

Pursuant to Executive Order 14091 (February 16, 2023) on "Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government"

## 2023 Equity Action Plan Summary

# U.S. Department of Agriculture

### Delivering equity through USDA

The mission of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is: "To serve all Americans by providing effective, innovative, science-based public policy leadership in agriculture, food and nutrition, natural resource protection and management, rural development, and related issues with a commitment to delivering equitable and climate-smart opportunities that inspire and help America thrive." To accomplish this mission, we must, together, build and maintain public trust and confidence among USDA stakeholders that this truly is, in the words of President Lincoln, the People's Department. We must: (1) identify and root out systemic discrimination in USDA programs; (2) ensure equitable access to USDA programs and services for all communities, including by removing barriers to access and working to repair past mistakes that have resulted in economic, social, and racial disparities; and (3) promote nutrition security, a healthy environment, and the opportunity for a good life for every person, in every community in America.

New strategies to advance equity

## New strategies to advance equity

USDA has identified seven areas of focus for its 2023 Equity Action Plan through town halls, webinars, outreach events, community forums, public comment opportunities, conferences, [tribal consultations](#), a dedicated [Equity Commission](#), analysis of after-event survey data, and more. USDA will continue to engage the public on these action areas, its progress, and next steps throughout the year and beyond.

- 1. Ensure agricultural resources and assistance for producers are broadly accessible, while at the same time creating new, more, and better market opportunities so USDA policies and programs advance agriculture for all who want to participate, not just a few.** *Agricultural production is a capital-intensive business, with high startup costs, which has created a barrier to entry for many who want to farm, and has made it overly difficult for small- and mid-sized farmers to succeed. Compounding this, over the course of decades, flawed policy and program design—for example, undue complexity and inflexibility—joined with an over-emphasis on efficiency, lack of fair and competitive markets, and individual acts of discrimination, have cost small and underserved producers equipment, land, farm operations, and opportunities to accumulate the generational wealth that has benefitted others. For example, crop insurance programs have often excluded smaller producers, specialty crops, and less-resourced growers. In other safety net programs, statutory requirements cover only a small number of crops or a historical snapshot of production. Market concentration has meant that smaller growers have had little market power. In some cases, due to lack of access to credit or to fair markets, or because of discrimination, producers have lost their farms, family homes, and valued links to their culture, history, community, and identity. To address these barriers and others, USDA will:*

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- Align farm credit and assistance with Departmental priorities and values through USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). FSA will continue to modify and improve farm loan programs to further reduce application processing times and improve customer experience, and will prioritize its [FSA County Committees](#) as key contributors for outreach and mentorship.
- Identify statutory barriers that prevent USDA from serving a broader set of producers or that disproportionately harm certain producers. More robustly enforce nondiscrimination provisions.
- Identify weaknesses in farm safety net program design that may be contributing to inequitable support, and remove hurdles and tailor programs to all types of producers, production, and business models.
- Target direct assistance and technical support based on degree of need. USDA is implementing support for underserved producers; progressive payment factoring; and whole-farm revenue approaches particularly suited to smaller operations. Where USDA has discretion, as in the ad-hoc disaster programs, the Department has been pursuing these strategies administratively. Other permanent programs would need legislative action; USDA is providing technical assistance on these areas to Congress.
- Create new, more, and better market opportunities for producers, which creates a fairer playing field for small- and mid-size farmers.
- To institutionalize access for broader stakeholder viewpoints, USDA is making a concerted effort to bring new voices to the table and to expand its stakeholder base through longstanding and new formal committees, including: the [USDA Equity Commission](#); [NRCS state technical committees](#); [FSA County Committees](#), [including urban county committees](#); and other new and continuing

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Federal Advisory Committees ([Urban Agriculture](#), [Tribal](#), [Minority Farmers](#), [New and Beginning Farmers](#)).

**2. Promote prosperity and economic security in rural communities by empowering people with modern infrastructure, connecting business owners to new opportunities for growth, and supporting community-driven solutions to build brighter futures in rural America.**

*Rural communities and the enterprises within them sometimes struggle to get financial or technical assistance from highly competitive federal programs whose funding formulas favor larger, urban areas. These programs often have burdensome and unrealistic requirements, including complicated processes, inconsistent rule implementation, and delays, which are significant barriers to access. Another barrier to equity in rural communities is insufficient outreach in some communities, which can exclude people who lack awareness of or experience with federal programs. In turn, communities lose their trust in and willingness to engage with the federal government. Still other barriers relate to inadequate infrastructure, such as broadband access, which prevents businesses and individuals from fully competing and participating in the digital age. To address these barriers and others, USDA will:*

- Continue to work towards 100% connectivity through the USDA's Rural Development (RD) [ReConnect Loan and Grant Program](#) which provides loans, grants, and loan-grant combinations to bring high-speed internet to rural areas that lack sufficient access to broadband.
- Further support rural clean energy by providing once-in-a-generation funding opportunities for rural electric cooperatives, farmers, and rural businesses—particularly those disproportionately affected by high energy costs and climate change.

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- Promote rural housing equity, furthering [President Biden's Blueprint for a Renters Bill of Rights](#), via education, communication, regulation, and contributing to the government-wide effort to bring more equity to property appraisals.
- Transform the food system to be fairer, more competitive, and more resilient through establishing Regional Food Business Centers; providing Meat and Poultry Processing Capacity—Technical Assistance; strengthening the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program; and expanding funding agreements for the [Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program](#).

**3. Promote nutrition security and health equity through USDA nutrition assistance programs to ensure all Americans have access to the nutrition they need.** *A complex web of factors causes food insecurity and contributes to diet-related diseases and health disparities. Poverty, or limited income or financial resources; education and job opportunities; access to health care, safe housing, and transportation; and neighborhood design all affect the ability to obtain food, make healthy choices, and remain physically active. A key barrier to healthy eating is lack of access to nutritious food. The food environment (e.g., proximity to stores, food prices, available food options) influences a person's food choices and diet quality. Disparities in food insecurity and diet-related diseases exist partly because of housing, and transportation. To address these barriers and others, USDA will:*

- Partner with program operators and stakeholders to address food and nutrition security equity and reach underserved communities. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) will provide nationwide implementation of the permanent Summer Food Service Program-

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[rural non-congregate option](#) and [Summer EBT](#); conduct a national outreach campaign to increase enrollment and retention in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and a multi-pronged [MyPlate](#) nutrition education campaign; and provide resources to [The Emergency Food Assistance Program \(TEFAP\)](#) state agencies on identifying and offering kosher and halal appropriate foods to observant communities.

- Ensure equitable and consistent access and participation opportunity for eligible populations by providing a new [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\) Electronic Benefits Transfer \(EBT\) Modernization Technical Assistance Center](#), expanding online shopping by updating WIC regulations, bridging language barriers to FNS nutrition programs by expanding translation and interpreter access, and training FNS and State agency staff to promote strategies to address these barriers.
- Continue to work with Puerto Rico to explore the feasibility of a potential transition from the current capped [Nutrition Assistance Program \(NAP\) federal nutrition block grant](#) to SNAP, in order to meet the needs of the island's population.
- Strengthen program participants' ability to embrace healthy eating patterns by updating the nutrition standards for School Meals and WIC food packages to reflect the Dietary Guidelines for Americans; supporting school meal operators through the [Healthy Meals Incentive Initiative](#) and other investments; engaging with tribal stakeholders to enhance the food package for the [Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations \(FDPIR\)](#); and developing the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, jointly with the Department of Health and Human Services, to

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provide science-based advice on what to eat and drink to promote health, reduce the risk of chronic disease, and meet nutrient needs.

**4. Ensure equitable access to forest resources, funding opportunities, and outdoor experiences; and target wildfire prevention and conservation investments where they are most needed.** *The Forest Service strives to ensure all people—regardless of race, ability, or income—have equal access to and equitable benefits from agency programs and services. Indeed, communities with fewer resources frequently need services the most. Underserved and socially vulnerable populations face significant barriers—financial, political, or related to access to knowledge and information—to applying for, benefiting from, and participating in programs and services. Agency practices can add to these, for example, by imposing match requirements, or by failing to communicate and engage effectively with underserved communities. To address these barriers and others, USDA will:*

- Target wildfire prevention where it is most needed, including underserved and tribal communities, through research, matching requirements, project-selection, training, mapping resources, barrier analysis, and personnel to facilitate robust investment in wildfire protection in underserved communities.
- Expand equitable access to grants, agreements, and contracts by integrating equity into proposal analysis, outreach, scoring, and guidance related to federal investments, including master participating agreements with non-profit organizations (multi-million and multi-year agreements that will leverage Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds to

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tackle the wildfire and climate crises at scale). Address barriers to participation posed by cooperator matching requirements.

- Expand the benefits of urban forestry, by increasing access for disadvantaged communities, providing education to the public, and promoting use of vulnerability- and equity-based data tools for grants and targeting investments under the Forest Service's [Urban and Community Forestry program](#) [Community Forest and Open Space program](#) and other similar efforts.
- Promote access to recreation and outdoor experiences within underserved communities. Develop an external facing online permitting application for special use permits on federal lands to better connect to underserved communities.
- Enhance partnerships and community engagement through collaboration; develop equity-centered communication strategies, including new inclusive recreation printed materials.

**5. Advance equity in federal procurement by providing underserved and disadvantaged businesses with tools and resources to increase access to funding opportunities, and by helping promote safe and secure provision of services and supplies.** Through listening sessions with hundreds of small disadvantaged businesses (SDBs) nationwide, USDA has received comprehensive feedback from SDBs on ways it can advance equity in procurement. Stakeholders shared with USDA that (1) SDBs that have not previously done business with the government find many of the processes intimidating and hard to understand; (2) SDBs need more time to prepare for upcoming contracting opportunities; and (3) for new entrants in particular, they do not know where to start or how to take full advantage of all of the government resources. To address these barriers, USDA will:



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- Expand and improve the [Forecast of Business Opportunities](#) website, including implementing real-time display of changes in contracting opportunities.
- Continue no-cost business development series, “[Path to Prosperity](#),” to provide un-banked and under-banked small businesses, communities, and individuals with useful information, tools, resources, and opportunities.
- Help protect children and others from exploitative and illegal labor practices, including but not limited to developing and implementing contractual language that provides USDA and the Department of Labor visibility into the supply chain to promote the safe and secure provision of services and supplies by responsible companies that have adequate experience, staffing, production capability, and technical ability to achieve successful contract performance without exploitation.

**6. Empower tribal sovereignty and uphold treaty responsibilities to Indian tribes, removing barriers to access to USDA programs and incorporating indigenous values and perspectives in program design and delivery.** *The unique legal status of tribes, tribal jurisdiction, and tribal land holdings has significantly hindered access to USDA programs for tribes and Native Americans. For example: Currently, tribal corporations are ineligible for Rural Development (RD) programs, and tribal trust lands are ineligible for Forest Service leases and Natural Resources Conservation Service conservation programs. Many indigenous plants and animals are excluded from FNS federal nutrition programs and Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) procurement opportunities. And tribal commercial activity is deemed disqualifying for some RD programs, even though—because they lack a tax base—tribal nations must systematically participate in commercial markets to accrue revenue necessary to provide*

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*their nation, and often neighboring communities, with (public) goods and services. These kinds of barriers, often the results of legislative oversight or poorly drafted departmental documents, have obstructed Indian Country access to USDA programs, in turn complicating economic development and tribal self-determination. To address these barriers and others, USDA will:*

- Remove barriers for indigenous and tribal access to USDA programs and services, through a [pilot project](#) with FNS and AMS through FDPIR procurement processes—which solely serve tribal communities—to test the flexibilities of existing procurement authorities to better incorporate bison, a key tribally identified indigenous food.
- Identify and address USDA program requirements for alignment with Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agricultural leases by assigning dedicated USDA staff to streamline access for Native producers and land managers by collaborating with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to align DOI lease requirements with the Farm Service Agency agricultural financing program options and Natural Resources Conservation Service planning and practice standards.
- Perform equity review of Forest Service grazing leasing process to promote for more equitable opportunities, including ensuring tribal applicants and tribal lands are eligible to compete for forest and grasslands leases.
- Support indigenous meat processing capacity expansion in support of the government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes and their self-governance goals of maintaining and improving food and agriculture supply chain resiliency.
- Promote tribal self-determination principles. USDA will support ongoing tribal self-determination demonstration projects for the FNS and Forest Service, expanding tribal self-determination policies to enable greater self-governance and decision making.

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**7. Commit unwaveringly to civil rights by improving tools, skills, capacity, and processes to more effectively and efficiently enforce them.** *Over the decades, intentional discrimination and agency policies, procedures, and practices that limited access to USDA programs and resources for underserved producers have imposed grievous harm on USDA customers and decreased their opportunities to accumulate generational wealth. Many of these barriers are built into organizational structures and still embedded in day-to-day agency operations. In addition, longstanding administrative inadequacies—for example, unduly lengthy times for complaint processing—have undermined civil rights remediation. To address these barriers and others, USDA will:*

- Transform USDA’s program complaint process by implementing streamlined and refined complaint processing mechanisms and completing improvements responsive to the Office of Inspector General (OIG).
- Improve USDA’s civil rights infrastructure through evaluation of agency programs by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) and agency civil rights offices.
- Implement a fast-track emergency intervention program complaint process to address critical cases in time to make a difference.
- Use a new Program Complaints Task Force to complete adjudication of existing aged case backlog.
- Build dashboards to track and monitor program complaints data, civil rights impact analyses, and workforce reporting requirements.
- Foster a civil rights community across USDA by bringing together department, mission area, and agency civil rights leaders to establish a community of practice to share processes, resources, and innovation.

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- Develop a comprehensive language access program by establishing and implementing a Department-wide plan that provides resources, transparency, accountability, goals, and objectives for mission areas and offices.

## What USDA accomplished

Below is a sampling of USDA's progress delivering on equity and racial justice since its first Equity Action Plan in 2022.

- ***Helped keep farmers farming.***

USDA has helped more than 30,000 farmers and ranchers who were in financial distress stay on their farms and farming, thanks to resources provided through IRA Section 22006. The IRA allocated \$3.1 billion for USDA to provide relief for distressed borrowers with certain direct and guaranteed loans, and to expedite assistance for those whose agricultural operations are at financial risk due to factors outside their control, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the law was signed in August 2022, FSA has provided over \$1.9 billion and counting in immediate assistance (as of December 31, 2023).

- ***Expanded TEFAP operations in underserved areas, including remote, rural, and tribal communities.***

USDA awarded nearly \$100 million in Reach & Resiliency grants to 42 state agencies. USDA also announced a second round of nearly \$1 billion in funding through USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation for states to order commodities from USDA vendors for emergency food providers, including food banks and community kitchens, as they face high demand and supply chain disruptions.

What USDA accomplished

- ***Increased land, capital, and market access for underserved producers.***

In June 2023, USDA announced the investment of approximately \$300 million to fund 50 innovative projects with non-profit, academic and other partners to help improve access to land, capital, and markets for underserved farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. The Increasing Land, Capital, and Market Access (Increasing Land Access) Program, funded by the IRA, works to increase access to farm ownership opportunities; improve results for those with heirs' property or fractionated land; increase access to markets and capital that affect the ability to access land; and improve land ownership, land succession and agricultural business planning.

- ***Announced a \$262.5 million investment to support 33 projects across U.S. institutions of higher education designed to train the next generation of diverse agricultural professionals.***

Through the USDA NextGen program, the projects are led by 1890 land-grant institutions (historically Black land-grant universities), 1994 land-grant institutions (tribal colleges and universities), Alaska native-serving institutions and native Hawaiian-serving institutions, Hispanic-serving institutions, and institutions of higher education located in the Insular Areas. This historic investment will provide training and support to more than 20,000 future food and agricultural leaders through 33 projects executed by more than 60 institutions across 24 U.S. states and Insular Areas.

What USDA accomplished

- ***Launched the USDA's Rural Partners Network (RPN) in April 2022, and expanded it in November 2022, to include 36 community networks across 10 states and Puerto Rico.***

The RPN is an all-of-government place-based program that brings together 20 federal agencies and regional commissions to help rural communities access resources and funding to create jobs, build infrastructure, and support long-term economic stability on their own terms. In May 2023, \$394 million in awards were announced to provide loans and grants to support 52 projects to support long-term visions for strong, local economies.

- ***Made funding available to rural communities, technical assistance providers, and cooperatives through a new Broadband Technical Assistance (BTA) program.***

The BTA program promotes broadband expansion in rural areas with support for project planning and community engagement, financial sustainability, environmental compliance, construction planning and engineering, accessing federal resources, and data collection and reporting. \$20 million is available to help rural communities access broadband technical assistance resources and to support the development / expansion of broadband cooperatives.