation, there’s an issue on the definition of discrimination in places such as Puerto Rico where loan applications are not being approved. He also raised that a process needs to be developed that leads toward the approval of the Secretary regarding the waive process in cases that have traditionally exclusionary policies.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** raised a previously tabled recommendation that centered the Office of Tribal Relations and the elevation of that office to become an Assistant Secretary position and noted it is still a crucial issue, particularly for Native American producers.
- **Member Rawls** asked RCED to update recommendation 1.7 on Justice40 with more consideration on how USDA should think about environmental impact and other possible consequences with the implementation of such programs.
- **Member Beel** noted the recommendation should be tabled in the interest of time to revise

it.

#### **4. Equity Commission Deliberation and Voting on RCED Recommendations**

- **DFO Hernandez** opened this portion of the meeting and explained that the Members of the Equity Commission will deliberate each recommendation, make any necessary edits, and vote before moving to the next recommendation.
- **DFO Hernandez** welcomed the RCED subcommittee to table recommendations that are not ready for a vote prior to the deliberation and voting by the Equity Commission.
- **Member Lakota Vogel** noted that RCED would like to table recommendations 1.7, 2.8, and 2.12.
- **Member Rainey** motioned to table recommendations 1.7, 2.8, and 2.12.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** seconded the motion.
- **Equity Commission Members** voted in favor of tabling RCED recommendations 1.7, 2.8, and 2.12.
- **DFO Hernandez** started the formal deliberation and vote on the non-tabled RCED recommendations.

##### **Recommendation #1.1: Ensure the communities with greatest need have access to critical staff resources.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #1.1.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #1.1.

##### **Recommendation #1.2: Increase the skillset of staff on community economic development, as opposed to only grant management, underwriting, and compliance driven tasks. There should be a core of community economic development specialists to assist other staff in providing rural communities more comprehensive solutions.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #1.2.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #1.2.

##### **Recommendation #1.3: Significantly expand and fund partnerships for historically underserved low-income, and sparsely populated communities. In collaboration with community organizations and leaders, identify priorities, design solutions, and secure funds for community priorities. In preparation for new funding, RD staff should draw lessons from successful partnerships models, such as NRCS new partnerships and the Fish and Wildlife Partnership Program.**

- **Co-Chair Cousin** suggested language changes to remove redundancies and improve clarity and specificity of the recommendation.
- Equity Commission Members returned to this recommendation to review the new

language later in the meeting.

- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #1.3.

**Recommendation #1.4: Strengthen or establish a state and tribal advisory committee and to support and advise the State RD Director on equitable systems thinking in identifying priorities, building partnerships, and monitoring effectiveness.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #1.4.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #1.4.

**Recommendation #1.5: Assess the distribution of grants and investments currently managed by USDA RD. Regularly analyze and compare the economic, place, and race demographics of where USDA funding or lending is going – and not going. If there is an uneven distribution to some rural areas or populations, evaluate reasons why.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #1.5.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #1.5.

**Recommendation #1.6: Revise definitions and measures of success that build upon multiple forms of community-based assets including quality of life, social capital, and the characteristics of the people they are serving, not just the quantity.**

- **Co-Chair Cousin** asked for the recommendation to be tabled, noting the recommendation sounds visionary rather than actionable.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** disagreed, noting the recommendation doesn't have to be perfect today and should be included as it is new language for USDA and can be refined at another stage.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** stated that it would be important to add more actionable meaning to the recommendation.
- **Member Corley** noted that while there's room for improvement on the recommendation, it would be good to get the recommendation voted for as is and passed on record.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** made a motion to table the recommendation. The motion was seconded. A voice vote was held on whether or not the recommendation would be tabled.
- Equity Commission Members voted six nay to five yes, that the recommendation would be voted on.
- Equity Commission Members voted in favor of recommending recommendation #1.6, 11-2.

**Recommendation #2.1: Amend USDA policies, programs, and funding mechanisms to prioritize investment in housing.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #2.1.

- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.1.

**Recommendation #2.2: Simplify the application process for single family housing.**

- **Member Sias-Hernandez** made a clarification edit to the recommendation regarding ‘persistent poverty waiver’ to instead clarify that it will provide a waiver for people living under the conditions of persistent poverty.
- **Member Charleston** noted that the recommendation is intended to address a rural area that has a population of 20% in poverty over a thirty-year period.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** provided language to address consistently poor households within an a persistent-poverty area to encompass the entire intended meaning.
- Equity Commission Members made no additional changes to recommendation #2.2.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.2.

**Recommendation #2.3: Invest and ensure equitable and high-quality standards for new construction and existing affordable multi-family housing in rural communities particularly in historically unserved and economically disadvantaged communities.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #2.3.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.3.

**Recommendation #2.4: Ensure access to Rural Housing Service programs for immigrant and mixed-status households by removing regulatory restrictions and seeking legislative change.**

- **Member Lower-Basch** asked to add ‘regardless of immigration status’ in the recommendation to be consistent with language in the justification.
- Equity Commission Members made no further changes to recommendation #2.4.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.4.

**Recommendation #2.5: Support Congressional efforts to permanently authorize the Native Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) Relending Program for the 502 Direct Home Loan as cited in Title III of S.1369 – the Rural Housing Service Reform Act of 2023.**

- **Member Ammons** recalled a request by Member Corley to add in language surrounding teaching efficiencies and best practices of the program to be able to replicate its success.
- **Member Rawles** provided the language for a new sub-recommendation based on Member Corley’s specifications to institute best practices based on lessons learned from CDFIs.

- Equity Commission Members made no further changes to recommendation #2.5.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.5.

**Recommendation #2.6: Expand the 504 Grant Program.**

- **Member Lakota Vogel** requested specificity of the population requirements to be added into sub-recommendation c.
- **Member Stanger-McLaughlin** noted allocation of funding should be included in the recommendation.
- **Member Sias-Hernandez** provided language for the new sub-recommendation to allocate a minimum of 50 million dollars annually to ensure sufficient funding.
- Equity Commission Members made no further changes to recommendation #2.6.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.6.

**Recommendation #2.7: Enhance broadband mapping and funding to address rural economically distressed and underserved census tracts.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #2.7.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.7.

**Recommendation #2.9: Expand Edge-of-Grid lending and investments for rural economically disadvantaged and underserved communities.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #2.9.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.9.

**Recommendation #2.10: Ensure future infrastructure projects account for impacts to local communities particularly rural economically distressed and historically underserved communities.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #2.10.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.10.

**Recommendation #2.11: Partner with the Farm Credit System to ensure that the Community Facilities Direct and Guaranteed Loan and Grant Programs are eligible for additional financing through the Farm Credit System.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #2.11.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #2.11.



**Recommendation #3.1: Develop eligibility requirements and waivers of matching requirements that prioritize rural economically distressed communities and historically underserved communities to enhance access to USDA programs and services.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #3.1.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #3.1.

**Recommendation #3.2: Allow products in Rural Business Services to serve agricultural operations.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #3.2.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #3.2.

**Recommendation #3.3: Permanently remove the loan loss reserve requirement for intermediary lenders that submit an acceptable strategy for handling defaulting loans.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #3.3.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #3.3.

**Recommendation #3.4: Create and include administrative grants with every loan product to intermediary lenders.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #3.4.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #3.4.

**Recommendation #3.5: Provide robust research, education, and technical assistance for rural people who seek to use cooperatives to access markets, services, and capture economic opportunities.**

- Equity Commission Members made no changes to recommendation #3.5.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #3.5.

**Recommendation #3.6: Expand opportunities for rural economically distressed and underserved communities to benefit from REAP through assessing where funding is going and refining program requirements to allow for greater access.**

- **Member Lower-Basch** called for refinement of sub-recommendation b to make reports a condition of commitment.
- **Co-Chair Cousin** provided language to encompass the intention of the sub-recommendation.

- Equity Commission Members made no further changes to recommendation #3.6.
- Equity Commission Members unanimously voted in favor of recommending recommendation #3.6.

## 5. Closing

- **DFO Hernandez** provided closing remarks and outlined the next steps for these recommendations.

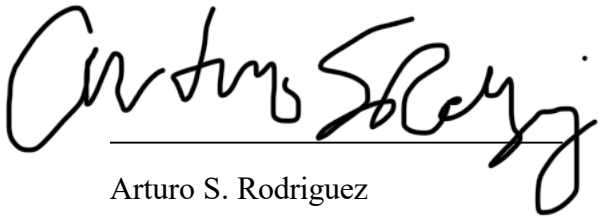
# MEETING ADJOURNED

I hereby certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the foregoing minutes are accurate and complete.

  
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Ambassador Ertharin Cousin

Co-Chair USDA Equity Commission

  
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Arturo S. Rodriguez

Co-Chair USDA Equity Commission

# APPENDIX

## Members of the Public: Attendance List

- Viola Brooks
- Henry Jones
- Kevin Dale
- Tara Chadwick
- Donald Green
- Winona Lake
- Lassine Doumbia
- Joey Schmidt
- Gerald Mensah
- Rochelle Blackman
- Benjamin McFarlane
- Fenyang Stewart
- Sederis Fields
- Shawntey Taylor
- Vi Ta
- Daruss Golden
- Eloris Speight
- Jacqueline Lenzy
- Tiphonie Carter
- Markus Holliday
- Viola Brooks
- Hamsa Ganapathi
- James Holmes
- Stephanie Ho
- Jenny Tran
- Jonathan Sierra Puertas
- Christopher Sacchetti
- Gary Woodruff
- Anita Petty
- Reginal Brumfield
- Robin Browder
- Shabria Whitfield
- Sherry Molteni
- Archie Crawford
- Elliot Cordano
- Evan Walton
- Angel Crocram
- Anika Patterson
- Catherine Hamilton
- Christopher Charlton
- Rudy Arredondo
- Carina Saavedra
- Linda Benally
- Paul Gengler
- Amy Lyman
- Lisa Yellow Luger
- P. Graham
- Janet Alkire
- Bianca Bell
- Alondra Lomeli
- Clint Bain
- Jonathan Clark
- Lloyd Wright
- Frances Hogan
- Neil Burnette
- Kirstin Nelson
- Jamie Flood
- Tania Ellersick
- Dwight Sanders Se
- Joanna Gamboa
- Maria Goldberg
- Michelle Hart
- Tyler Schwarz
- Toney Dixon
- Steven Ringgold
- Minh Pham
- Cassandra Taylor
- Cinnamon Butler
- Laila Diaz
- Felicia Clay
- Keith Callwood
- Latoya Kess
- Belinda Mollard
- Juan Carlos Rodriguez
- Karen Husain
- Jasmine Hendrix
- Marsheela Hines
- Rafeal Boyd
- Gwen Edmonson
- Kourtney Graves
- Justin Rhee
- Bridget Peters
- Mary Ellen Miller
- Kelli Reynolds
- Brent Kleinjan
- Deborah Davis
- Henry (n/a)

- Michael Robinson
- Luralene Knorr
- James Parker
- Justin Howard
- Maranda Broughton
- Kimberly Strickland
- Denise Banks
- Amanda Sanfiorenzo
- Lauren Garba
- Jeff Knishkowy
- Terrence Trimble
- Julie A. Siemers
- Allison Johnson
- Edwin Kitzes
- Paige Van Ditta
- Satina James
- Lawrence Rhone
- Rajesh Sinha
- Debra Green
- Wardell Carter
- Niki Alston
- Keon Lewis
- James Quarterman
- Dr. Joy Ohayia
- Rosa Saavedra
- César Daniel Ramirez
- Zepeda
- Kenya Nicholas

- Camy Louis-jean
- Nichelle Harriott
- Kevin Chapman
- Kasey Brown
- Marcus Grignon
- Celina Mahabir
- Alice Zhang
- Dalene Hillery
- Goodgame
- Rachel Neuenfeldt
- Laura Crowell
- John Parker
- Regina Ginyard
- Candice Rogers
- Simon Liu
- Veronica Watson
- Matt Cinadr
- Om Shah
- Robert Maggiani
- Webster Davis
- Kerry Libby
- Lindsey Aull
- Lorette Picciano
- Heather Peterson
- Starry Krueger
- Brian Mohr
- Theresa Edwards
- Shelby Saucier

- Areon Turner
- Claire Akaliza
- Mark Wax
- Steve Davies
- James Wabindato
- Jasmine Baldwin-Smith
- Mark Haggerty
- AL Anderson-lazo
- Karen Gibson
- Eva Soria
- Abid Ullah
- Albert Jones
- Erin Oban
- Newman Nalls
- Irma Durand
- Dania Davy
- Dwayne Nichols
- Russia Sherrod
- Edward Pennick
- Shirley Lewis
- Liljana Bashllari
- Patrice Lazard
- Sandra Penn
- April Love
- Abi Fain
- Deadra Dunham
- Dorathy Barker