

Minutes for the USDA Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers June 9, 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 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 he would like to let you all know before I call the roll for the committee, just to give you an idea of what we're all about. We're strictly an advisory committee. What we do, we try to create and eliminate some of the policies and some of the guidelines that would increase minority participation in the USDA programs.

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

Eston introduced Dr. Lisa Ramirez, Director for Partnerships and Public Engagement. Dr. Ramirez went on to say, I really have to just send home the point to how important an advisory committee is because you are out on the ground and having these interactions and your input is critical to the decisions that we're making. And as we think about different policies in this space, it's important that we have your input so that it can reflect that going forward. Also, the work that you are doing helps us to ensure so many different required objectives for us, such as improving the viability and profitability of small and beginning farmers and ranchers.

In addition to that, it is because of your input that we're able to improve access to USDA programs for historically underserved communities. This morning, I was on a call helping some new individuals into the 2501 space, and they were needing additional information. And they shared with me, "We had never heard about this program before." And so that tells me that we have much work to still do in that space in spreading the word about the great work that we are doing, not just through 2501, but through our advisory committees, through our liaisons, through the different players within OPPE and USDA at large.

Dr. Ramirez introduced Dr. Jewel Bronaugh, deputy secretary. Dr. Bronaugh mentioned we recently announced the debt relief. There've been rollouts about the debt relief program all across the country. I hope that some of you all participated in those last week. I was at Virginia State, where I announced it there. The debt forgiveness at 120%, with 100% of the debt being relieved, but an additional 20% provided to cover costs incurred due to taxes and other additional fees. We have sent out letters to qualified producers across the country through the direct loan program to begin that process. Letters

went out to be able to verify the debt that they owed. Actually, we have had five of those returned. So, we are moving forward with the 20% that will go directly to accounts of farmers to cover their fees. And so that program is very important, but equally as important are the other resources the American Rescue Plan provided, and we call it in section 1006. I just wanted to make a couple of comments and tell you that I'm very aware of all the work that needs to be done at USDA. I want to thank you all for your advisement because you all let us know whether we're stepping right, or whether we need to change that direction, and that's always very important. And thank you for the work that you all do in supporting our food supply, supporting our economy, and I certainly look forward to meeting and working with you all going forward.

Eston introduced Kenya Nicholas, Program Director for the USDA OPPE 2501 Program commended the committee on their great work. She mentioned this committee is one that we like to call a part of our OPP extension family, which is also the front door to USDA. The Minority Farmer Advisory Committee is so important to the 2501 Program, and for those of you that are not familiar with the 2501 Program, it is our flagship outreach program. The official name is the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program. So, the length of the title, that's why we call it the 2501 Program because it was authorized first in the 2501 section of the 1990 farm bill. We will have \$35 million that we're sharing with NIFA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. So that leaves us with 17.5 million for this fiscal year under the farm bill. And in addition, we received 37.5 million under the stimulus funding. So, we have, ladies and gentlemen, unprecedented funding that we will be awarding this fiscal year. I know some of you are wondering, "When is the money coming? Show me the money." The money is on its way. We are finalizing some of the decisions the department needs to make in terms of the additional stimulus money. If it's not too late, we welcome your advice and recommendations on how we going to fund that over the next year to three years. The maximum grant under this program is 250,000 per year for up to three years. So that's three quarters of a million dollars to assist socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers and ranchers.

Eston allowed Chairman Reed to say a few things. Chairman Reed started by saying I'd like to let Miss Bronaugh and also Dr. Ramirez know that this committee not only looks at what goes on through the federal government, but also we observe what goes on in 50 States and also the six territories that we also cover. Because we try to ensure that everybody gets a fair share of what's going on. If not, we'll bring that to the attention of the Secretary's office, because getting back to the territories we have here Pacific Islanders as well as those out in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. So, we like to make sure that this is spread far and apart because we have one territory that sits there in the Pacific islands that's much closer to Australia than it is to the United States.

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 Stuart Bender, Director USDA Office of Ethics. Stuart indicated, as representatives, the ethics rules apply to you in a much more limited way because you're not federal employees. You're not even special government employees, what we call S-G-Es, which are intermittent government employees. But as representatives, you do have a duty and here it is, you can talk unfetteredly about broad policy matters, about advice and recommendations for the direction that the Department of Agriculture should go in. But if the committee were to recommend a specific grant of money, so let's say there was a situation where the committee was recommending a specific pot of money go to a specific individual. If the individual being considered is yourself or your spouse or your business, you should raise your hand and talk to your DFO, Mr. Williams, or go to your chair, Mr. Reid, and say, "This is a matter involving giving specific dollars to myself, my spouse, or a family member or to my business." What they would do is then call me up and we would figure out how we would proceed.

Eston introduced Monica Rainge, Deputy Assistant Secretary USDA Office of Civil Rights. Deputy Rainge pointed out, we are harnessing see new tools, new approaches to ensure that civil rights and equity across USDA, and we build trust between USDA and socially disadvantaged producers. The Office of Civil Rights is building back better for our employees and our customers. I have the honor of leading a dedicated team of about 114 civil rights professionals. Our work in civil rights enforcement ensures that USDA is a model EEO employer, free of discrimination and harassment. And since I took leadership in February of 2021, our EEO complaint process has been timely and there have been notable reductions in the prior year's inventory of final agency decisions.

We continue to focus on implementing additional efficiencies and improvement. In the short term, we will focus on improvement to our alternative dispute resolution process, during the complaint, pre complaint process and improvement to our IT system to enhance accuracy and reporting functionality. I'm excited about how we're modernizing our approach to civil rights. We will be introducing our new program complaint system, data system. And that system will allow us to develop a dashboard of information for me and for the secretary to inform our decisions about where we are seeing complaint activity across the United States and being able to address those situations quickly.

Our overall engagement strategy for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights really focuses on two broad categories. One, looking at how the internal civil rights program affects USDA employees and applicants for employment. And then two, the external civil rights program relating to customers

and potential customers of various agricultural programs, benefits, and services. We believe that this external stakeholder engagement strategy is important to ensuring that we improve the effective and efficient delivery of civil rights programs and services, and that we connect internal and external stakeholders in the civil rights community to innovative and solution-based perspectives.

Eston announced the agenda calls for a break. A 10-minute break was given.

Eston introduced Frank M. Wood, USDA Nation Appel Division. Mr. Wood mentioned, Basically, wherever we're invited, we will go if there is some legitimate connection to the agricultural industry. And that's not me making that noise. I will keep going. We've done presentations in front of the Women in Sustainable Agriculture Group, the National Women in Agricultural Association. We have held briefings to the Hmong community in Minnesota, and we regularly speak to a number of veterans' groups. So, outreach to all farmers, all producers are a big part of our charter. And we have learned over the years that the more we reach out, the more people reach out to us. I would like to highlight in 2021, we finally addressed a need that had been developing for years. Well, we hope we have addressed it. And that's in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico has been problematic for us in a lot of ways.

Eston introduced Robert Baggett, a special agent in charge of the Investigative Liaison, a Special Operations Division within USDA OIG Office of Investigations. Robert stated the first goal is to strengthen USDA's ability to protect public health and safety and secure agricultural department resources. The second is a strength USDA's ability to deliver program assistance of integrity and effectiveness. And the third goal is to strengthen the department's ability to achieve results-oriented performance. Advancement of these goals, LIG is an added partner and collaborator with the Department, recommending policies and actions, promote economy and team effectiveness, informing the Secretary of Agriculture, Congress, and management about problems and progress towards solutions. Reporting criminal violations to the US Department of Justice, Whistleblower Hotline, which I'm ultimately in charge of. How many on legislation and regulations, maintaining these on an oversight for external audits and the conduct of joint investigations of other law enforcement agencies. The IG Act of 1978 and other legislation provides you all with the independence as a separate budget personnel purchasing and legal authorities. However, we do partner with the Department of Management to ensure recommended agents straight into our program operations across the enterprise.

So IG's primary focus of receiving complaints from the public is through the USDA LIG hotline unit. Hotline unit receives allegations primarily through the online complaint submission form, as well as correspondence via phone fax and mail. Reports concerning violations of laws and regulations relating to USDA programs, which include criminal activity, such as bribery, smuggling, theft, fraud, endangerment to the public health and safety, this management of waste of funds or workplace violence. Which includes employee misconduct and harassment as well as conflict of interest. All able to be reporting through a hotline unit for processing and assessment. Once the hotline unit receives the complaint, there's a log and provided a file number for recording and tracking purposes.

Next, Chairman Reed runs the meeting with inviting committee members to make comments. Chair Reed begins by saying, this committee is here. We're advocating on your behalf. Like they say, we are an advisory committee. We don't make any laws. We do not make any programs, but we want to make sure that those programs are equitably given out to everybody, not only within the 50 States, but also six territories. And the reason why I emphasize that, because sometimes, we fail to forget there's another part of this country that's out there in need of our support. Because we forget about those in the Pacific Islands. We forget about those that's in Alaska. We forget about those that's down there in the Caribbean area. I mean, we as individuals of the institution of the USBA, they don't. But we want to rest assured that they do reach out to them, so there will be no complaints or anything else like that. Because I know, like on the island of Guam, there's about six different ethnic groups on the island of Guam. So, some speak Spanish, some speak English, and some speak other languages, or what have you. So, we must make sure that we reach to those individuals.

Eston read comments from the public that was submitted via email.

Eston allowed Chair Reed to make statements and included the rest of the committee to make statements.

Eston open the floor for questions from the public to USDA representatives. Some of the Committee added to questions and discussions.

Eston thanked all for participating and adjourn the meeting 3:58 P.M.

Eston Williams

Eston Williams

Designated Federal Officers

Date: July 12, 2021


Harvey Reed
MFAA Chairman

Date: June 30, 2021