

Minutes for the USDA Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers April 7, 2021

Members in Attendance: Harvey Reed, William Miller, Dr. Claude Evans, Carolyn Jones, Kimberly Ratcliff, Arnetta Cotton, Antonio Harris, Delmer Stamps, Michelle Cruz, Lois Kim, Ivan Howard, Dr. Elsa Sanchez, Cary M. Junior, Dr. Duncan M. Chembezi

Welcome was given by the Designated Federal Office, Eston Williams.

Eston introduced Jacqueline Davis-Slay Acting Director, USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement and she provided greetings. She touched on the scope of OPPE and their commitments. Jackie mentioned, we at USDA are committed to your wellbeing, we're committed to your future enterprises and opportunities that are available. The Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement is USDA's lead outreach and partnership agency. Not only will we be working with the USDA resources, but we will be working with other federal agency. We take serious racial equity, racial justice, COVID-19, and we're going to be partnering with other institutions to bring you those resources that we're addressing.

Eston introduced the Committee Chair, Harvey Reed and he provided input from the Chair perspective. He also introduced all the committee members and provided locations. He also mentioned one of the things to bring everyone apprised to what the USDA is doing for the Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers to reach the people of color.

After the welcome and introductions, we began to have USDA Agency Briefing.

Eston introduced Kenya Nicholas, Program Director for the USDA OPPE 2501 Program commended the committee on their great work. She mentioned we seek continuous improvement on our outreach and access to black, indigenous, people of color, our minority farmers. We want to make sure that they're able to participate in our programs in an equitable manner. You all are here to assist us we're in DC. We want to have a repeat of any of the former administration of providing relief to our black and indigenous people of color, our farmers that we've had in the past. We want to hear from you on how we can better roll these programs out, how we can better get the word out, the outreach and assistance that's available in the 2501 program is unprecedented. We have approximately \$57 million in this program due to all the efforts to level the playing field, make sure that we're providing equitable assistance to our minority farmers and ranchers. This year we have 35 million and our 50% is 17.5 million. We also have an additional \$3 million in the Appropriation Bill, and we have the 37.5 million out of the stimulus funding. So again, we have unprecedented funding. We are planning to roll that funding out as soon as we have guidance, the maximum amount available under this program is \$250,000 per year for up to three years. And this program is very competitive.

Eston introduced Acting Chief Terry Cosby. Mr. Cosby stated we conduct a large part of our outreach efforts through on-ground collaborative partnership with many diverse entities. It's been going across multiple demographics because we've made an effort to increase the money that we spend annually for outreach and technical assistance just to let you know, and fiscal year of '20, NRCS entered into 16 different agreements with investment of almost \$30 million. Some of these new partnerships did include, and I do have a list of all of those. And just to put in a little more perspective in fiscal year 2016, we had 20 agreements for about seven million and so you can see that we've increased that to 30 million. We partnership with public and private entities that we're able to outreach to a lot more in a broader section of American public. Through Community Compost and Food Waste Reduction, USDA has invested more than a million dollars in 13 pilot projects and developing test strategies for planning and implementing the municipal compost plan and food waste reductions. Priority is given to projects that anticipate or demonstrate economic benefits, incorporate plans to make compost easily accessible to farmers, including community gardens. Integrate other food waste strategies, including food recovery efforts and collaborate with multiple partners.

Eston allowed Chairman Reed to say a few things. Chairman Reed thanked Mr. Cosby and mentioned I know that all of you all are new in your position right now, but I would like you all to know that we have several comments and information that has to be conveyed to your office. And since we haven't had a chance to put them through, I would like to know, you can let us know at another time, that we would like to get this information to your office for your review.

Eston introduced Mr. Bruce Summers, Administrator with Agriculture Marketing Service. Mr. Summers stated, if you'd ever see a USDA grade applied to any U.S. Agricultural commodity that was done by an AMS grader. We grade a hundred percent of the cotton grown in the United States. We grade all of the grain that's exported from the U.S. If you see prime choice or select beef at your grocery store, that grade sticker was applied by an AMS employee. Same thing would go for Grade A eggs, butter, and cheese, or U.S. No.1 apples or potatoes. So, grading is a big part of what we do at AMS. AMS has a full-time position dedicated to strategizing, coordinating and conducting stakeholder outreach for underserved peoples all over the U.S. We have a full range of tools we use like social media webinars; monthly newsletters notice to trade.

Eston introduced Mrs. Eloris Speight, Director of the Policy Research Center at Alcorn State University. Mrs. Speight added, the policy center was authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill. And as I mentioned, it is a national center with a strategic focus, but it is located at Alcorn State University in Lorman, Mississippi. We are fully staffed currently, and it is staffed by four full-time employees. So, in addition to myself, there is a policy analyst, there is a research analyst and there is an administrative support person there. Much of the work gets done through contracts and sub-awards. We have four primary areas of focus. Stakeholder engagement, active research, policy development and strategic outreach. When we talk

about stakeholder engagement, we're talking about broad engagement, if you will, across the agricultural community. We have an advisory board, which is very diverse. It is chaired by the president of Alcorn State University, and as I mentioned, that is currently Dr. Felecia Nave. And there are 23 members, four other 1890 universities, other than Alcorn, are represented. And that's FAMU, North Carolina A&T, Tuskegee University and Virginia State University currently. We also have three 1862 representatives, two from the University of Arkansas and one from the University of Tennessee.

Secretary Vilsack joined the call and Eston asked Ms. Speight if she would allow Secretary Vilsack to speak at this time, because he was working with a tight schedule.

Eston introduced Dr. Dewayne Goldman, Senior Advisor, Racial Equity. Dr. Goldman introduced Secretary Thomas Vilsack. Secretary Vilsack begins my saying, I didn't anticipate that I would have this opportunity again to serve as Secretary of Agriculture, but I'm privileged to have it, and I'm honored to have it, and I'm going to try to do the very level best I can to begin to address many of the issues that I think are incredibly important to this committee. And I would say that I think this committee is incredibly important, and I'm glad that it's finally been constituted and that you've had at least several months to work together. Certainly, want to appreciate your service and appreciate your persistence in making sure that this important committee was in fact set up.

When I took this job, I basically said that it was a different time and a different department, and I was a different person. And I think that's true. When I first became Secretary, the focus at that point in time was on trying to resolve the longstanding class action cases that had been filed against the Department, to begin the process of diversifying the staff at USDA, to more rapidly resolve Civil Rights complaints that were filed within USDA, both by employees and outside of USDA, and to focus on investments in persistently poor areas around the country. Much different circumstance today. Today, I think we are confronted with an opportunity and a challenge. And the opportunity and challenge are to essentially begin to identify the systemic nature of discrimination that has occurred, not just in the Department of Agriculture, but throughout the entire federal government.

We have, re-invigorated our Civil Rights departments. We have new leadership there, and leadership that comes with the right perspective. It's impressed upon me by Representative Thompson from Mississippi, that when I spoke to him before I was confirmed about why it was necessary, not just simply to have diversity in leadership, but to have diversity with the right perspective, and the important understanding of where folks have come from, why folks feel the way they do is an important consideration, certainly in terms of our civil rights efforts.

Upon Secretary Vilsack completing his presentation, I open the floor for Questions and Answers with his permission. The Q and A went on for several minutes.

Eston introduced Steve Peterson to speak on behalf of Administrator Zach Ducheneaux. He shared with the group that producers have worked with USDA previously, may have already identified the race and ethnicity, and we may have that on file; but I do want to share, the last question came up about

eligibility, and so I want to make certain, everybody is aware, there are opportunities for borrowers that have not made that designation of their race, or ethnicity to still do so. We would recommend that, you can either call a local County office, or visit. I will go over the posture of our County offices in my final comments, just so you know what our posture is within the farm service agency, but there is a form that can allow you to make that designation with regard to your race and ethnicity. And that is an AD-2047.

So, we've been working very closely with Dr. Goldmon in the rollout and the policy surrounding this issue. And we are moving forward, and we think we're on a very good track. And I can tell you that, the goal is we will. I know the question came up to the secretary, one gentleman associated to, "Does FSA know the loans for the guaranteed lenders, those institutions that we do guaranteed loans with? We do, we have that list. Then we will be as more information becomes available, notifying borrowers, both the direct loan, and also the guaranteed borrowers. We will be notifying them. FSA will be notifying them of their awareness. And of course, if you have not designated your race and ethnicity, I would recommend that you go ahead and do that, initiate that with our local County office.

Eston announced to allow Eloris Speight to finish up her presentation, but she yields the floor and allow me to carry on with the agenda.

We were schedule for a break, but due to running behind schedule Eston asked if people needed to take a break to step away and we carry on the meeting. Eston read comments that were emailed into him.

Shortly after reading comments Dr. Dewayne Goldmon asked if he could speak to the group, he was granted the opportunity to speak. He begins by saying, I want to touch on a couple of things. And I think I caught the tail end of Ms. Speight's comments. And I just wanted to say, thank you, Eloris. And I want to say thank you for facilitating those listening sessions that we had last week, and we'll have tomorrow on the American rescue plan. Those are vitally important. Mr. Smith talked about Zach Ducheneaux, the new administrator of the Farm Service Agency. And last week we had the pleasure of sitting in with the policy center and kind of mid-South focus for about an hour and a half, maybe two hours. And it was time well spent because It allowed us to do a couple of very important things related to the American rescue plan. So, the first one was to clear up a lot of misconceptions and confusion that's out there on the American rescue plan.

And we focus our conversation on two sections, the debt relief in section 1005 and the technical assistance and outreach in section 1006. And those are vitally important. The debt relief, and I'll be open with you, the debt relief is intended wipe out the debt for social disadvantaged farmers, you heard the definitions, but it's different than Pickford and it's different than the other class action settlements. As the secretary so well explained, it's to deal with the cumulative effect of historic discrimination that's really impacted the ability of farmers of color to compete with their farming neighbors. And so unlike Pickford, where the onus was on a farmer to bring forth a claim, Congress with some judicious input from some senators and from USDA, did I think a pretty effective job in positioning this to where the people of color is a class in that historic discrimination or that cumulative effect is what the debt relief is trying to address.

Upon the completion of Dr. Goldman speaking, Chairman Reed asked if he could say a few things. Mr. Reed begins by stating, the mission of the committee is to do two basic things and recommendation. This committee is going to work closely with the secretary in your office regarding these funds that must be distributed. But one of the things that I would like to ask of you, we will convene again on June the eighth. And I would like for you to return on June 8th, if possible, to give us an update on what has transpired between today and June 8th. But during that period, I hope that we can set up something where we can see exactly what must be done. Because we can only work on what the charter has asked us to do, to provide advice and recommendation.

This has just started, this is only less than two months old, and we cannot do that much at this point, until we start ascertaining the doc, release the information as needed and gathered from you as well as other sources, as well as the center over there in Alcorn. We will do the most to make sure that we won't be playing political football with this amount of money. We would ask that you return with us on the meeting on June 8th, but in the meantime, we can collaborate and see what all must be done. But our mission is to stay within the guard rails and not go outside. Because Congress has authorized to stay within five to seven, section 2279, and we want to make sure we stay within that framework. So, with that, I just want to let you know that we are in support.

Eston resumes with reading comments and open to the floor to the public to make comments. Many public comments were provided.

After the public comments, Eston announced the Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers will begin their dialogue amongst the committee members. The discussion went on for a short period.

Eston thanks all the participants, committee member, colleagues, and speakers for joining the call. Eston adjourn the call.



Eston Williams
Designated Federal Officers

Date: May 25,2021



Harvey Reed
ACMF Chairman

Date: May 22, 2021