



# ***NRCS Equity Action Update***

UPDATE JULY 2023

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/priorities/equity>

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## Message from the Under Secretary

The central aim of USDA’s Farm Production and Conservation mission area is to support **all** agricultural producers by providing financing, risk management tools, disaster aid, conservation assistance and a range of other services. The doors to every USDA county service center and every office must be open to everyone. FPAC Business Center, Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Risk Management Agency have all adopted Equity Action Plan’s that outline key actions and initiatives to improve FPAC for our existing customers while ensuring our agencies are welcoming and accessible to future customers as well. These agency plans detail specific steps we are taking to address historic barriers to our programs, to improve program implementation, and to thereby help farmers and ranchers grow and improve their agricultural operations.

With thousands of offices across the country, we know that agriculture is composed of a diversity of crops, farm and ranch sizes, locations, individuals, and families. Our support and engagement with agriculture, in turn, must consider and reflect that diversity. Implementation of these Equity Action Plans will guide each FPAC agency as we serve all producers in all types of operations while fostering a more prosperous, resilient, and sustainable agricultural economy.



*Robert Bonnie, Undersecretary for  
Farm Production and Conservation*

*– Robert Bonnie  
Undersecretary for Farm Production and Conservation*

## Message from the Chief



*Chief Terry J. Cosby,  
Natural Resources Conservation Service*

NRCS published its first equity action plan in Fall 2022; I’m pleased now to offer this update and report. For all too long, inequalities and impediments have denied equitable services to many of our citizens. That is why NRCS is striving to remove and dismantle barriers and inequities by creating and following a trail of equitable opportunity for all. This update will help those our customers and stakeholders hold us to account for the promises we have made, and to offer us their wisdom as inputs for improvement, going forward. The NRCS Equity Action Plan provisions set forth a well-defined roadmap for strategy execution and a framework to meet the agency’s equity operations short- and long-term goals and objectives.

*– Terry Cosby  
Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service*

## Introduction

The NRCS Equity Action Plan was designed to advance equity in the culture of NRCS and commit to institutional transformation, in alignment with the direction of Executive Order 13985, *Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*, and the USDA Equity Action Plan. We now update that plan in alignment with the direction of Executive Order 14091, *Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Community Through the Federal Government*.

The plan promotes long-lasting, transformational change by focusing on:

**AWARENESS:** Building equity awareness and analytical capacity across NRCS, fostering common understanding of key concepts such as: equity and inequity; implicit and explicit bias; individual, institutional, and systemic racism.

**CAPACITY BUILDING:** Recruiting and developing leadership, staff, and stakeholders with the tools, strategies, and resources to be effective in fostering implicit equity education that will provide successful outcomes for equity, justice, and opportunity.

**ACTION:** Engaging in methodical messaging to combat equity barriers and biases. Implementing equitable sustainability practices that change the scope of NRCS program processes, access, and participation. Organizing advance, deliberate, and intentional changes to NRCS policy, processes, and practices with fair equity intent.

Using this framework, the NRCS Equity Action Plan describes five strategic goals.

**Strategic Goal 1: Organizational Capacity for Equity** – Enact changes throughout the breadth and organizational depth of NRCS, from the national headquarters level to the local level, for training and infrastructure to build employee understanding about equity goals and to create equity and inclusion experts and teams across the agency.

**Strategic Goal 2: Equity Toolkits** – Institutionalize use of Equity Toolkits to integrate equity into decision-making processes to change policies, programs, and practices as necessary to eliminate inequities, to prevent decisions that may create or perpetuate inequities, and to develop decisions that promote advancement of equity.

**Strategic Goal 3: Equity and Inclusion Data** – Implement strategic data planning and develop data-driven measurements to evaluate the success of specific programmatic and policy changes by developing baselines, setting objectives, and measuring progress toward NRCS and community goals.

**Strategic Goal 4: Equity and Inclusion Partnerships** – Work in collaboration with communities and other institutions at the national, regional, state, and local levels to ensure NRCS efforts for change are informed by the lived experiences of communities that changes seek to benefit.

**Strategic Goal 5: Operationalize Equity** – Communicate and act with urgency to incorporate institutional mechanisms for required continuance of education, transparency, and accountability to eliminate program, policy, and service inequities.

## Policy Changes

The overarching goal of NRCS’s Equity Action Plan is to ensure equity in programs, services, planning, and decision-making. Before turning to the process improvements that are moving this agenda forward, we summarize the substantive progress made in the past two years, across NRCS:

1. **Streamlining Applications** – NRCS refined guidance to streamline how applicants may apply for more than one program with a single application. Applicants identify on form NRCS-CPA-1200 which programs they are applying for, then NRCS enters applications for each program.
  - *Act Now Policy* (440-CPM-530-D-530.37) helps to streamline the application process, particularly for historically underserved producers, by providing an opportunity for NRCS’s state offices to identify ranking pools and establish a ranking threshold at or above which they can automatically pre-approve an application for funding and move to contract obligation quickly.
  - Updates to forms to remove obsolete information, streamline procedures, and improve clarity, including:
    - NRCS-CPA-1200, “Conservation Program Application”
    - NRCS-CPA-1245, “Practice Approval and Payment Application”
    - NRCS-CPA-152, “Conservation Program Contract Transfer Agreement”
    - NRCS-FNM-60, “Electronic Funds Transfer Hardship Waiver”
    - NRCS-CPA-153, “Agreement Covering Non-Compliance with Provisions of Conservation Program Contract”
  - Updated form NRCS-CPA-1257, “Landowner Concurrence Form to Install Structural or Vegetative Conservation Activities,” was updated to address feedback from small-scale and urban agricultural producers, as the practice lifespan information was creating barriers to obtain landowner concurrence. Landowners have been interpreting the form as entering into an agreement for the lifespan of the practice. NRCS removed the practice lifespan column and associate footnote to clarify that information only pertains to NRCS participants.
2. **Improving Feedback Loops** – The NRCS Financial Assistance Programs Division established a process for state offices to provide feedback and recommendations to improve program policy, including recommendations to remove or revise policies that may present barriers to program delivery.
3. **Increasing Flexibility** – Updated policy provided through Title 440 Conservation Programs Manual Part 530 allows NRCS state offices more overall flexibility in program implementation.
  - State offices can request policy waivers for specific situations where existing policy may not be applicable or additional flexibility is needed. Updated policy expanded State Conservationists’ and Directors’ authority to approve waivers (e.g., Early Start waivers, one practice or activity implementation within 12 months of contract, extending terms of an NRCS-CPA-153 for up to an additional 12 months).
4. **Heirs’ Property** – NRCS conducted a comprehensive analysis on the barriers encountered by producers associated with heirs’ property when they attempt to participate in the agency’s financial assistance programs. Barriers included excessive documentation and requirements that blocked participation due to ‘control of land’ issues. NRCS revised its guidance (see National Bulletin NB 440-23-11), established a new streamlined form that allows heirs to easily document their ‘control of land’ (NRCS-CPA-1304, “Heirs’ Property Ownership Applicant Self-Verification Form”), and provided training to state program managers.
5. **Assistance for Alaska Native Village Relocations** – In partnership with the Department of the Interior, in November 2022, NRCS’s Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program (WFPO) allocated \$40 million

from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to assist relocation of Alaska Native villages due to climate change, erosion, and flooding. Seven villages have been chosen from a set of the highest-risk villages, for whom the funding will cover feasibility studies, watershed planning, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance, and relocation design.

6. **Post-Inflationary Supplemental Payments (PISP)** – NRCS established a supplemental payment to assist producers to continue implementing existing EQIP contracts in light of current inflation. The agency conducted an economic analysis to determine which conservation practices were most impacted by inflation and to what extent. In evaluating options to determine which practices should receive PISPs, NRCS heavily weighted the impacts to underserved producers.
7. **Conservation Efforts in Pacific Island Communities** – In April 2023, NRCS, announced availability of up to \$500,000 for Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) in the Pacific Islands Area (PIA), which includes Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. CIG projects help stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies for agricultural production. This will help address challenges associated with climate change that farmers and ranchers need to overcome to develop more resilient food systems and better access to local nutrition in the PIA.

In May 2023, NRCS announced an additional \$1 million funding opportunity for agreements that more equitably address PIA specific conservation issues. By participating in the PIA Conservation Solutions program, accepted projects will receive technical assistance and resources to address local natural resource issues and develop conservation leadership initiatives at the state and community levels in Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

8. **Urban Agriculture** – Historically, the lack of USDA offices and presence in urban and suburban areas and the absence of USDA farm programs that are aligned with the needs of urban and suburban agricultural producers have been barriers to access. In response, USDA stood up the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP), a Department-wide office housed in NRCS, which has hired a permanent Director and six full-time staff.
  - OUAIP has been coordinating with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and NRCS to open 17 Urban Service Centers in cities selected for pilot Urban County Committees. The Urban Service Centers will provide urban producers one convenient location where they can enroll in FSA and NRCS programs and learn about other USDA programs available to support their operations.
  - OUAIP has been working with newly hired Urban Agriculture Coordinators at FSA and NRCS to modify programs to eliminate barriers to participation by urban and innovative producers nationwide, including adjusting payment scenarios for use on small-scale operations, and developing new NRCS practice standards to better serve on small-scale urban agriculture operations.
  - OUAIP added language from Executive Orders 13985, 13990, and 14008 to the evaluation criteria of Urban Agriculture & Innovative Production Grants and Community Compost & Food Waste Reduction Cooperative Agreements. Those updates help to ensure that applicants address these issues in their proposals and that selections for funding consider these priorities.
  - Additionally, NRCS rescinded General Manual Title 450 Subtitle 408 Subpart A “Assistance for Soil and Water Conservation,” which limited NRCS provision of conservation engineering designs in urban areas.
  - In fiscal years 2022 and 2023, OUAIP held outreach events targeted to historically underserved groups in urban and suburban areas. Additionally, the office updated the USDA Urban Agriculture Toolkit by publishing a series of customer-facing documents, including:
    - *Urban Agriculture Programs at a Glance*, which highlights USDA programs and resources available to urban customers, partners, entities, and their communities. The document is available at <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-urban-ag-at-glance.pdf>.
    - *Urban Agriculture & Innovative Production Grants*, which highlights the urban grant programs

available and how to apply. Detailed information is also available at <https://www.usda.gov/topics/urban/grants>.

- *Reducing Food Waste*, which highlights the annual cooperative agreements process to assist local and municipal governments with projects to develop and tests strategies for compost plans and food waste reduction plans. Detailed information is also available at <https://www.usda.gov/topics/urban/coop-agreements>.

For further information, see the USDA urban agriculture webpage at <https://www.usda.gov/topics/urban>.

**9. Support for Stewardship on Tribal Lands** – NRCS works with the Intertribal Agricultural Council at national and state levels as well as with individual Tribes through the agency’s state and local staff, furthering efforts to enhance the stewardship of Native American lands by providing improved access to conservation planning technical assistance, management resources, and land stewardship tools. In fiscal years 2022 and 2023, several state offices hired additional Tribal liaisons and changed existing liaisons’ duties from collateral to primary duty functions in order to expand NRCS support. Many of those tribal liaisons are provided office space on tribal lands to work with tribal members and entities more effectively, meeting them on their lands and on their timetables.

**10. National Cooperative Soil Survey – Offensive Soil Names** – The National Cooperative Soil Survey (NCSS) is a nationwide partnership of Federal, regional, State, and local agencies and private entities and institutions. This partnership works to cooperatively investigate, inventory, document, classify, interpret, disseminate, and publish information about soils. To uphold the NRCS commitment to equity and civil rights, it is critical that the soil information the agency publishes follows a soils series naming protocol that avoids offensive names and shows dignity and respect to all members of society. It was brought to the attention of NRCS that certain soil series names exist that are now, or continue to be, considered derogatory.

In response, Chief Cosby established a Naming Review Committee charged with discussing and reviewing offensive soil series names and recommending corrective actions. The committee recommended the change of 25 soil series names because each of them has confirmed instances of a pejorative nature. The offensive soil names were removed from the Soil Survey Geographic Database (SSURGO) and State Soil Geographic 2 (STATSGO2) databases effective January 1, 2023.

**11. Promoting Access for Underserved Communities** – NRCS requires our state offices to set aside at least 5 percent of EQIP and CSP funds for beginning farmers and ranchers (BFR) and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (SDFR). Some states are increasing ranking points for SDFR applicants in ranking pools, and many states voluntarily set higher set-asides than the 5 percent minimums. Allocations of IRA program funds by state consider data on past obligations, identified future needs, climate change, underserved producers, urban agriculture, and other criteria. The Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)-Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) national ranking pool includes a ranking question to identify when the landowner of easement offered acres is a historically underserved participant by NRCS defined criteria and self-certified on form NRCS-CPA-41A. The ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) national ranking pool includes a similar ranking question with self-certification of historically underserved applicants on form NRCS-CPA-1200.

## PROGRESS ON STRATEGIC GOALS

### Strategic Goal 1. Organizational Capacity for Equity

Equity and justice government requirements impact how the Federal Government must do business. NRCS, from agency leadership to the local level, will be a champion of equity operating requirements. The agency will accomplish this by enhancing its ability to change the culture and its communications, and committing to institutional transformation. The workforce's collective beliefs, values, behaviors, attitudes, performance, customer service, and level of accountability will be key.

NRCS has demonstrated a commitment to equity, across all levels of the agency and spanning all agency functions, to create infrastructure that advances awareness and builds capacity.

Strategic Goal 1 has four Priority Actions:

- 1.1 Form the NRCS Equity Division.
- 1.2 Convey the NRCS Chief's commitment to the breadth (all program functions and services) and organizational depth (NRCS hierarchy) of institutional transformation.
- 1.3 Develop resource materials that clearly identify the history of government to envision and operationalize equity in NRCS, and utilize clear and easily understood definitions of equity and inequity, implicit and explicit bias, and individual, institutional, and systemic discrimination.
- 1.4 Employee Professional Development - Build common equity understanding and develop skill sets for all NRCS employees.

#### Progress

**1.1 NRCS Equity Division** – In October 2021, NRCS Chief Terry Cosby established the first ever NRCS Equity Division under the leadership of Director of Equity Vivian Dickson. The Division is fully staffed with five permanent, full-time employees, operating under the mission to advocate for, and better align, institutional equity into the work and practices of NRCS to ensure that every USDA-NRCS customer is put in a position to succeed in a diverse government world and notably feel inclusiveness to agency programs and services. In establishing the Equity Division, NRCS is fulfilling departmental requirements to dedicate and provide sufficient resources to administer the agency's Equity Program responsibilities.

**1.2 NRCS Equity Policy Statement** – Signed by Chief Cosby and disseminated to all NRCS employees, the NRCS *Advancing Equity* policy statement reaffirms and highlights the agency's commitment and support to the provisions of Executive Orders 13985 and 14091. In accordance with departmental regulations for public notification requirements, the policy statement ensures a positive and continuing notification of NRCS's equity policy to the public and USDA-NRCS employees. All NRCS offices are required to prominently display the policy and ensure accessibility by making it available in language(s) appropriate for the local population. You can view the policy statement on the NRCS webpage: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/guides-and-instructions/nrcs-equity-policy-statement-and-poster>.

#### 1.3 Resource Materials

**NRCS Equity Webpage** - The national NRCS website includes an Equity landing page and related links that serve as an external customer service informational tool. The website includes the mission, vision, and core values embraced by the NRCS Equity Division. To demonstrate the importance of advancing equity, the webpage is located under the 'Priorities' section of the NRCS website. The landing page includes links to key information and resources including foundational equity information (Executive Orders and USDA Equity Commission), USDA and NRCS Equity Action Plans, and the NRCS



Equity Policy and Poster. Additional details about these items are outlined below. The equity landing page is at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/priorities/equity>.

***State and Field Office Equity Resource Guides*** - NRCS developed Equity Resource Guides for state offices and field offices. These internal resources outline the roles and responsibilities of NRCS staff and highlight existing materials that they can use related to ensuring equitable access to programs and services.

***Equity SharePoint for Employees*** - This internal resource, available only to E-authenticated employees, is an online platform for NRCS employees to increase their knowledge and understanding of equity and includes tools and resources to help them integrate equity into their day-to-day business operations. It provides a centralized resource for staff to locate resources and facilitate communication. The site includes equity communication tools, training resources, success stories, equity news, equity policy resources, and the NRCS Equity Action Tracker.

***NRCS Chief Cosby's Video Overview on Equity*** - This video message was recorded in the fall of 2022 as a pledge to the agency's commitment to sustaining a culture that operates with a core value of equity and equal opportunity for all. The Chief's video message is embedded on the equity landing page of the NRCS website and is also available at <https://youtu.be/V6cWHwvxWOs>.

***NRCS Equity Poster*** - NRCS, in partnership with FPAC External Affairs, developed the Equity Poster to demonstrate the agency's commitment to achieving equity in NRCS programs and services. In accordance with departmental regulations for public notification requirements, the poster increases transparency and openly promotes NRCS's dedication to ensuring fairness. All NRCS offices are required to prominently and visibly display the poster. The poster is also available in multiple languages to meet the needs of customers with limited English proficiency. You can view the poster (in English) at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/guides-and-instructions/nrcs-equity-policy-statement-and-poster>.

***NRCS Equity Division Brochure and Fact Sheet*** - The Equity Division brochure presents the mission, vision, and core values of the NRCS Equity Division, outlines the NRCS Equity Action Plan, and provides other foundational information. The Equity Division fact sheet includes sections that define equity and other key terms, and links to foundational information. The fact sheet also presents the mission, vision, and core values of the NRCS Equity Division, outlines its equity focus, and explains why achieving equity is a priority. Agency staff are encouraged to share both resources with partners, stakeholders, underserved community representatives, and tribal representatives and distribute them widely at meetings, conferences, and other outreach events. Both resources and more are available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/priorities/equity>.

***"Get Started: A Guide to USDA Resources for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers"*** – Led by NRCS, the FPAC mission area rolled out a new guide to help underserved producers navigate USDA programs. The NRCS Historically Underserved Working Group developed the Get Started guide, with consultation from the NRCS Equity Division, FPAC External Affairs, and experts across FPAC agencies, to serve as a one-stop shop for underserved producers (beginning, low-income, military veteran, women, and those identifying as one or more marginalized race or ethnicity). The guide covers everything from planning a service center visit and obtaining a farm number to navigating eligibility for the technical and financial assistance programs offered across FSA, NRCS, and RMA. Additional topics especially relevant to underserved producers include urban and organic agriculture and heirs' property.

The *Get Started* guide is available online as a digital download in [English](#), [Spanish](#), [Hmong](#), [Korean](#), [Vietnamese](#), [Thai](#), and [Chinese](#). Other languages can be made available upon request. USDA Service Centers across the U.S. received 25 printed copies in English, and additional copies and translations can be ordered as necessary to serve customer, community, and partner needs.

**1.4 Equity Training for Employees** – NRCS developed a comprehensive training module for agency employees, through which staff and leadership complete a series of lessons to build common understanding and necessary skillsets. The lessons include guidance and materials covering:

- What equity is and how it compares to equality, civil rights, and environmental justice;
- The federal government’s history, background, and purpose of advancing equity;
- The importance of incorporating equity into the customer experience;
- Cultural awareness, cultural competence, and communicating to build trust;
- How to integrate equity into day-to-day operations;
- Required programs designed and dedicated to achieving equity; and
- Ways to leverage equity communication resources and tools.

## Strategic Goal 2: Equity Toolkits

When equity is not explicitly brought into operations and decision-making, inequities are likely to be perpetuated. NRCS is implementing equity tools to integrate explicit consideration of equity in policies, practices, programs, and budgets, helping develop strategies and actions that reduce inequities and improve success for all groups.

Strategic Goal 2 has four Priority Actions:

- 2.1 Develop equity toolkits to integrate equity into decision-making processes.
- 2.2 Develop targeted trainings for employees at all organizational levels of NRCS to institutionalize use of equity tools.
- 2.3 Improve outreach efforts to reduce or remove barriers to and inequities in NRCS programs and services.
- 2.4 Implement the Justice40 Initiative, an Administration-wide project to ensure that 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain Federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution.

### Progress

**2.1 Equity Toolkits** – NRCS developed a set of equity toolkits designed as internal resources for agency decision-makers to integrate equity into decision-making processes and align institutional equity into the work and practices of NRCS. Deliberate and intentional integration of equity into decision-making ensures that no group or community bears a disproportionate burden due to decisions on agency policies and procedures, and that people in underserved communities have equitable access to programs and services available on private agricultural and forest lands. Use of the toolkits will empower NRCS decision makers to address inequities and advance equity, proactively and remedially, in alignment with agency, mission area, and departmental priorities. Equity tools provide a structure for institutionalizing the consideration of equity. The NRCS equity toolkits take decision-makers at the national and state levels through a five-step process, for either program policy and procedure decisions or grants and agreements announcement, proposal, and award decisions. The toolkit process uses equity tools to:

- Proactively seek to eliminate inequities and advance equity,
- Identify clear goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes,
- Engage communities in decision-making processes,
- Identify who will benefit or be burdened by a given decision,
- Examine potential unintended consequences of a decision,
- Develop strategies to advance equity and mitigate unintended negative consequences, and
- Develop mechanisms for successful implementation and evaluation of impact.

**2.2 Equity Tool Training** – NRCS developed a set of guidance manuals for decision-makers to utilize the equity toolkits for program policy and procedure decisions and for grants and agreements announcement, proposal, and award decisions. The manuals cover important information about why the toolkits are important to ensuring equity principles are integrated into decision-making processes, what types of agency decisions at national and state levels should be processed through the toolkits, and how to use the toolkits iteratively and adaptively to promote equity and to monitor impacts and progress after decisions are implemented. The guidance manuals then take decision-makers step-by-step through all of the components of the equity toolkits in order to eliminate inequities, prevent decisions that may create or perpetuate inequities, and develop decisions that promote advancement of equity. NRCS is currently developing an internal app for decision-makers to implement the equity toolkits, and the agency is simultaneously developing online training that will educate employees at national and state levels on use of the app.

**2.3 Program Outreach.** NRCS is revisiting and reviewing past reports and recommendations from stakeholders about how USDA can improve on customer service, civil rights, and equity. Additional stakeholder engagement pursuant to Justice40 was conducted via five public listening sessions and a Request for Information published in the Federal Register that garnered more than 500 public comments. Some examples of Program Outreach include:

- NRCS Chief Terry Cosby participated in consultations with tribal leaders across the country through national tribal consultations hosted by the USDA Office of Tribal Relations in March 2021, April 2022, and April 2023. Through those engagements, NRCS received recommendations on how the agency can improve program services to tribal nations and tribal producers. Recommendations included means of improving program reimbursement rates, misalignment with Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) leases, increased staffing for tribal conservation planning, and better means of assuring that indigenous knowledge informs conservation programs and services. With tribal input, NRCS is implementing protocols to address these concerns in an equitable manner.
- NRCS and the West Fresno Family Resource Center hosted the second annual USDA “Growing Together” Black and Urban Farmers Conference in Fresno, California. The conference is open to all farmers and ranchers but is uniquely tailored toward black and urban farmers. Topics included natural resource conservation, climate smart agriculture practices, and why farming networks are important for success. This statewide conference provided opportunities to network and learn about resources available to farmers and ranchers. Workshops covered topics including but not limited to beginning farming, youth in agriculture, resources from USDA and California state agencies, urban farming, and USDA programs.

**2.4. Justice40 Program Implementation** – In collaboration with USDA departmental leads and appointed agency representatives, NRCS is executing the Justice40 guidance recommendations for a comprehensive approach to advancing equity in the agency’s conservation covered programs between fiscal years 2022 and 2026. The implementation plan for each of the 11 covered programs in NRCS includes the following:

- Clarifies desired outcomes with equity enhancements;
- Identifies the benefits of a covered program;
- Determines how a covered program distributes benefits;
- Describes methods to calculate and report on reaching Justice40 Initiative goals;
- Details planned and completed program modifications;
- Addresses methodologies to identify Justice40 ‘disadvantaged communities’;
- Lists plans for continued stakeholder engagement; and
- Identifies how interagency collaboration is maintained.

The NRCS Justice40 covered programs can be viewed at: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/priorities/equity/justice40>.

## Strategic Goal 3: Equity and Inclusion Data

Even when data relating to inequities is available, strategies for closing gaps and tracking progress over time are often missing. It is not enough to have data if we do not also use the data at multiple levels and track impacts. Data governance is needed to pinpoint problems, form decisions for change, deploy resources, track progress, evaluate effectiveness, and justify continued support. Reliable findings for equity and Inclusion assessments result from data-driven measurements and continuous improvement in data planning.

Strategic Goal 3 has three Priority Actions:

- 3.1 Continuous Improvement Plan for Data-Driven Equity
- 3.2 Equity and Inclusion Data Catalog
- 3.3 Establish NRCS metrics to track progress and outcomes according to equity goals and objectives.

### Progress

**3.1 Data-Driven Equity** –NRCS work to achieve equity is supported by continuous improvement in collection and analyses of conservation program and technical assistance data and other data sources as needed to ensure that processes and programs are impartial, fair, and provide equal opportunity for all applicants, participants, partners, and stakeholders. NRCS is working to develop a continuous improvement plan for equity data that establishes a data governance framework for managing and protecting agency data with a focus on advancing equity in access to NRCS programs and services. The plan is being designed to align with data governance efforts across agency offices and priorities, and to align with the USDA Data Strategy and the USDA Information Technology Strategic Plan.

**3.2 Equity Data Catalog** – The NRCS Equity Division is collaborating across agency offices to develop a centralized equity data catalog that documents, describes, and provides appropriate access for agency employees to all data and tools related to advancing equity in access to NRCS program and services. The catalog will be shared internally using the NRCS Equity SharePoint site, and in alignment with the continuous improvement plan (see 3.1, Data-Driven Equity, above), it will be a dynamic resource that is maintained to respond to changing staff and customer needs and to developments in available data and tools.

**3.3 NRCS Equity Metrics** – NRCS and the FPAC Analytics Team released a suite of internal dashboards for *Outreach, Equity, and Program Delivery*. The dashboards leverage datasets across FPAC agencies to provide insight into NRCS financial assistance program delivery to customers who self-identify their race, ethnicity, and gender, and other customer groups to improve outreach to underserved producers and communities. Additionally, the dashboards provide centralized access for agency leadership and key staff to authoritative datasets and analyses, many of which incorporate metrics and indicators developed to evaluate progress in redressing inequities in program delivery components. The comprehensive approach taken in this suite of dashboards enables tracking of progress toward equity goals set for NRCS programs.

NRCS has also developed methodologies to integrate equity data and metrics into budget prioritizations for fiscal years 2022 and 2023 and beyond. The methodology combines considerations of NRCS State historical performance, unmet demands, and potential for delivery of technical and financial assistance to underserved producers. A key part of the methodology is a series of geospatial data layers for internal use that include multiple datasets addressing agency priorities to guide programmatic decision-making at national, regional, and state levels. NRCS data on program implementation and the best science available related to agency priorities were used to develop the data layers. The tool provides georeferenced datasets about past treatment and future opportunities for advancing equity in program delivery, mitigating climate change, and promoting conservation in urban and peri-urban areas, as well as additional data layers to consider multiple priorities in program investments

alongside information about tribal lands and American Indian or Alaska Native producers. The agency is continuously working to refine the methodology while tracking impacts of prioritization decisions to program delivery, particularly concerning applications and contracts with underserved producers.

**NRCS Equity Action Tracker** – The NRCS *Equity Action Plan* commits to advance equal access to opportunities and resources for underserved communities, embrace diversity and inclusion, internally and externally, and ensure an equity minded, well-trained, and diverse workforce committed to equal opportunity. To facilitate measurable equity actions, the tracker documents and reports on strategy across agency functions. The tracker includes quarterly and biannual equity reports from national, regional, and state level offices, and the information and data are analyzed and reported through internal reports and dashboards to enable continuous improvement in the achievement of equity across all organizational levels and functions of the agency.

## Strategic Goal 4: Equity and Inclusion Partnerships

At all levels of the agency, NRCS is committed to achieving equity through partnership with stakeholders, tribal entities, community-based organizations, and underserved communities. Broad collaboration is paramount to the success of removing inequities in NRCS programs, policies, and services. Transformation requires that the people experiencing problems are at the center of determining the solutions to inequities.

Strategic Goal 4 has six Priority Actions:

- 4.1 Identify and define roles of NRCS partners, stakeholders, tribal entities, community-based organizations, and other underserved communities and relevant institutions at national, regional, state, and local levels.
- 4.2 Create and monitor State and Territorial Area 3-to-5-year Outreach Plans to align with the *NRCS Equity Action Plan*.
- 4.3 Engage partners, stakeholders, underserved community representatives, and tribal representatives at the decision-making level for shared influence.
- 4.4 Enhance partners’ and stakeholders’ awareness of and clear and consistent understanding of Equity and Inclusion within NRCS organizational capacity.
- 4.5 Advance Equity in NRCS grants, agreements, and contracts.
- 4.6 Multi-pronged approach to providing technical assistance to underserved communities – Technical Service Providers (TSP) program.

### Progress

**4.1 Equity Guidance Materials** – The internal and external equity guidance materials described in 1.3, above, define collaborative roles for achieving equity. The publicly available *NRCS Equity Division Factsheet and Brochure* clarify that collaboration with internal and external partners, stakeholders, and various communities is paramount to success of NRCS’s work to remove inequities in NRCS programs, policies, and services. The internal educational materials provided through the state and field office *Equity Resource Guides* encourage staff to identify and engage partners with roles to play in addressing barriers and inequities.

**4.2 Integration of Equity into State Office Outreach Plans** – NRCS is now requiring that all state and territorial area offices create an equity subsection within their State Outreach Plans. To support those efforts, NRCS created guidance materials for state leadership and staff to:

- Implement equity strategies within states in alignment with the agency’s *Equity Action Plan*;
- Conduct thorough, regular identification and mitigation of program barriers and inequities;
- Plan and monitor actions to address barriers and inequities;

- Evaluate program participation and technical assistance data to assess and improve engagement with underserved communities and individuals;
- Identify underserved communities and individuals not currently engaged in NRCS assistance, in order to expand engagement in agency programs and services;
- Expand TSP Program participation of providers who can offer conservation technical assistance for historically underserved producers;
- Increase diversity on State Technical Committees, Local Working Groups, and Soil & Water Conservation District Boards; and
- Ensure employee participation in equity training and offer training to partners and stakeholders.

Chief Cosby reinforced the establishment of the Outreach Direction and Coordination collaboration in all state offices by identifying State Outreach Coordinators to launch effective community outreach and education for NRCS conservation programs, benefits, and opportunities and for assisting new and beginning customers on how to achieve success on their farmlands and rangelands. Work being accomplished across the country by State Outreach Coordinators includes:

- Building relationships and trust with organizations and individuals at the local level that can help USDA reach historically underserved audiences.
- Increasing awareness of and participation in NRCS programs and services.
- Seeking out new partnerships and sharing ways to work with NRCS.
- Identifying program barriers that negatively impact producers’ ability to participate in programs and services, and working with partners to overcome these barriers at the state level.
- Identifying NRCS operational procedures that negatively impact producers’ ability to comply and participate in program and services.
- Ensuring all local staff are aware of potential customers and ways to communicate with them.
- Working with Rural Development, Farm Service Agency and the Risk Management Agency at the state level to increase support for beginning farmers and ranchers (BFR) through strategic outreach, barrier identification, and communication through BFR Outreach Plans.

**4.3 Partner and Stakeholder Engagement for Shared Influence** – NRCS is continually engaged in reviewing input, reports, and recommendations from stakeholders with suggestions for how the agency can improve customer service, equity, and equal opportunity. For example:

- Stakeholder engagement pursuant to Justice40 was conducted through five listening sessions and a Request for Information published in the Federal Register that garnered more than 500 public comments.
- NRCS Chief Cosby participated in consultations with tribal leaders across the country through National Tribal Consultations hosted by the USDA Office of Tribal Relations in March 2021, April 2022, and April 2023.
- NRCS reviewed hundreds of comments regarding program delivery and outreach, especially for underserved producers, received in response to the November 2022 Federal Register notice requesting public input on implementation of IRA funding.

From those engagements and more, NRCS will continue to ensure that input from partners, stakeholders, tribal representatives, and underserved communities is acknowledged and integrated as appropriate in the planning, financing, and development of programs and inequity issues. For example:

**Alternative Funding Arrangements** – In response to input received during tribal listening sessions, NRCS published policy on Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFAs) under Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to provide Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations with additional flexibilities for funding, planning, and administration where existing processes created barriers to program participation. These AFAs provide flexible options for Tribes wishing

to participate in these programs, with an emphasis on support for traditional tribal practices and Tribe-managed projects.

**Indigenous Knowledge in Policy and Practice Standards** – The NRCS Indigenous Practices Team was formed in fiscal year 2022 to help regions develop new Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) scenarios, Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) enhancements, and interim practice standards based on indigenous knowledge to make NRCS assistance more meaningful on tribal lands. Staff from NRCS National Headquarters and the California State Office developed a new Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activity (CEMA) named *Indigenous Stewardship Methods Evaluation* (CEMA 222) under the EQIP program to provide funding that assists in the sharing of indigenous knowledge between tribal subject matter experts and producers. Input from the California State Tribal Advisory Committee was an important catalyst for this action. NRCS tribal liaisons in states provided foundational support and helpful review comments. CEMA 222 is now available nationwide for use in conservation plans and EQIP agreements. EQIP agreements for CEMA 222 compensate participants for obtaining an evaluation of a planning area with respect to Indigenous Stewardship Methods. EQIP participants use the financial assistance opportunity to hire a “Qualified Individual” to complete and provide the CEMA. As sovereigns, tribal nations and indigenous governing bodies decide if, when, and who they will designate as Qualified Individuals to provide CEMA 222. The CEMA 222 results are expected to:

- Promote objectives for tribal food sovereignty and environmental stewardship.
- Support development of new conservation plans and site-specific conservation practice implementation requirements and designs that incorporate Indigenous Knowledge.
- Inform NRCS science and technology leaders about opportunities to increase use of Indigenous Knowledge in conservation practices, interim practices, field trials, and demonstrations.
- Complement other new NRCS efforts to increase indigenous peoples’ participation in NRCS programs, such as: Equity in Conservation Outreach cooperative agreements, Alternative Funding Arrangements, and new conservation practice scenarios designed to fit smaller-scale operations.

In fiscal year 2023, NRCS expanded flexibility for developing payment rates for CEMA 222, providing instructions to state offices to revise payment rates based on geographically specific payment scenarios. Detailed information about CEMA 222 and other EQIP documentation is available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/eqip-environmental-quality-incentives/eqip-cpas-dias-and-cemas>.

**4.4 Equity Training Development for Partners and Stakeholders** – As described in 1.4, NRCS developed a comprehensive equity training module for agency employees. In the coming year, the module’s lessons will be tailored to partners and stakeholders for opportunity to educate and inform their organizations, with the goal to enhance awareness of and consistent understanding of equity as a shared organizational value. While diverse partners and stakeholders do not have to do the same work in the same way, if goals and values are shared, our work can have significant cumulative impact.

#### **4.5 Advancing Equity in Grants, Agreements, and Contracts**

**Equity Toolkit for NRCS Decision-Makers** – As described in 2.1, NRCS developed a set of Equity Toolkits for agency decision-makers to integrate equity into decision-making processes and align institutional equity into the work and practices of NRCS. The “Grants, Agreements, and Contracting Equity Toolkit” guides decision-makers to integrate principles of equity into announcement, proposal, and award decisions. This ensures that underserved and under-utilized entities are prioritized from the start of decision-making, and that there is a path toward advancing fair and equitable access to our grants and agreements opportunities.

**Regional Conservation Partnership Program** – In May 2023, NRCS announced \$500 million in funding through Inflation Reduction Act to advance partner-driven solutions to conservation on agricultural land through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), including up to \$50 million targeted for tribal governments to implement tribally led projects. NRCS is working to improve and streamline the program, which includes simplifying the agreement process, consistent guidance and training for partners, simplification of the Partner reimbursement process, and simplification of the technical assistance structure.

**Equity in Conservation Outreach Agreements** – In fiscal year 2022, NRCS administered \$50 million of investments in partnerships to improve equity in access to conservation programs and support efforts to address climate change. The Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements fund two-year projects to expand the delivery of conservation assistance to producers who are new to farming, are low-income, identify as one or more marginalized race or ethnicity, and/or are military veterans. The program encourages new partnerships and the development of State and Community leadership for underserved producers, with projects focusing on key conservation priorities including:

- Improving soil health and water quality;
- Providing habitat for at-risk wildlife;
- Improving natural resources and productivity on agricultural lands;
- Increasing access to conservation staff and resource in urban areas; and/or
- Building and strengthening local and regional food systems and markets.

NRCS selected 117 groups in FY 2022 to provide funding to through cooperative agreements, all of which advance equity by focusing on the needs of underserved communities and individuals. These agreements:

- Establish 85 new outreach partnerships.
- Continue or build upon 32 existing outreach partnerships.
- Provide service to 44 States and Territories plus the DC area, with three having nationwide impact.
- Include 15 tribal agreements, 7 agreements with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and 1890s Foundation agreements, and 2 agreements with Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

In fiscal year 2023, NRCS is investing an additional \$70 million for Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements with a renewed purpose to:

- Develop community-led conservation projects for historically underserved producers and underserved communities;
- Increase access to NRCS programs and services; and
- Promote potential career opportunities in agriculture, natural resources, and related sciences.

Demand for the program increased from FY22; NRCS received 300 proposals for the fiscal year 2023 funding opportunity and is currently reviewing the proposals.

**4.6 Technical Service Providers (TSP) Programs** – NRCS is collaborating across national and state offices to enhance outreach and training for TSPs to ensure that the registry includes providers who have specialties and experience (e.g., urban, small-scale, tribal, forestry) to meet the varying needs of underserved producers and communities. The internal educational materials provided through the *State Office Equity Resource Guide* (as described in 1.3) clarify the importance of actions to enhance TSP Program participation, as the agency is continually working to expand the number and availability of conservation technical experts. Additionally, the equity training as described in 4.4 will be made available to TSPs.



## Strategic Goal 5: Operationalize Equity

Equity and inclusion must be incorporated at every stage of NRCS work and services—personal, team, and institutional. Managing change and maintaining support for change require ongoing strategic thinking and decision-making. NRCS must develop processes that are transformative and change structures that may have created barriers to equity. Success for equity achievements internally requires clear communication with urgency and a solid continuity of strategies throughout the breadth and depth of the organization.

Strategic Goal 5 Priority Actions include:

- 5.1 Advance equity by having a diverse workforce.
- 5.2 Encourage diversity on State Technical Committees and Soil and Water Conservation District Boards.
- 5.3 Meet program participation parity levels relative to population demographics to eliminate disparities.
- 5.4 Implement technology enhancements to improve business processes and eliminate communication barriers for customers.

### Progress

**Workforce Planning for Diversity** – NRCS includes diversity as an integral and major component of the agency hiring strategy. NRCS has created agency specific integrated workforce planning presentations including a diversity component, predicted attrition, projected vacancy component, and a hiring strategy component. The purpose is to be able to identify the positions and vacancies at mid-entry and journeyman level, and the hiring strategies associated with filling those positions.

**Recruitment Videos** – NRCS developed a series of recruitment videos designed with different audiences in mind at national, regional, state, and local levels. The videos highlight agency priorities including equity, key positions for recruitment, and the agency’s diverse customer-base, landscapes, and conservation practices. The videos can be viewed on the NRCS YouTube channel under the “Playlists” section (<https://www.youtube.com/@TheUSDANRCS>).

**Strategic Recruitment and Hiring Task Force** – Executive Order 14035 states, in part, “The Federal Government must be a model for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, where all employees are treated with dignity and respect. Accordingly, the Federal Government must strengthen its ability to recruit, hire, develop, promote, and retain our Nation’s talent and remove barriers to equal opportunity. It must also provide resources and opportunities to strengthen and advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility across the Federal Government. The Federal Government should have a workforce that reflects the diversity of the American people.”

This comprehensive approach can only be accomplished through a strategic and targeted hiring plan, to increase our scientific expertise and provide more boots on the ground, and to strengthen our diversity so that we can be better at providing services and reflect our current and potential customer base throughout America’s rural and urban landscapes. The NRCS strategic recruitment and hiring plan addresses challenges the agency has faced and provides measurable strategies to meet expectations set by the Administration.

**5.2 Diversity on Committees and Boards** – As described above in 4.2, Integration of Equity into State Outreach Plans, all state and territorial offices are conducting strategic planning that includes efforts to increase diversity on State Technical Committees, Local Working Groups, and Soil & Water Conservation District Boards. Through the regular equity reports from states and territorial areas (see “NRCS Equity Action Tracker” under 3.3, NRCS Equity Metrics, above), state offices are reporting on actions toward increasing diversity on committees and boards. The NRCS Equity Division is working with national and state leadership to track and monitor reported actions to ensure that barriers to diversification are addressed.

**5.3 Program Participation** – As described in 3.3, NRCS Equity Metrics, above, NRCS has developed internal equity data tools to inform program barrier analysis.

**5.4 Addressing Communication Barriers** – NRCS worked with FPAC External Affairs to produce translations for critical contract and program documents and other in multiple languages (including Spanish, Hmong, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Korean), with additional languages available upon request. Improving language access for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) customers is an important barrier removal initiative. The NRCS Limited English Proficiency webpage is available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/limited-english-proficiency>.

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For more information on equity at NRCS and all of USDA, see [usda.gov/equity](https://usda.gov/equity).

## APPENDIX: Resources

### Selected Equity-Related Executive Orders and White House Resources

Executive Order 13166, [\*Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency\*](#)

Executive Order 13175, [\*Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments\*](#)

Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies. [\*Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships\*](#).

Executive Order 13985, [\*Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government\*](#)

Executive Order 14008, [\*Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad\*](#)

The [\*Path to Achieving Justice40\*](#)

Executive Order 14035, [\*Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce\*](#)

Executive Order 14091, [\*Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government\*](#)

Executive Order 14096, [\*Revitalizing Our Nation's Commitment to Environmental Justice for All\*](#)

Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies. [\*Modernizing Regulatory Review\*](#)

### USDA Equity-Related Resources

USDA [\*Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2022-2026\*](#)

USDA [\*Equity Webpage\*](#)

USDA [\*Equity Action Plan\*](#)

USDA [\*Environmental Justice Scorecard\*](#)

Equity Commission: [\*Shaping Change at USDA\*](#)

### NRCS Equity-Related Resources

NRCS [\*Equity Webpage\*](#)

NRCS [\*Equity Policy Statement\*](#)

NRCS [\*Equity Poster\*](#)

Get Started! [\*A Guide to USDA Resources for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers\*](#)

### Additional Resources

2011 Jackson Lewis Report, [\*Independent Assessment of the Delivery of Technical and Financial Assistance\*](#)  
(NRCS recommendations begin on page 316)

Government Alliance on Race & Equity (GARE) resource guide [\*Advancing Racial Equity and Transforming Government\*](#)

GARE resource guide [\*Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity\*](#)

## Non-Discrimination Statement

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Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotope, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint](#) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by:

- (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250-9410;
- (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or
- (3) email: [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov)

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## USDA Mission Statement

“To serve all Americans by providing effective, innovative, science-based public policy leadership in agriculture, food and nutrition, natural resource protection and management, rural development, and related issues with a commitment to deliverable equitable and climate-smart opportunities that inspire and help America thrive.”

## Department Equity Action Plan Goals

### **1. Reducing Barriers to USDA Programs**

USDA is reducing barriers to programs and improving support to underserved farmers, ranchers, landowners, businesses, and communities, including by providing ways for stakeholders to share their experiences, insights, and needs and by incorporating that input into policy development and implementation improvement.

### **2. Partnering with Trusted Technical Assistance Providers**

USDA is partnering with trusted technical assistance providers to ensure that underserved producers and communities have the support they need to access USDA programs.

### **3. Directing USDA Programs to Those Who Need Them the Most**

USDA programs are targeting those who need them the most, including by increasing infrastructure investments that benefit underserved communities.

### **4. Expanding Equitable Access to USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs**

USDA is expanding equitable access to USDA nutrition assistance programs to ensure that those who qualify are able to participate, those who participate get benefits that are meaningful, and those who receive those benefits can use them conveniently and in ways that promote improvements in their health and well-being.

### **5. Advancing Equity in Federal Procurement**

USDA is advancing equity in Federal procurement by providing tools and resources to underserved and disadvantaged businesses to increase access to funding opportunities and expand their network to develop critical local, State, regional, and National relationships.

### **6. Upholding Federal Trust and Treaty Responsibilities to Indian Tribes**

USDA is upholding general Federal trust and treaty responsibilities to Indian Tribes, removing barriers to access USDA programs, embracing Tribal self-determination principles, and incorporating indigenous values and perspectives in program design and delivery.

### **7. Committing Unwaveringly to Civil Rights**

USDA has committed unwaveringly to civil rights, working to equip its civil rights offices with the tools, skills, capacity, and processes essential to effectively and efficiently enforce and uphold civil rights.

### **8. Operating with Transparency and Accountability**

USDA is operating transparently and accountably, providing information on Department programs that Congress, stakeholders, and the general public need to hold us to account on our equity agenda, and working systematically to collect and take account of public feedback.



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<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/priorities/equity>

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