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S. HRG. 119–5

NOMINATION OF BROOKE ROLLINS TO BE SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

January 23, 2025

Printed for the use of the
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

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NOMINATION OF BROOKE ROLLINS TO BE SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23, 2025

U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10 a.m., in room SD–106, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John Boozman, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Boozman [presiding], MCCONNELL, Hoeven, Ernst, Hyde-Smith, Marshall, Tuberville, Justice, Grassley, Thune, Fischer, Moran, Klobuchar, Bennet, Smith, Durbin, Booker, Luján, Warnock, Welch, Schiff, and Slotkin.

STATEMENT OF HON. BOOZMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF ARKANSAS, CHAIRMAN, U.S. COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

Chairman BOOZMAN. Good morning. I am delighted to call today's hearing U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry to order.

First, I would like to congratulate two Members of this Committee who were instrumental in organizing the inaugural ceremonies that took place at the Capitol earlier this week, Senator Klobuchar and Senator Fischer, respectively the Chairwoman and Ranking Member of the Senate Rules Committee in the last Congress. For more than a year, the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, led by Senator Klobuchar, put tremendous effort into the planning, organizing a traditional ceremony on the west front of the Capitol. As you know, those plans had to be set aside at the very last minute because of the bitter cold, for the more intimate gathering inside the Rotunda, that we witnessed on Monday.

Thanks to her efforts, and without missing a beat, our Nation's tradition of peacefully transferring power continued, and the President was sworn in on the 20th of January, as required by the Constitution. Many thanks to Senator Klobuchar, Senator Fischer, and the staff for successfully organizing and hosting one of our Nation's most important civic traditions.

I would also like to congratulate Senator Klobuchar on becoming the Ranking Member of our Committee. I have worked closely with her over the years and look forward to continuing our partnership. I visited Minnesota with Senator Klobuchar in the spring of 2023, and met with farmers with the Gopher State, and similarly, cold weather, that we are experiencing today, only it was in May. I

greatly enjoyed the opportunity to hear those farm families, and I look forward to hosting her in Arkansas in the not too distant future.

I would like to welcome the Committee's Members. For those returning, thank you for your continuing service. For our four new Members—Senators, Slotkin, Schiff, Moran, and Justice—thank you for choosing to serve on the Committee. I look forward to working with you and learning more about what is important to you and your states.

Our Committee, established in 1825, is one of the oldest in the Senate. Our hearing room, which we will use in the future, is unique in that we do not have a dais but a table. We sit across from each other, not away from each other, symbolic and practical. I look forward to convening many meetings in Russell 328 in the coming years, for us to work together and address the concerns of our farmers and ranchers and rural communities and those needing assistance.

As the Chairman, my door is open to every Member of this Committee. The fundamental purpose of our Committee is to solve problems and help our citizens. I welcome you to share your ideas, concerns, and your solutions. Agriculture is not partisan. We all care about our Nation's farmers and ranchers. The state of rural America concerns us all. We all believe that no American should be hungry. I intend for this Committee to be highly productive in the 119th Congress. Working together this year, we will pass a farm bill that will meet the needs of our farmers, for today and for the future.

This morning we meet to consider the nomination of Brooke Leslie Rollins of Texas to be the Secretary of Agriculture. Ms. Rollins, congratulations to you on your nomination. You are being nominated at a very challenging time for America's farmers. The costs for fuel, seed, and fertilizer remain high. Interest rates are also very high, and continue to be high. Farm gate prices are low. Farmers everywhere are losing money on every acre they cultivate while farmers in certain parts of the country are losing hundreds of dollars per acre.

Thankfully, Congress responded at the end of last year and provided a bridge to help ensure producers could plant again this year. Delivering this economic assistance to our farmers will be one of the major tasks you will be faced as Secretary, but as I mentioned, this was only a bridge. It was necessary because the safety net our producers have counted on in the past no longer works. I look forward to working with my colleagues in this room, across the Senate, and with you to help create a farm bill that meets the realities of modern-day agriculture.

Beyond the economic strains our farmers and ranchers feel, I believe our producers want an improved relationship with USDA. They want to know USDA has their back and is helping them with the tools and support needed to successfully and profitably farm and ranch, rather than coercing them into production practices that do not work for their operations. They want new markets and new opportunities to sell what they produce. They want conservation programs to help with the issues they are facing on their farms. They want rural communities to have the infrastructure and the

resources for a high quality of life. USDA, with the right leadership, can do all of these things.

Beyond agriculture production, USDA is a land manager, research institution, food regulator, protector of animal health, and rural lender. There is very little USDA does not touch or have an impact on. All of these resources and abilities can be used to improve the quality of life not only in rural America but all of America.

As I met and talked with Ms. Rollins, it is clear the needs of American farmers, ranchers, and rural communities will be her focus. It is also clear that she has the relationships across the new Administration and an understanding of the processes in which decisions are made in the executive branch to best position our producers for success. I look forward to seeing her bring her considerable skills and her abilities to bear at USDA for the benefit of our farmers, ranchers, and rural communities.

I now recognize Ranking Member Klobuchar for her opening statement.

STATEMENT OF HON. KLOBUCHAR, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MINNESOTTA

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and we welcome you, Ms. Rollins, thank you, your entire family, that seems to take up like ten rows, as well as the FFA, your FFA officers—it is kind of an incredible group there—and your ag teacher.

I want to thank Chairman Boozman for holding this important nomination hearing. Thank you to our colleagues from Texas who are here. Senator Boozman and I have been friends and colleagues for years, and as you noted, you came to visit my state. We did not consider that cold that day in May. We considered it a beach day with a touch of snow. I want to thank you for visiting with our farmers and our ranchers and our conservation and nutrition leaders in our state.

I also look forward to working with you to be a voice for rural America. All of our colleagues on this Committee are incredible voices for rural America. I am really excited. I have told our Democratic leaders on this Committee how excited I am about the people that are on this Committee, and I believe we are going to work really well together.

I want to mention our friend and colleague, Senator Stabenow, for her 14 years of leadership of this Committee. She is now retired from this Committee. Whether it was passing farm bills, standing up for conservation programs, or making sure there was food on the table, she was always at the forefront of the fight.

I would like to thank all of our returning Members as well as the new Senators on the Committee, that Senator Boozman mentioned—Senator Schiff and Senator Slotkin. They have been already really strong participants in all of these discussions we have been having. Senator Moran as well as Senator Justice, thank you. We are looking forward to continuing the strong tradition of bipartisanship.

Ms. Rollins, again thank you for being here. I enjoyed our previous discussions, and I look forward to the hearing today and hearing from you about your plans for the future. I know you and

your family—I just talked to your mom about it—have had a farm in Minnesota for years, and I hope you will be visiting our state again soon.

As you know, the Secretary of Agriculture is a voice for rural America within the President's Cabinet. If rural America is going to prosper it will be important to have a Secretary who will address the challenges facing farmers and rural families, who sees the importance of nutrition and conservation, and who will work with us on a strong bipartisan farm bill.

We, on this Committee, have made progress on so many fronts, from strengthening crop insurance to improving voluntary conservation programs to the good work we have done on biofuels across the aisle. There are still numerous challenges facing America—avian flu, struggling dairy producers, flooding, droughts, wildfire, as Senator Schiff well knows, scarcity at food shelves, and the lack of housing, childcare, and health care facilities in rural America.

As we discussed, I have concerns about some of the proposed policies from the Administration, and while I have always supported targeted tariffs, I am concerned that major across-the-board tariff increases could hurt rural America. I hope that, if confirmed, that Ms. Rollins will make the case for sensible trade policy that will work for our farmers and rural America.

We also need leaders of the USDA that believe in science and research, which is so critical right now. I know many of our Members will be asking on that front.

As the Ranking Member of this Committee, I am committed to doing what is right for rural America, which means finding common ground when we can, but standing our ground where we must. In Minnesota, our prosperity depends on the strength and vitality of our rural communities. Farmers and livestock producers need access to safety net programs with weather conditions threatening all the time, input costs, and the like. Rural businesses cannot spur innovation and create jobs without an available workforce, which I think is going to be an issue we will be confronting this year, as well as childcare, health care, housing, and broadband. I know this is true not just for me but for all Members of this Committee.

I look forward to the hearing today and learning more about, Ms. Rollins, your plans for the Department of Agriculture. Thank you very much, and thank you to our colleagues.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Today we are being joined by our colleagues from Texas to introduce our nominee. Thank you all for being here. Senator Cornyn, will you please proceed.

Senator CORNYN. Thank you, Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar, Members of the Agriculture Committee. I am delighted to be here, along with my colleague, Senator Cruz, to introduce our friend, Brooke Rollins, to be the next Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This one is a no-brainer. Everybody who knows Brooke Rollins loves Brooke Rollins, and you will too, once you get to know her. I first met Brooke years ago, when serving in State Government in Texas, but it was when she was the Policy Director for then-Governor Rick Perry that I began to see what a truly dedicated public servant she was, and still is.

Since this time, as you know, from reading her resume, you know she has had quite an impressive career, and so I am delighted to be here today to help introduce her.

She was born and raised, as was pointed out, in Glen Rose, Texas. For those of you who have not pulled out your map to see where that is, it is about an hour southwest of Fort Worth. She brings firsthand experience to the often difficult realities of farm life into the Department of Agriculture.

She graduated from Texas A&M School of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications. I thought I heard a whoop somewhere.

[Audience whooping.]

Senator CORNYN. Texas is home to nearly 230,000 farms and ranches, more than any other state in the country, and one in every seven Texans works in an agriculture-related job. This is critical to our state and to the Nation, as has been pointed out. Brooke's agricultural roots will serve her well as Secretary of Agriculture, to give farmers and producers from the Lone Star State and across the country a clarion voice when it comes to President Trump's Cabinet.

Ms. Rollins' credentials go way beyond the day-to-day intricacies of farming. She is also a University of Texas Law School graduate, and a policy wonk. She will confess to that during this hearing today. That is demonstrated by her years of service as general counsel to Governor Perry and her 15 years leading one of Texas' premier policy institutes, the Texas Public Policy Foundation. It was during President Trump's first administration she served as Director of the Domestic Policy Council. Many of us worked with her closely there, where she assisted Jared Kushner in that job.

You know that position is responsible for coordinating the domestic policymaking of the White House and ensuring that decisions and programs are consistent with the President's goals, and overseeing the implementation of the President's domestic policy agenda. Since her time in the first Trump administration, Brooke has served as President and CEO of America First Public Policy Institute, where she helped craft the agenda for President Trump's second term.

I have worked with Brooke in a number of roles and seen her as she has helped advance bipartisan legislation, both in Austin and here in the Nation's capital, and I know she will bring that experience and that temperament to her job at USDA. It is a good thing because she has her job cut out for her. First, Congress has failed to pass a 5-year farm bill, and I know that is priority number one for this Committee. She will have an opportunity to work with each of you to shape this critical legislation that farmers and ranchers across the country depend on.

As has been alluded, I think by Senator Klobuchar, the disasters that we have experienced throughout the country have hit farm country particularly hard, and I know she will work hard with you and all of us to make sure we provide an essential lifeline to our farmers and ranchers.

As Coach Tuberville knows, the Texas A&M football team, of which Brooke is a devoted fan, says their student body is the 12th man, who propels them to victory. I know Brooke is honored to step

up now and become the 12th woman for the farmers and ranchers of America.

I am looking forward to working with her and with all of you to pass a farm bill and put farmers back where they deserve to be, and that is first and foremost in our policy deliberations. I have no doubt that Brooke is exactly the person for the job to implement President Trump's agenda at USDA.

It is my honor to be here with all of you, and her family, and a multitude of friends. Even her high school ag teacher is here. Everybody who knows Brooke, loves Brooke, and I know you will too as you get to know her.

Thank you for allowing me to be here and say a few words by way of introduction.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you, Senator Cornyn. Senator Cruz.

Senator CRUZ. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Boozman. Thank you Ranking Member Klobuchar, Members of the Committee. Let me start by saying what Senator Cornyn said a minute ago is absolutely right. This is a no-brainer. Brooke Rollins is the nominee to be Secretary of Agriculture is an extraordinary choice, and I have absolute confidence that every Member of this Committee is going to be very, very happy working with her in that role in the next four years.

I have been friends with Brooke for over two decades, from when she was Policy Director for then-Governor Rick Perry to when she led the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which became the preeminent free market state foundation in the country, to when she came to Washington to join President Trump to lead the Domestic Policy Council, to her more recent years leading the America First Policy Institute.

At every stage, she has proven herself to be a leader, she has proven herself to be an innovative policy thinker, and she has proven herself able to bring people together to accomplish major objectives. All of those skills will serve her and the farmers and ranchers of America exceptionally well.

To know Brooke is to know she is an Aggie, and all Aggies are members of a cult——

[Laughter.]

Senator CRUZ [continuing]. which I say from a place of deep love. I am convinced if you were to cut Brooke's hand right here it would not bleed red, but it would bleed maroon onto this table. She brings that ferocity to everything she does. She brings creativity. She brings joy. Brooke is always smiling, and she is smiling because she has a vision of where to take us.

She grew up in a small agricultural community, Glen Rose, Texas. Her summers were spent at her family's Minnesota farm, helping with the corn, potato, and soybean crops. I have to say, Brooke, the level of foresight to kiss up to the Ranking Member as a young child is impressive.

[Laughter.]

Senator CRUZ. Her experiences in barrel racing—and by the way, for everyone who knows barrel racers, yes, they are crazy—and raising livestock for 4-H and Future Farmers of America, instilled in her a profound appreciation for the challenges and rewards of life in agriculture.

Farmers and ranchers in America right now are facing extraordinary challenges, challenges that are putting their livelihood at risk, putting their families at risk, putting the ability to provide food and fiber and clothing for the American people at genuine risk. Farmers and ranchers of this Nation, the farmers and ranchers in the great State of Texas, are looking to this Committee for leadership, and they are looking to the next Secretary of Agriculture for leadership.

In Texas, in South Texas, we face historic droughts, and yet our neighbor, the Nation of Mexico, is in brazen violation of the 1944 Water Treaty that obligates it to provide water each year to the people of South Texas. I have no doubt that soon-to-be Secretary Rollins will be a ferocious advocate for those South Texas farmers, just as she is a ferocious advocate for farmers and ranchers in every one of your states and all across the country.

She is going to be an extraordinary and even an historic Secretary of Agriculture. I am proud to join John Cornyn in supporting my friend, Brooke Rollins, and I encourage you to do the same.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you, Senator Cruz. Again, thank you, Senator Cornyn, for being here.

I would now like to recognize our nominee, Brooke Rollins, to introduce some of her guests, before I administer the oath and she gives her opening statement.

Ms. ROLLINS. Good morning, everyone. What a joy to be here, and wow, a little surreal and slightly overwhelming, the two gentlemen that were sitting up here, whom I have known, as they mentioned, for a long time. I want to thank them.

A few guests, and I appreciate, Senator Boozman, the opportunity to introduce them. My awesome mom right here, whose new issue that all of you know, the oldest freshman legislator in Texas history, Helen Kerwin, raised my sisters and me by herself in that small town, and PFAS is her big issue. I know a lot of you are certainly concerned with that.

My incredible husband, Mark Rollins. We met the first week of our freshman year at Texas A&M, Senator Tuberville, in 1990, 35 years ago, and our four incredible children, Luke, Jake, Anna, and Lily are here with me. Luke is the oldest—Luke, raise your hand. Listen to your mother. Very good. He is a sophomore at Texas A&M University in the Corps of Cadets, and in fact, left College Station at 1:30 last night, 1:30 a.m., to drive all night, catch a flight in Dallas, and be here this morning. I am especially grateful to him and my other incredible children. Even though they are all teenagers—Luke is 20—it has been the joy and most important part of my life, being their mom, so what a joy to have them.

My sister, Ann Bluntzer, my sister, Helen Hubert, Eliza, my niece, they are all here, my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, Tim and Elizabeth Yaggi. My incredible ag teacher, who I would like to stand up. This is Mr. Gary Rosenbush, who put up with a lot from this FFA'er.

[Applause.]

Ms. ROLLINS. I have often said that the Future Farmers of America changed my life and put me on a course that, frankly, leads me to today. Mr. Rosenbush was a big part of that.

I also want to recognize, a lot of people know that I take great pride in my short but I think very successful life as a Little League softball coach. My daughter, Lily, was the catcher on the team, but most of the rest of the team also flew in last night. The Hot Tamales, everyone, from Texas, are here. Thank you guys for being here.

[Applause.]

Ms. ROLLINS. My 1990–1991 State FFA officer team from all parts of Texas. There were 10 of us. The other 9 all came—ag teachers, insurance agents, workers of the land, they are all here. What a joy to have my State FFA officer team here, as well. If you all want to stand. What an incredible inspiration.

[Applause.]

Ms. ROLLINS. I know, Senator, I could go on and on. I promise I am going to cut this short. One other thing, one other person, Pastor Jentezen Franklin of Georgia, who has been such an inspiration to me, flew all the way in from Free Chapel in Georgia to pray with my family and I this morning. Pastor Franklin, I want to thank you, as well. One of the great pastors of our time. Pastor, thank you.

I have so many Texas friends, other family that are here, but I will wrap it there and just say what an incredible honor to have all of them behind me today.

Chairman BOOZMAN. That is great. That is wonderful.

Please stand and raise your right hand.

Do you swear or affirm that the statement that you are about to provide is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Ms. ROLLINS. I do.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Do you agree that if confirmed you will respond to requests to appear and testify before any duly constituted committee of the Senate?

Ms. ROLLINS. I do.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Again, congratulations on your nomination. You can have a seat. You are recognized for five minutes to give your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF BROOKE ROLLINS, OF TEXAS, TO BE SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and distinguished Members of this Committee, first my thanks to President Donald Trump for his faith in me to lead the United States Department of Agriculture. His confidence fuels my determination to deliver.

I also want to thank my dear friends and fellow Texans, Senator John Cornyn and Senator Ted Cruz for so graciously introducing me to this Committee.

I also, obviously, want to extend my sincere thanks to all of you, the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, for your careful consideration of my nomination, and understand, and perhaps most importantly, I want to thank and am so overwhelmed at the honor to potentially serve the men and women who daily, without pause or complaint, provide our great nation and the world with the best food, fiber, and fuel.

Throughout the past several weeks I have met or spoken with every Republican and Democrat Senator on this Committee, and I appreciate your insights, your concerns, and your very wise counsel. It is clear we all agree that farmers and ranchers are the cornerstone of our Nation's communities, and I commit to you today that if confirmed I will do everything in my ability to make sure our farmers, ranchers, and rural communities thrive.

I also want to thank the many Senators and Representatives on Capitol Hill with whom I have had the incredible opportunity to work with these last two decades, during my career in public policy, in my time first with Governor Rick Perry, then leading the Texas Public Policy Foundation, in my various roles in the Trump administration, the first one, and since 2021, in my role founding and leading the America First Policy Institute. Each of you cares deeply about the American people whom we all serve, and I promise my work will reflect that commitment.

Growing up in the small ag town of Glen Rose, Texas—you all have heard this—population then 1,200 people, is where my story begins. Then my world revolved around the Future Farmers of America, 4-H, and the endless cycle of baling hay, livestock shows, and rodeos. That still, today, constitute the calendar of our small corner of Texas.

That experience sent me to Texas A&M on an agriculture scholarship, where I studied and majored in ag leadership and development, then on to the University of Texas Law School, where I graduated with honors and performed a federal judicial clerkship. Then, of course, to helm the policy shop of Texas Governor Rick Perry. It was there that I had my first direct leadership role in big state ag policy.

I had been in office serving Governor Rick Perry for 2-plus years when I received a call, a small think tank of two or three staffers in San Antonio, who asked if I would be interested in being their new leader, and I answered that call, as well, thinking that as my husband and I built our family that that would be helpful and a good potential opportunity to be a great mom but also continue to fight for Texas.

At TPPF over the next years we fundamentally redefined the mission of a think tank from just having ideas or writing about them in white papers to actually effectually changing policy for the people of our state. We engaged strongly during those 15 years the Texas rural and small town communities, giving them a voice in government that was too often denied. In short, we changed the game in Texas.

Changing the game is exactly why I accepted the invitation to join President Trump's first administration at the beginning of 2018. Everything that we had sought to do in Texas those last decades, to make policy for real change, for real Texans, was being done in the first Trump administration, and I was so honored and excited to be part of it. I joined first to the White House Office of American Innovation as its leader. I then soon became the Assistant to the President, in addition, on Strategic Initiatives, and eventually added the role of the Director of the Domestic Policy Council.

In January 2021, exactly four years ago, we understood that President Trump's second-term agenda would be delayed, so I had

the privilege and the idea of establishing yet another institution of policy leadership, and the America First Policy Institute was born. I currently serve as the President and CEO there.

Thanks to President Trump and to all of you, I hope to have the opportunity to bring that level of passion and commitment to the USDA. I need not tell you, of all people, that this is surpassingly important, because agriculture is surpassingly important to us as a Nation. All Americans are important, but the farmer, the worker of the land, who feeds all the others, is amongst the most notable. Thomas Jefferson wrote that "Agriculture is our wisest pursuit because it will—excuse me, I do not want to get Thomas Jefferson's quote wrong; cannot misquote Thomas Jefferson—because it will, in the end, contribute most to real wealth, good morals, and happiness", and his wisdom holds true today.

I fully recognize that if I am confirmed I am stepping into the role during one of the most economically challenging times in American agriculture history. With that in mind, I want to share with you, as I close, my top priorities for day one, and then perhaps a longer-term priority.

First, we must ensure that the disaster and economic assistance authorized by Congress is deployed as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Second, we must work with the great men and women of USDA, the stakeholder communities, and state leaders—my deep background in state policy—to immediately and comprehensively get a handle on the state of animal disease outbreaks.

Third, we must immediately begin to modernize, realign, rethink the United States Department of Agriculture, responding to the clear needs and the desires of the American people, as set forth so well by the President of the United States over this last historic week.

Finally, and longer term, we understand that serving all American agriculture and all the American people means ensuring that our rural communities are equipped and supported to prosper not just today but tomorrow and the day after that and the many tomorrows to come. This includes exploring improvements to our rural development programs, demanding strong and steady domestic and export markets for our beautiful agriculture bounty, eliminating burdensome and costly regulations that hamper innovation, ensuring our nutrition programs are effective and efficient, and putting in the work to make sure we have a healthy and prepared next generation of farmers, ranchers, entrepreneurs, innovators, and indeed, all Americans. This is what we need for the next century of American greatness.

These are just four of my top priorities. Beyond these, I am dedicated and committed to providing all of you with the timely technical assistance that we will need to ensure that we have a farm bill that moves forward.

My aim, after all, is the same as yours, the same that brought you to the Senate, the same that brought Donald J. Trump to the presidency again, and that is to serve the people and this great country.

Thank you, Senator, and thank you, Ranking Member Klobuchar.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Rollins can be found on page 71 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you for your opening statement.

As is customary, my colleagues and I would like to ask you some questions. Each Senator will have 7 minutes to ask questions during this first round. If we need an additional round that will be 5 minutes.

Before I ask my questions I would like to add a number of letters in support of Ms. Rollins' nomination into the record. In particular, I would like to highlight one letter signed by the Farm Bureau, the Farmers Union, the National Council of Farmers Cooperatives, and more than 400 other agricultural organizations supporting Ms. Rollins' nomination. Without objection, so ordered.

[The letters can be found on pages 78–118 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. In your written statement, again, you alluded to, and the testimony that you just provided, you talked about your focus, you know, some of the things you want to do. Can you expand on that a little bit more? The first 100 days, what can we expect?

Ms. ROLLINS. I think the first 100 days, sir, if I am so fortunate to be confirmed, will be a fast and furious effort to ensure that we move that economic aid out. In fact, when I got the call from the President about this particular position it was the honor of a lifetime to accept that call and to accept the nomination. Then about 5 minutes later I started thinking about, okay, what do I do to make this successful and perhaps the best, most effective, efficient, United States Department of Agriculture in history, since President Lincoln first launched this Department.

The aid to the farmers, top priority, animal disease, top priority, ensuring that we begin to move toward President Trump's vision. I work for him. I am his Cabinet Member. Also working alongside all of you. In so many of the conversations that we all had over the last 4 to 6 weeks, from both sides of the aisle, from both Republicans and Democrats, were very encouraging to me. I believe that there is an opportunity, while there will be moments of disagreement. I have no doubt that there will also be many, many moments of agreement.

Chairman Boozman, my thought is that we get in there, and anyone that knows me and that has worked with me over the course of all these years knows that excellence is not only the goal but the expectation, that we move with rapid speed to ensure it gets done, that we work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for our constituents, which is American agriculture, and that at the end of the day this country and that community is thriving in a way perhaps they never have before, because of the work and the foresight and the goals and the vision that I think is so important.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Good. I appreciate you, you know, on several occasions, bringing up the disaster assistance. This Committee worked in a very bipartisan way to get that done. It was a big effort, and it took a lot of work, and again, we were able to get that done in a very bipartisan way.

That is what we have heard about from our farmers now, is thank you for doing it but we desperately need it so that we can talk to our bankers and try and figure things out from this last

year, where most farmers lost a lot of money, their path forward. Again, that, I think, is music to all of our ears.

Trade is vitally important to American agriculture. Our abundant yields and high-quality crops help feed the world. Can you please describe how the President's trade agenda will prioritize the needs of American farmers and ranchers. If our trading partners unfairly target U.S. agriculture producers, how will the Administration minimize the impact to our producers?

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator, and I am actually glad this is at the top of the next few hours, because I think it is on the mind of every Member of this Committee and perhaps every member of the ag community across this great nation.

The first, I think, that is important to note is that the last few years we have almost a $45 billion trade deficit for our ag products. A key priority will be expanding access to these markets across the country. We have already been sort of vision-boarding—not to get ahead of the process, but I want to make sure I am able to hit the ground running—how it is we begin to immediately effectuate bringing down that $45 billion trade deficit, and it is just up 42 percent in the last year. There is a deep recognition that corn prices are down 35 percent just in the last year, as well—the past two years, I am sorry—and that, in fact, our farmers are hurting.

Regarding the President's tariff agenda, I think it probably comes as no surprise to anyone sitting in this room that he believes it is a very important tool in his toolkit to continue or bring America back to the forefront of the world and to ensure that we have a thriving economy. Just as he did, and we did, in the first administration, he also understands the potential devastating impact to our farmers and our ranchers.

During that time I have spoken with Secretary Perdue a few times on how that was managed, and to that team, so I fully understand, and that we are prepared to execute something similar, if approved, if confirmed, but also working with the White House to ensure that we can close those holes for our farmers and ranchers, moving forward, under any sort of tariff execution in the next coming days, in the next few years. That will be a top priority of mine.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Hunger is an issue that we continue to face. My home State of Arkansas has the highest rate of food insecurity in the Nation. At USDA you will be responsible for leading 16 nutrition programs that assist 1 in 4 Americans. These programs make up the vast majority of the spending at the Department.

In spite of these programs, which have grown substantially over the last 20 years, the national food insecurity rate has hovered around 12 percent since 2001, even during times of economic prosperity. The goal of these programs is to provide temporary assistance to those in need, but the focus on moving families to a place of economic independence has been lost.

Will you commit to reviewing these programs to ensure they help incentivize Americans to secure steady employment while still being able to trust that their federal supplemental assistance can be relied on in times of need?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, I so appreciate your concern and focus on this incredibly important program. I think sometimes people on our side of the aisle are framed as those that do not care as much about the kids or those who are hurting or those from disadvantaged communities. I know I have spent my career working to ensure that every corner of America, that everyone has a shot at the American dream, first with Rick Perry, then with my think tank, then with President Trump, then with the AFPI, the America First Policy Institute.

I too have a real heart for this work, and I have talked to many of you about that in your offices. That is perhaps driven by being raised in a small town, by a single mom, and we did not have much. Now, we never participated in the nutrition program, but I am fully aware and have a heart for this work and for this community, that it is easy to make the commitment to ensure that we are doing everything we can, that this supplemental program continues on a course of being effective and efficient.

Having said that, it is also imperative to us that every taxpayer dollar that is spent in support of these programs we fully understand that it is reaching its intended recipient, that that recipient is able to use it effectively and efficiently, for true nutrition reason, that we have a real health issue in this country. You all know this. I think 4 out of 5 children are facing obesity or close to it, that level of diabetes and chronic diseases continue to rise.

We, together, and myself, if so fortunate to be confirmed, will have a major role in all of the above, ensuring that these programs are serving those who need them, and doing it effectively, but also ensuring that the taxpayers are being well served, that the dollar that we take from, you know, my electrician in Fort Worth, who has his own small business, and then sending it to a family in need, that that dollar is being used in the best and most effective way. That is certainly my commitment to you, Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Again, welcome, Ms. Rollins. As we both noted, the Chairman and I, this Committee has worked together, and all the Members know this, on a bipartisan way to pass farm bills in the past, improve the farm safety net, stand up for conservation, nutrition, food security.

Will you be a force for working with both sides of the aisle?

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you so much, Senator Klobuchar, for that question, and it is exceedingly important to me that we deliver for American farmers and ranchers, exceedingly. I have already begun to lose some sleep over how to make that happen in a way that is productive and supporting your work.

I have a long history of working in a bipartisan manner. It may not be at the forefront of my bio or my resume, but I worked with many of you in the last administration on the First Step Act, which I believe was perhaps the hallmark of President Trump 1.0 and bipartisan work together. I sat in an office for many hours with Senator Durbin, Senator Grassley, Senator Booker, Senator Scott, and many others from both sides, as we hammered out how to solve the criminal justice challenges that our Bureau of Prisons is facing. I

hope to bring that same skill set and perhaps knowledge base in relationships to this effort, as well.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. I appreciate you mentioned animal disease as one of your lead priorities, as well as the disaster economic assistance. As you know, and you and I discussed this, since 2022, the most recent outbreak of avian flu has devastated poultry producers, spread to dairy cattle, resulting in at least one death. We are starting to see increases in certain prices attributed to that.

If confirmed, how will you ensure that farmers have the resources they need to combat the spread of this virus? What is your plan?

Ms. ROLLINS. There is no doubt that what the community, and whom we all work for, that community, not just America but the entire world relies on for an abundant, safe, and secure food supply. Just learning of the devastation in Georgia, just over the last few weeks, with the poultry outbreak and the depopulation there of our poultry, of course, to your point about dairy, it has been affecting some of the dairy herds, I believe, across 16 states. There is a lot that I have to learn on this, and if confirmed, this will be, as I mentioned in my opening statement, one of the very top priorities. We are hyper-focused on finding the team right now—I am assured they are already working. I have obviously respected the process and not gotten too involved—but I know that the current team and the future team will be working hand-in-hand to do everything we can on animal disease.

Senator, if I may add one more thing. My deep background working in state policy included working very closely with Governors' offices and ag commissioners across this great country. In fact, in the last White House I sort of took it upon myself, which is where I met a few of our Governors, who are now here, to work closely and in concert and aligned with both Republican and Democrat leaders from the states.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. I really appreciate that. We have 7 minutes, so I am going to go a little quicker here.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, ma'am.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. I will note that just yesterday the Administration announced they will halt external public health communications from the CDC on these avian flu, animal diseases, and these important announcements have helped keep producers up-to-date with the latest information on disease spread, health of workers. While I know that was not under the USDA, I just urge you to talk to them about that. We are concerned.

Biofuels—and I appreciated our discussion on that—while you served as the CEO of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, your organization was often critical on biofuels, including ethanol. As you know, we have worked really hard to make this so we do not just have one fuel, that we have options here, including with Senator Ernst and Senator Fischer and Senator Grassley, Senator Thune, many others.

What role do you believe biofuels play in our domestic energy production? How will you continue to promote the production of these fuels as Secretary?

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, and I appreciate you bringing that up. It is my understanding that those reports were written over a decade ago. I have not seen anything more recent. Texas Public Policy Foundation puts out almost 900 to 1,000 pieces of content a year. I did not author that specific piece.

To be clear, there is no doubt, coming from Texas, I was a massive defender of fossil fuels and the importance of fossil fuels in the energy independence and energy dominance narrative. Clearly I have spoken with so many of you on both sides of the aisle on this issue.

I will be a Secretary for all agriculture. It is really important to me that we continue to defend and elevate and honor all sources of fuel. My former boss and current boss, in his current Energy Dominance Plan, included biofuels as an important piece of his agenda. I really look forward to continuing that.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. I know your family, based on the forms—I appreciate you getting us those forms—that your family has significant financial interests in the oil industry. Will these interests motivate decisions you make at the Department, especially when they impact your family's financial holdings?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, I can promise you this, and you and I have met a few times through the years, and have more in-depth discussions, but not as many as I would like. Hopefully a lot more in the future. I can promise you this. Anyone that has ever worked with me will tell you, even to the detriment of organizations I have run, detriment financially, to my potential family, that I have never, not ever, made a decision based on financial interest, ever. That certainly will not begin now.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. You discussed briefly with Senator Boozman the export markets. I also appreciated you mentioned that in your long-term focus on exports. As you know, during the first Trump administration we heard resounding calls from farmers that they want trade, not aid—those were exact words, I am remembering. They want to grow their market and not just get government payment.

We worked hard on this Committee to help farmers build markets here and abroad. Senator Hoeven and I have set up a Rural Export Center, in fact. Ms. Rollins, how would you work with President Trump, the Office of the U.S. Trade Rep, and others within the Administration to ensure that they understand the effects of potential retaliatory tariffs on American farmers, and how will you help them manage this risk, beyond just getting extra payments to make up for it. Will you be a voice to make sure people understand the importance of exports for rural America? It is not just farming. It is also manufacturing and the like.

Ms. ROLLINS. No, that is correct. The, I believe, extraordinary value that I potentially bring to this table is having served in the last White House for three years, right alongside President Trump. I believe I may be the most well-versed in how the interagency process works, of all the Cabinet, of how the interagency process works, of how the discussions are handled, of what the Oval Office meetings look like, and how to ensure that at every corner that my team, that our community, that what we all represent together, is

at the table, fighting for what we believe is necessary for these communities.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thank you. I have some important questions for the second round here on conservation and nutrition, and I know my colleagues will be asking them, as well. Thank you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator McConnell.

Senator MCCONNELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Congratulations on your nomination, and I appreciate you coming by the office. I had a chance to tell you then that Kentucky agriculture is a little different. We have 75,000 farms, but most of them are small. We are also the number one beef cattle state east of the Mississippi. People do not generally associate Kentucky with that.

I want to echo what others here have said about trade. I went over to the trade representative on the floor of the House—we were there for the big speech—and introduced myself, and I said, "Do you have anything to do?" She basically did not have an answer.

It seems to me that trade has sort of become a word, for a lot of Americans, that implies exportation of jobs. In Kentucky, we think of trade as exportation of products. It is an extremely important part of what we do.

I think both of the candidates in the last election sort of shied away from this issue. As others have said, give us some hope that maybe we could get back in the trade business. We would need trade promotion authority, which we currently do not have. I would be interested in your thoughts further about this.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, thank you, Senator McConnell, and it was an honor to be in your office to talk a little bit about Kentucky bourbon and a few other important things. It is the first time I have ever heard, I think, anyone say that President Trump has shied away from anything. I do not specifically have a recall of anything specific about him not talking about trade, other than perhaps to your point that our country, and especially our ag community, is in a tough spot right now with regards to exports and moving our products out. I know that the USMCA is back up for negotiation, along with other trade agreements.

Here is what I am very encouraged about, Senator, and I hope it perhaps gives you some encouragement, as well. In my now almost nine years, maybe eight years, with President Trump, at the end of the day we all know him to be the consummate deal maker. I believe that that skill and that intense focus on making deals, for his people, not only for America but for the ag community that supported him at 90 percent, since really the very, very beginning, I think 338 counties out of 344 agriculture counties voted for him. He knows that these are the people that had been with him the longest.

I sincerely believe that if I do my job, and in working with all of you to ensure that the White House and that our partners across the agencies have all of the data that they need, while at the same time we are working across the world to bring in new trade partners, to expand access for new trade products and for all, whether it is the specialty crops or the row crops or the livestock industry, I believe, as the President mentioned in his inaugural address, that

we are embarking on a Golden Age, and I also believe this is going to be a very, very big part of that.

Senator MCCONNELL. Okay. I want to shift to something Kentucky-specific that we discussed in the office. I wanted to bring it up again. Back in 2020, through the appropriations process, I managed to allocate $65 million for an agricultural research service lab at the Kentucky College of Agriculture. That was four or five years ago. Nothing has happened yet.

What did happen? Well, there were a number of different regulatory trip wires that got injected into the process. In trying to meet those regulatory trip wires slowed everything down, everything down, everything down. I want to see construction begin. The money is there. What can you tell me, to give me hope?

Ms. ROLLINS. We did discuss this, and again, another passion of mine, that has been mentioned, is my love for Texas A&M and the Ag School and the research facilities. I am really excited to get knee-deep, waist-deep, neck-deep in these facilities across the country. I know we also had discussions with some of the others Senators on this Committee that they have some similar concerns with some different facilities that they would like to see move a lot more quickly.

Senator MCConnell, I commit to you that we will immediately begin digging in on what is happening. A big part of my portfolio in the last administration was the President's deregulation agenda and understanding how certain regulations and rules hampered important projects for moving forward and opening up markets, et cetera.

I actually believe that with the right team in place, and with your quick confirmation of some of those under secretaries, that we will be able to dig in, figure out what is happening, work with you and others from Kentucky to figure out what is going on and figure out how to move this forward.

Senator MCCONNELL. As you say, the previous administration was big on regulations, across the board. I think they all ought to be looked at in terms of the impact on the economy, and I think that is what the new administration intends to do. Thank you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator. I agree with that and look forward to working with you and others on that.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Bennet.

Senator BENNET. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to thank you and the Ranking Member for your opening statements. Both of you together, I think, captured the spirit of what this Committee is supposed to be about in a Congress where we have not worked well together. I just want to say how much I appreciate your leadership today, the two of you. Thanks also for mentioning Chairwoman Stabenow, who did a great job here for a long period of time.

Ms. Rollins, congratulations to you. You mentioned in your answer just now to Senator McConnell—this is actually not a question that I was going to ask, but since you mentioned it to him, you said we all recognize agriculture is in a tough place when it comes to exports. We do all recognize that. Could you elaborate more on that? We would love to hear your perspective on the hole that many of us feel that we are in right now, as we get ready to think

about what the trade policies are going to be of this Administration and of the country.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator Bennet, of course, and loved our conversation about your beautiful Colorado.

Senator BENNET. Thank you. Come any time.

Ms. ROLLINS. I would welcome that. We do spend some time there in the summers, as good Texans do, getting out of the heat. I will look forward to seeing you next time.

In the last handful of years we have gone from not having a trade deficit in our agricultural communities to having a $45 billion trade deficit. Of course, that has led to many challenges, including food inflation. I know when I have heard President Trump talk about his priorities, the first is the border, which I am guessing we will get into at some point, but second was food inflation.

There are many tools in our toolkit, both through USDA and expanding markets, which are all intertwined, to begin immediately to work to bring that deficit down, and hopefully soon get it to zero. My commitment is to——

Senator BENNET. I would say, though——

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator BENNET [continuing]. that deficit, we know, is being caused by a strong dollar. It is being caused by competition from Brazil. It is being caused by limitations on our beef supply. It is being caused by prices that are going up. I mean, I do not think these particularly are failures in trade policy. It is making it harder for us to export, which is what Senator McConnell's concern was, which I share.

I think that all of us understand it. Actually, I will say there are many ways in which I am sympathetic to some of the trade policies that President Trump is trying to advocate for. Agriculture is already in a tough spot for those reasons, I think, largely, and we do not want it to be in a tougher spot as a result of what happens here. I think when you were in my office you talked a little bit—and this is going to be the easiest question that you get, and I hope you only take 15 seconds to answer so I can go on to the next——

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator BENNET [continuing]. which is, you know, what is your responsibility as the Secretary of Agriculture to go into the Oval Office and say, "You have not thought through the unintended consequences that are going to flow to American agriculture if you pursue these trade policies?"

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, in 15 seconds my role is to defend, to honor, to elevate our entire agriculture community, in the Oval Office, around the table, through the interagency process, and to ensure that every decision that is made in the coming four years has that front of mind as those decisions are being made.

Senator BENNET. I agree also with what Senator Klobuchar said, as we have heard from our farmers and ranchers over and over again, is they want to be able to do the work. They want to be able to export. They do not want to solve this problem by getting aid to make up for what they should have been able to send to Asia and other kinds of places. The only growth that my farmers and ranchers can see in the foreseeable future, which is to say their lifetimes, is by growing our exports of agriculture.

I appreciate your understanding that——

Ms. ROLLINS. I agree.

Senator BENNET [continuing]. and we are counting on you, if you are in this job, to be that advocate.

We also had the chance, when you were in my office, to talk a little bit about something that I have focused on here the entire time I have been on this Committee, which is the state of our national forests throughout the American West. As you know, and I know you know this, they are incredibly important to us because every single community that we have, no matter how big or no matter how small, every single farm and ranch that we have is downstream from these snowpacks and downstream from these national forests. The condition of these national forests—and they are national forests for a reason, you know, they are national forests—the condition is just untenable and dangerous.

I told Chuck Schumer, he does not necessarily agree with me, but I have told him over and over again that these forests are more important infrastructure from our perspective than the Lincoln Tunnel is to New York. If the Lincoln Tunnel is closed, there are other things you can do. He may not agree with that.

If we lose our water, we lose everything in the West. Coloradans are watching what is going on now in California, Senator Schiff, with broken hearts because of what is happening there. We have seen it happen at a much smaller scale, but still universal in our state with things like the Marshall Fire.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the importance of these national forests, how you think about the stewardship, whether or not we should be considering the fact that if we wait to fight these fires, it costs $50,000 an acre to fight them, whereas if we do the work on the front end, putting people to work in our national forests, it can cost $1,400 an acre to do it. I would love to hear your perspective on this.

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, I am so glad you brought this up, and I believe—and Senator Schiff and I spoke about this, obviously, in his office a week or two ago, as they were facing an unimaginable experience in California. I am really excited to tackle this problem. I do not pretend to even know the beginnings of it. I have just started studying it. It seems to me, and after speaking with you and others on the Committee and beginning to learn, first of all, I think we have a great Under Secretary identified and announced, the quicker we can get him confirmed, the quicker we can really begin this hard work ahead.

My husband's family owns a little cabin right on the edge of a national forest in Gunnison, Colorado, so I, too, have spent about the last 25 years enjoying the national forests and the extraordinary beauty that they bring to our people.

The water is a massive issue, and you and I talked about that. Forty million people depend on the water that is under your land in Colorado. I do believe, and people call me a pathological optimist, but maybe the pathological optimist in me sincerely believes that we can fix this, and we can fix it fairly quickly, with the right team in place, and working with all of you who have watched it, been frustrated by it, and want an answer.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to thank, or express to both you and to the Ranking Member that I think we are fortunate to have both of you in the role of Chairman and Ranking Member. We have worked on many things in the past together, and I very much look forward to working with you in the future. Again, I feel this Committee is fortunate to have both of you in these roles. Welcome.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you.

Senator HOEVEN. Ms. Rollins, good to see you again. Thanks for coming to visit at the office. You have an awesome family.

Ms. ROLLINS. The best. The best.

Senator HOEVEN. Yes, so thanks, of course, for your husband being here, and your kids. Of course, no one will ever love you the way your mom does.

Ms. ROLLINS. That is true.

Senator HOEVEN. Pretty awesome having Mom.

Ms. ROLLINS. She is missing an important vote in Texas today to be here to sit behind me, so I am really grateful, really grateful.

Senator HOEVEN. It is great. You have a fantastic family. We mentioned all this talk about A&M. Did I tell you, when we talked, that my wife went to UT? I do not know if I did or not.

Ms. ROLLINS. We did, and I had my sincerest condolences.

Senator HOEVEN. Yes, yes. That is kind of fun. I am wearing my North Dakota State University tie today, home of the Mighty Bison. I know we talked about them. We do have an incredible School of Agriculture at North Dakota State University.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, you do.

Senator HOEVEN. We are doing some awesome things. We have a project called Grand Farm. Sonny Perdue came out and actually cut the ribbon on it. We have a partnership between ARS, NDSU, and Grand Farm on precision agriculture that is incredible. I am going to invite you to come out to our state right away and see what we are doing. Would you commit to coming out and seeing what we have and meeting our folks?

Ms. ROLLINS. I would love to come visit. I have said, I think it has actually been reported in the press that if you can get me on a horse, I would love to ride a horse, as we are all working on all of these issues across the states, and I really look forward to that—only if you ride with me, though.

Senator HOEVEN. Oh, absolutely. We will absolutely ride. One of my sisters raced barrels. My job was just to get the horses in the trailer, which, as you know, is sometimes——

Ms. ROLLINS. Harder than racing barrels, yes.

Senator HOEVEN [continuing]. sometimes easy and sometimes not, depending on the horse. We will do it.

Ms. ROLLINS. That sounds great.

Senator HOEVEN. I am so glad to hear that. Of course, I love your background in ranching. My grandfather was a cattle rancher, back in the good old days when he raised Hereford instead of all the Angus.

Ms. ROLLINS. Love Herefords.

Senator HOEVEN. Farm bill. Will you commit to work with us to get a farm bill? It is so incredibly important, in agriculture, as you know, we have a system of family based farmers and ranchers

across this country. Sixteen million people involved in agriculture in some way, shape, or form. Versus look at all these other industries that are concentrated.

We have this system of family based farmers and ranchers, businesses, small businesses. What they produce for every single American, every single day, is the highest quality, lowest cost food supply in the world. Americans have better choices, better quality, and spend less of their budget on food than almost any other developed country. That is what we have because we have good farm policy. That means affordable crop insurance, and that means a countercyclical safety net that works, keeping the farm in the farm bill.

Will you commit to help us get that—we are past due. We need to get it done. Will you commit to help us get it done, and get it done in the way I described?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir, and again, it may be the pathological optimist in me, but I have talked to both sides of the aisle, the complexity, the challenges in the last year or so of reauthorizing it. I hope that I can be a force multiplier, and I hope what I bring to the table is the opportunity to work alongside both sides to get us where we need to be for our farmers and ranchers, and some security, some understanding that the net is there, and that the loans are there, and that the insurance is there, and that they can continue to be the best producers in the world for the world food supply.

I really look forward to that, obviously providing you the technical assistance that you need to be able to do your job, but also, if asked or if called, to help in any other way I can to get this done.

Senator HOEVEN. I think your relationship with President Trump is going to be incredibly important in that effort. We already saw it as we worked on the disaster piece that we included with the extension of the farm bill. Will you commit to work closely not only with this Committee but with our Ag Approps Committee, as we administer that emergency assistance?

Ms. ROLLINS. One hundred percent yes. Whether that is at two in the morning, four in the morning, midnight, I am always available and will work harder than anyone to ensure that you all have everything you need across the Capital.

Senator HOEVEN. The President's help there was important, and I want——

Ms. ROLLINS. Indeed.

Senator HOEVEN [continuing]. that acknowledged on the record. Also, tariffs. We went through this, you know, in President Trump's first term. I worked with Sonny Perdue when China targeted our farmers and ranchers. We want markets. Talk for a minute about—I mean, we look at tariffs as a way to get markets for our farmers and ranchers, so that they can compete on a level playing field. We did have to do the MFP. We worked with Sonny to do that last time. Give me your thoughts on how we are going to approach this.

Ms. ROLLINS. As I mentioned, when I got the call about this particular position from the President, we were driving our motor home across Mississippi, on our way to Auburn for the Texas A&M-Auburn Alabama game. I clearly was not expecting a call from the President at that moment. When it came, and when we talked

about this job, I celebrated, prayed with my family, and then immediately began understanding what happened last time, and ensuring that we have the right team on the field that can immediately execute to ensure that we are solving for these major challenges.

The Under Secretary that will be coming before you, hopefully very quickly, Mr. Chairman, helped run that program under Sonny Perdue. The staff that he is building out, if confirmed, is the same team that did it before, with the idea that we cannot reinvent the wheel. We have got to be able to move quickly.

Senator HOEVEN. That is good to hear because we did have to do some things legislatively to get it rocking and rolling, and we did work with Fortis and the other guys. We look forward to working with them again, so that whether it is China or anybody else knows we are going to defend our guys, and we are going to make them play fair. Because on a level playing field, our farmers and ranchers outcompete anybody in the world.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

Senator HOEVEN. On just a couple of others, one is the sugar industry is huge in my state. That involves trade very direct, as you know. Will you commit to work with me on that industry? Senator Klobuchar also shares that same concern, I think.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. In fact, Senator Smith and I discussed it, as well, when I met with her.

Senator HOEVEN. Absolutely, Senator Smith.

Ms. ROLLINS. I know. Do not leave out Senator Smith, my Minnesota Senators.

Senator HOEVEN. I want to emphasize Senator Smith shares that concern.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, yes. Thank you, Senator. Yes, 100 percent. Any of these industries, I am here and will always be available.

Senator HOEVEN. We have also worked with your potential Deputy Secretary, as well. I want your commitment, both on behalf of yourself and him, that you will work with us on access on the forest lands, which as you know, we have ag and many other interests out there, on these forests, on the national grasslands. Access is an issue. We need your help. Will you commit to help us on that?

Ms. ROLLINS. One hundred percent.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. Thank you, Senator.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. [Presiding]. Thank you very much, Ms. Rollins. Senator Boozman had to go vote. You noted, which I appreciate, we have not one but two Minnesota Senators. We are blessed to have Senator Smith with us. Senator Smith.

Senator SMITH. Thank you so much, Ranking Member. I want to just say I share my congratulations to you and to Chair Boozman for leading this Committee. I love serving on this Committee. I love the bipartisan spirit that we have, and I even love Senator Hoeven, who always forgets that I care about sugar in Minnesota.

Ms. ROLLINS. She even loves you, Senator Hoeven.

Senator SMITH. Welcome to you and your family. I can see how proud your family is of you, and I appreciated very much our conversation in my office. I also appreciate your Minnesota roots and connection in Clear Lake, Minnesota, so thanks for that.

We have lots to talk about, and I am going to get right to it. I wanted to start out by just raising the issue of ethanol and sugar, and I am so glad that Senator Klobuchar and Senator Hoeven have touched on those two issues, both of which are vitally important to Minnesota agriculture.

You know, ethanol is home-grown energy. It is a major economic driver in Minnesota, $7 billion to our economy. Similarly, the national sugar program supports more than 151,000 jobs in our country, and contributes $23 billion a year to the U.S. economy, and it is run with zero cost to U.S. taxpayers. I appreciate your commitment to work with us on those two important programs.

Let's turn to rural development. You come from a small town, and I represent a state filled with small towns and rural places, places that are full of energy and creativity and innovation and talent. I think we also know that small towns and rural communities face unique challenges. I sometimes think that people forget that the rural development side of the USDA is really important. That portfolio is very important.

I will be honest. I am fearful that the work done there, those efforts, not being well understood, could become the target for budget cutting. I also know that American farmers and ranchers really trust the USDA on those issues. They do not want to see those programs farmed out to other agencies, where we are all worried that they would just get less attention. We talked about this when you were in my office, and I appreciate that.

Let's dive in on a couple of issues, two big rural development issues: housing and childcare.

We know we have a serious shortage of affordable housing in rural communities. These are places where our elders and folks that live on fixed incomes, people who make our food system work, it is where they live. For decades, the Rural Housing Service at the USDA has helped in those communities, and everyone agrees it needs to be modernized and updated.

Last Congress, Senator Rounds and I introduced the Rural Housing Service Reform Act to do that. We had 14 bipartisan co-sponsors.

I want to ask you first, Ms. Rollins, can you talk a bit about your vision for how the USDA can engage on rural housing, and will you work with me on rural housing service reform, as we are describing in our bill?

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator Smith, and I think of all of the portfolios, if confirmed, that I am taking on, the one that excites me the most is the opportunity to put forward a vision and build a program around revivifying, restoring, and bringing back rural America. Clearly, the Federal Government itself cannot do that, or there are going to be many, many factors. The idea that we, at USDA, can lead that effort, that it is not just about elevating our farmers and ensuring our ranchers are protected, and that USDA is doing everything they can to defend them. It is an all approach. It is housing. It is childcare. It is education. It is all of the above.

One of the things I think I bring to the table, and I, Senator Smith, you and I, and even Senator Klobuchar, discussed this, in the last White House I led the effort called the White House Opportunity and Revitalization Council. I say I led it. We hired Scott

Turner to lead it, who is now President Trump's housing nominee. You all, if you have not met him, will love meeting him, former NFL player, and just a pastor and a visionary.

In that effort we were really focused on urban communities and the disadvantaged communities within those urban communities. Over the course of many months, across the agencies, across the government under President Trump, we focused on the myriad of programs that were duplicative, that tried to serve the same constituency, that sometimes were fine but other times was not a great use of dollars.

Having an all-of-government approach like that, where we can really understand what role HHS plays, what role housing plays, and doing it quickly, so we can begin to roll it out.

A final thing I will say, and I know, Senator, you have got one more question. America at 250, which America turns 250 next year, is going to be an incredible opportunity for us to take this message to every corner of rural America, and to really get people focused on it.

Senator SMITH. I appreciate that very much, and I think we do need to bring that message. We also need to make sure that we are supporting, and improving wherever we can, those rural development programs at USDA, and not throwing them under the bus, because I can tell you that they are counted on by folks in rural communities. I hope that we will be able to work together on that.

Ms. ROLLINS. I look forward to it.

Senator SMITH. Ms. Rollins, I want to just touch, in the time that I have left, on the nutrition programs at USDA. You know, nutrition programs are foundational for healthy Americans. Two-thirds of SNAP recipients are families with children, one-third are families with older adults or people with disabilities. SNAP is a rural development tool.

In Minnesota, rural communities have the highest food insecurity in the whole state, and in this country, nine out of ten countries with the highest food insecurity rates are rural.

Ms. Rollins, can you talk to me about how you see the rules around SNAP? Let's start with what you think about work requirements for SNAP.

Ms. ROLLINS. Well, first, I understand this is an incredibly important issue to everyone on the Committee. My commitment is to ensure that we have the data, the research, and the understanding of this program, to make sure that we are serving those that need it. As I mentioned earlier, raised by a single mom in a rural community with two little sisters, she worked at the library, she made $5 an hour. I understand it.

Senator SMITH. Is it your view that we need to adjust or change the work requirements for SNAP?

Ms. ROLLINS. It probably will be no surprise to everyone on this Committee, both Republican and Democrat, and through a course of 20 years of being a policy leader, that I do believe in work requirements. I do think they are important. I do think—and I do not fully understand, but plan to get more in the weeds on this, if confirmed—and working with all of you to make sure that your concerns are part of that education process for me.

Senator SMITH. My view, and, in fact, I think this is the official view of the USDA, is that SNAP should ensure that no one fears going hungry in this country, but also that it reflects the importance of work and responsibility in this country. That is why SNAP has extensive work requirements in place. Folks that are not required to work under SNAP, a very small number, it is because they are taking care of a child or an incapacitated person, because they are participating in an alcohol or a drug treatment program, because they are already working under some other program.

I ask you to consider this as you look at this, because again, I do not think that this is a good place to be looking for extra dollars when we have so many people that are struggling with food insecurity, even though they are working one or maybe two or three jobs.

Thank you. I know I am out of time.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator. I commit to working with you, and I look forward to it.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Senator Smith. Next up, Senator Ernst, our neighbor to the south.

Senator ERNST. Yes, thank you to our Ranking Member, Amy Klobuchar, and a great neighbor, as has been mentioned many times over, between Minnesota and Iowa. Amy has worked with me on so many different agriculture-and biofuel-related issues. I am excited to work with you, Senator Klobuchar, you and Chairman Boozman, as we work on a 5-year farm bill. It is very important that we get that done, and it is something that I hear continuously from Iowans as I travel all 99 counties in my great state.

Of course, to you, Mrs. Brooke Rollins, thank you so much for being here today, and thank you for bringing your friends and family. I know how important that support is, and I am excited to see you as our nominee for Secretary of Agriculture. I know you are an ag girl at heart. We have talked about it at length. I truly am too, and I do have full confidence in your ability to lead this Department, full faith and confidence in this role.

Ms. Rollins, something that you and I talked about, I will start with this one, we talked about it at length, is telework. I know that we must address some of the work policies for federal employees at the Department of Agriculture. As you know, the GAO reported USDA's headquarters has a space utilization rate at just 11 percent—11 percent. I have even received whistleblower letters from employees describing the building as a ghost town.

Last year I addressed this exact issue with then-Secretary Tom Vilsack, and was met with very strong opposition. Rather than provide any evidence to dispute the GAO's numbers, and even after repeatedly following up with his staff, he refused to give me specific in-office numbers or building utilization data. In stark contrast, President Trump acted immediately to get our federal workforce back to actually working for the American people.

Ms. Rollins, in line with these efforts, what is your plan to achieve the 60 percent utilization goal for your headquarters buildings, which has been set by Congress? Second, will you commit to requiring each USDA employee to show up to the office?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator Ernst, thank you, and I really loved our time. We first started talking about this way before even the election.

Senator ERNST. Way back.

Ms. ROLLINS. I love your intense focus on ensuring that those who are hired and paid by taxpayer dollars are fully committed to serve in the most effective way, wherever and for whomever they work. That is, I believe, being in an office almost every single time. It is not my belief alone. Obviously, President Trump has been talking about this. I believe there was even an executive order in the last day or two, calling for the same.

I do look forward to getting into the office, hopefully very soon, and really working to effectuate the most effective workforce that the United States Department of Agriculture has ever had in the history of this country, and so doing ensuring that they are all in the office to make that happen.

Senator ERNST. Wonderful. Thank you for that commitment.

Another area that has been brought up quite frequently here on the dais, and one that will not be a surprise to you, but another area that is critically important for my Iowa farmers is biofuels. It is a key source of demand for our corn and our soybeans.

During the Biden administration, this industry really did suffer from deflated renewable, or the RVOs. The last-minute announcements on sales of E–15 and the lack of clear tax policy guidance on the 45Z Clean Fuel Production Credit, which is something that Roger Marshall, Senator Marshall of Kansas, and I were just discussing. Many of these moves have forced plants to idle or stop production completely. This is a huge issue for us. This is threatening hundreds of rural jobs and squeezing grain prices in the process.

I do applaud President Trump for making E15 a priority. He did have an executive order on that. I do look forward to securing a permanent fix in law.

We will need an all-hands-on-deck approach for crafting future RVOs that reflect production capacity and guidance on the 45Z that will support American farmers.

Ms. Rollins, the USDA has a very big role to play when crafting these policies. As Secretary, will you commit to supporting biofuels and working with me to provide certainty for our farmers and the entire renewable fuel industry?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, Senator, and I really look forward to that. I think there is no question where President Trump stands on this. I believe, if memory serves me correct, there was even an executive order on this in the last administration. It did not come out of Domestic Policy. It came out of Larry Kudlow's NEC, so I did not work on that directly. I know the courts, I believe, overturned it and correctly stated that the Congress should take that up.

I really look forward to working with you, but also with my friend, Lee Zeldin, if confirmed, over at EPA, on a piece of this, on the 45Z, with my friend, Scott Bessent over at Treasury. I think that you all will find, and hopefully be encouraged, that the Cabinet, if confirmed, we all know each other, are friends, many of us are like family, and we really, really are looking forward to working together on these cross-agency issues, like the ones that you have just outlined.

Senator ERNST. That is wonderful. I really appreciate that because in the last administration I have to say that in conversations with the leaders at all of those agencies we were really blown off

and left swinging in the breeze. I anticipate that President Trump will want to do right by our farmers and those that are producing renewable fuels.

Another issue, just very quickly, Ms. Rollins, top of mind for Iowa's ag community is Proposition 12. We are the number one hog producer in the United States, number one hog producing state. California's ballot initiative has been very devastating for our family farms and is only fueling market consolidation of pork producers.

Just ultimately what we would like to do is move on legislation to craft a way forward so that we do not have states telling our producers how they can raise their livestock. Very important to us.

Ms. Rollins, in line with President Trump's priority to lower food costs for American families, will you commit to working with this Committee to reverse Proposition 12?

Ms. ROLLINS. Proposition 12—and I have just, in the last few months, become very acquainted with it—you know, the idea that one state—and listen, I am a federalism believer. I believe in the founders' vision of the Tenth Amendment and the Government closest to the people is the Government that should be most active under that Tenth Amendment.

This particular issue, I believe from even a bipartisan perspective, there is no doubt that it is not just affecting California. It is affecting multitudes of other states, multitudes of other parts of the ag community, including our hog family farms. Iowa, but many other states, have been really affected by this, as well. I know that you guys, if you already have a bill filed, you are soon to file one, legislation has been drafted.

Yes, I commit to working with you on that and look forward to it.

Senator ERNST. Excellent. Thank you, Ms. Rollins, and I look forward to hosting you in Iowa on an ag and biofuels tour, and I would welcome your family, as well. Thank you very much, and I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. [Presiding]. Senator Durbin.

Senator DURBIN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Mrs. Rollins, I took your advice. When we met yesterday you told me about your mother's agenda as a Texas State Representative on the issue of PFAS, and I should make a point of meeting her. She was the first person I met in the room today.

Ms. ROLLINS. She is special, isn't she, Senator?

Senator DURBIN. Sure is, and it looks like we are going to have a possibility of a real bipartisan state-federal alliance on an issue important to everybody. I am glad she came, and I am glad I had a chance to meet her.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir.

Senator DURBIN. We talked about a lot of things yesterday, and I want to talk about one that is in the headlines this morning and will be for a long time, the mass deportation of undocumented people from the United States. I mentioned to you that I had been surprised by the response I received among farmers and ranchers and people involved in agriculture when it comes to the immigration issue. I told you about the dairy farmer who said, "Senator Durbin, we're going to close down our dairy operation after three genera-

tions in our family because we need immigrant workers for dairy operations in Illinois."

Another young lady with the Farm Bureau raised her hand and said, "While you're at it, include the orchards. Who's going to pick this crop? It isn't the local kids at the high school. They won't even man the fruit stand out by the highway, and I put an air conditioner in there. I can't get them to come to work for me. I need immigrant workers."

It turns out that 40 percent of the farm workers in this country are undocumented, and you know what that means—they are vulnerable to being deported. If they are deported, what are the farmers going to do? For a lot of them, and for a lot of different industries, immigration is critical.

Now your organization has said some things, pretty strong things, your America First Policy Institute. They have called for deportation at a scale that actually matters and massive deportation efforts.

I just need to ask you, what is your policy on immigration? We have got to get down to the real world, not the criminals. We do not want them, they should not come here, and they should not stay. Those who work every single darn day to pick a crop that American people are not going to pick themselves, and most of them—I should not say most—40 percent are undocumented.

Can we expect this Administration to be raiding farms and going after the immigrant farm workers?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, thank you, and I really was grateful for our time yesterday and our time working together in the last administration, and I appreciate your kindness. I was a little late yesterday. There was some confusion, and you gave me a little grace, so I really appreciate that. Yes, Senator Luján, you, as well.

Listen, the President's vision of a secure border and a mass deportation at a scale that matters is something I support. I was his Domestic Policy Director in the last White House. I have built and led an organization, alongside Chad Wolfe, our former Secretary of Homeland Security, at the America First Policy Institute.

I want to be extremely transparent, and I think that you deserve that. That is my commitment is to help President Trump deploy his agenda in an effective way, while, at the same time, defending, as if confirmed Secretary of Agriculture, our farmers and ranchers across this country. Having both of those, which you may argue is in conflict, but having both of those is key priorities.

My job is to work with, if confirmed, the Secretary of Labor, Lori Chavez-DeRemer, from Oregon, but she herself has family farms in California and Oregon, to work with her on the H–2A program, to also work with all of you, to reform and perhaps modernize that H–2A program. I will also say that the President has been very clear that this first round will be aimed at, as you mentioned, those who have committed crimes and are criminals while inside our borders over the last fouryears.

We will follow the data. We will follow and listen to our farmers and ranchers as this is moving. My commitment is to work with all of you to work to solve and do everything we can to make sure that none of these farms or dairy producers are put out of business.

Senator DURBIN. I support your answer. Dangerous people should not be here, and if they are here they should be gone, period. When we are talking massive deportation we are going beyond dangerous criminals. I just wonder if we ought to give fair warning to farmers and ranchers across America that if you have immigrant labor you can expect federal agents to come and search your property. Is that in the future for farmers and ranchers under the mass deportation plan?

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, I have not been involved in that, the President's current plan. I cannot answer that one way or the other. I do know that my job is to ensure that as those conversations are ongoing, if confirmed, that I am part of that data collection and understanding, and that the President understands what this means to our agriculture community. I believe, sincerely, that he will execute his agenda that he has promised the American people, but that we will never forget our ag community in so doing.

Senator DURBIN. Well, I certainly hope so, because these men and women in immigrant labor on our farms are doing back-breaking work every single damn day, and they have done it for years, and many of them, 40 percent of them, are undocumented. If they are going to be deported then we are going to see a lot fewer fruits and vegetables that we take for granted every time we go into the store. I think that is part of the reality.

When it comes to the SNAP program, the work requirement and the asset requirements, do you think we ought to apply work and asset requirements to other agricultural programs?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator Durbin, I look forward to learning more about those. I have actually spent most of my time on SNAP in preparing for this hearing. I am obviously aware there are 16 other nutrition programs across the United States Department of Agriculture. I look forward to learning more about all of those, meeting with those that are running them, even looking across the agencies to see whom else is working on these projects, and ensuring that they are the most effective for those who need them but also the most efficient for the taxpayer.

Senator DURBIN. I am going to ask one last question. Project 2025, you are familiar with, calls for capping crop insurance payouts to $40,000 per farmer and terminating longtime USDA export promotion programs. What is your position on this Project 2025 proposal?

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, the America First Policy Institute was not involved at all in Project 2025. We were in no meetings. We were not part of any policy process and had nothing to do with it. I am sorry, I do not know that I can answer that specifically.

I will say that my role is to defend farmers and ranchers in our ag communities, in our rural communities, with everything I have. As I am looking at all of these programs, aside from anything that other think tanks put together, my commitment is to ensure that we follow the data and protect our ag community.

Senator DURBIN. Thank you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Hyde-Smith.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and congratulations to our nominee. I am so proud of you and so excited to get

to work with you. I think it is really neat that you got the call from President Trump, and I believe you were in Newton, Mississippi.

Ms. ROLLINS. Newton, Mississippi, in the Walmart parking lot. That is when the call came.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. When you got the call on your way to the Auburn game, and I believe that went into three overtimes, if I remember correctly.

Ms. ROLLINS. It did, and the Aggies once again ran out of time, which is our November sort of game plan these days.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Well, that was a super exciting day——

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you.

Senator HYDE-SMITH [continuing]. for sure, no doubt. It was so nice to get to meet Mark out at the National Finals Rodeo. Thank you for accepting the invitation to come there.

I want to highlight two important things before diving into the questions, and that is the supplemental that was passed before Christmas. I just want to thank Senator Boozman, and I want to thank Senator Collins on how incredibly important that was, to get that into that bill, that $10 billion that will make a total difference in the survival of so many producers throughout the nation. Thank you for that. That certainly did not go unnoticed by the ag world.

I wanted to talk to you about catfish. Mississippi is the top producing state of catfish, our farm-raised catfish, and it is a huge contributor to our rural economy throughout the state. Our neighbors in Arkansas and Alabama are right there with us. Unfortunately the foreign catfish imports, primarily Vietnam and China, have really hurt the industry. My greatest concern—now that imports are being inspected by USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, which is charged with inspecting all those imported catfish—I have been very concerned about how that has been implemented. FSIS is far more rigorous than the Food and Drug Administration inspection, but the inspection has not been at the top of the priority list for the last administration. That made a big, huge difference because there could be dangerous carcinogens in those imports, many elements that are harmful to human consumption that were getting by and not inspected.

If confirmed, will you work to ensure that FSIS tightens its imported catfish inspection responsibilities?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, ma'am. I really look forward to all aspects of the United States Department of Agriculture, but have heard from several of you that the inspection part of it could be significantly improved. My commitment is to do everything I can to do just that.

We are close to announcing an Under Secretary—I should say the President is close to announcing an Under Secretary—in that role, and I think everyone will be very pleased when that announcement is made, and look forward to hopefully his quick confirmation and letting us get to work, Senator.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. Wonderful. I have fought for that for years, as we are the top producing state there, and as Ag Commissioner in Mississippi.

I also share your commitment, as you mentioned in your testimony, to addressing the H5N1 and the New World screwworm outbreaks as high consequence diseases threatening animal agriculture. I have gotten several calls lately from producers who are

very concerned about that. I can remember the avian influenza threat getting to Mississippi flocks. That kept me up at night. I had plenty of foam, plenty of water on standby, that if we had the outbreak we were ready.

I was also involved in reopening beef export markets after BSE, or the mad cow infection. Those markets took over a decade to recover. We had countries that did not buy our beef because of that for 13 years, until we got that under control.

While much attention is given to the problem of animal disease outbreaks, I want to focus on the key solution that is often overlooked, and that is the importance of USDA veterinarians. Those are so critical, and despite the hiring freeze, those professionals are essential in protecting animal and public health and ensuring food security because of these outbreaks. The vets are currently managing the H5N1 outbreak by testing meat and milk and helping producers with biosecurity practices. Unfortunately, USDA has struggled for years with inadequate veterinarian staffing, and with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and with APHIS, a problem was made worse by a compensation system that the previous Secretary described as just uncompetitive in a hearing in last Congress.

I tried to work with the previous administration to begin correcting these serious recruitment and retention problems there, but those efforts were pretty much ignored, as well. It is just extremely frustrating to know how critical it is to make sure we have the safest, cheapest food in the entire world, and it takes inspections to do that.

Hopefully that will be better, and I am going to ask for your commitment on that, as it just jeopardizes American agriculture competitiveness by putting us at further risk for spreading disease. The shortage affects public health and the situations we find ourselves in, because we just sit there and hope and pray that we do not get a call that there is an outbreak of anything.

The USDA and Office of Personnel Management must address these veterinary personnel challenges. My question is, will you commit to working with me toward timely and meaningful solutions, solutions, of course, that would be in line with the President's agenda, regarding these veterinarians we need at USDA?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, I so look forward to doing that. I am not sure if you have heard but Texas A&M has a heck of a good veterinary school that I am very familiar with. I especially, on this, look forward to that with you. I do think that the recruiting piece of this, and you and I working together, and I believe Senator Klobuchar may be a co-chair with you on the Veterinary Committee here in the Senate, but across the board, ensuring that your leadership and my supporting you, if confirmed, continues to be a priority, and I really look forward to that.

Senator HYDE-SMITH. One quick issue I want to get in, that I look forward to working with you on, as well, once confirmed We need to address the USDA Packers and Stockyards rules concerning poultry. It has really caused some significant cost increases to our poultry growers, and it really does not have any quantifiable profits. That is another thing that I would like to meet with you on is Packers and Stockyards, the law that we all live by.

Thank you so much, and I so look forward to supporting you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator, so much.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Booker.

Senator BOOKER. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. I am excited to be here and excited to have a few moments with you. Thank you for coming by my office yesterday. I know I was the favorite office you visited, much more than——

Ms. ROLLINS. You were the favorite—there were three favorites, and you were one of the three.

Senator BOOKER. I am glad to hear that. I know you liked my visit better than Tommy Tuberville.

[Laughter.]

Senator BOOKER. I am going to jump on the moving mom bandwagon here, when you told me about the work she did, the work on PFAS, God, I hope it foreshadows some of the work we can do together. It is a real problem for American farmers, and it is something that is really important to me.

I mentioned to you, when you were with me, that one of the biggest problems we have in America is that the biggest producers in our country have done well. That is not a problem. I love and celebrate American success. We are having a problem with the big, big producers, often controlled by multi-national corporations, who are doing great, but most of our small farmers in America really continue to struggle.

Since 2017, we have lost over 140,000 farms in our country, and since the 1970's, over half a million farms have been lost in this country. This loss of family farms has led to awful things happening in our rural communities, an exodus of residents, jobs, really the hollowing out of rural communities. For the farmers who have managed to hang on, times are really tough for American farmers. Eighty–eight percent of family farmers have second jobs off the farms, and a majority of that income utilized by those families is generated from off-farm income. Right now the USDA programs are structured in ways that serve well the biggest producers but often do not work for small and mid-sized family farms.

I am pushing in the upcoming farm bill to create an Office of Small Farms within the USDA that would be charged with looking at USDA programs and policies and finding ways to make them work for our small farmers. This is a crisis. We are losing our heritage. Families that have had farms for five, six generations in America are really struggling.

This is just a yes-or-no question, which I got in private and I am hoping to get in public. As Secretary, will you make it a priority for the USDA to do a lot more to help small farmers?

Ms. ROLLINS. One zillion percent yes, which is Aggie math, because you can only get to 100 percent yes. One hundred percent yes. Senator, we discussed yesterday, for me, personally, that is where my heart is and my passion, in restoring rural America and working together in all parts of our country.

Senator BOOKER. I am grateful. I am going to say hallelujah, amen to your answer, and remind you that your mother is watching.

[Laughter.]

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator BOOKER. All right. As you know, we are also facing a global hunger crisis. Millions of people are in desperate need of food. For the past several years, Senator Boozman and I have worked closely with USDA to increase and expedite the USDA's purchase of commodities such as rice and wheat from U.S. farmers for shipment to countries where people are really suffering, near famine-like conditions. It is a win-win for us. The USDA purchases really help our farmers, and at the same time we are able to provide lifesaving food to children and families around the globe.

I know that you and I share a deep faith. It is the motivation behind what we do in our work. You believe that the gospel calls on us to help people in need. It is also a national security issue for America, in helping to stabilize other nations that are facing crises.

My office is getting a lot of concerning reports from farmers that humanitarian programs like Food for Peace may be paused by one of the recent executive orders. I really am hoping that is not true. Again, a yes-or-no question. Once you are confirmed, will you check on the status of that, and will you make food purchases from our farmers a priority?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir, of course.

Senator BOOKER. Fantastic.

Meatpackers—most Americans do not know this—they work in really horrifically dangerous conditions, one of the most dangerous jobs in America. They are being forced to make repetitive motions every day, forceful ones. The USDA published recently a report showing that a current line speeds, 81 percent of chicken processing plant workers are at an elevated risk, significantly so, of developing debilitating upper body disorders and things like carpal tunnel syndrome.

These workers also face a risk of serious injuries. On average, two worker amputations per week occur on slaughter lines in the United States of America. Just imagine if that was your family member. Even worse, meatpacking giants like JBS have admitted, and been fined, for child labor violations in their processing plants. The USDA currently is one of the largest buyers from these big meatpackers.

I have a bill with Senator Josh Hawley. It is a bipartisan bill to stop federal contracting with companies with child labor violations.

As Secretary, yes or no, will you commit to using the agency's purchasing power to force these companies to end these horrific abuses, child labor practices, and bad treatment of workers?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator Booker, I look forward to working with you on that. I have not spent enough time to fully understand to commit one way or the other. I absolutely look forward to working with you and learning more about this issue.

Senator BOOKER. Senator Hawley and I will definitely talk to you more. I am grateful for that, yes, and I am going to speed to my last question.

Ultra-processed foods in school meals, we are facing a crisis—you talked about it earlier—with our children. Thirty-eight percent of teenagers in America have pre-diabetes, among other often chronic diseases. We have a sickness epidemic in American children. We know that if kids reach adulthood obese, they are on a trajectory

of a lifetime of sickness and suffering that will cost our health care system inordinate amounts and cost them, as well.

We know that 60 percent of children's calories—60 percent—currently come from ultra-processed foods. Many of them have unhealthy levels of salt and added sugar. With our school meal program we have an opportunity to make sure that kids get healthy, nutritious meals that empower them in school that day and for their life. Right now, kids are still getting too many of their calories in schools from ultra-processed meals.

Yes or no, if confirmed, will you commit to dealing with this crisis and really focusing on improving children's nutrition by reducing the amount of ultra-processed foods in our school meal program?

Ms. ROLLINS. The answer is yes, but I want to add to that, if you do not mind. As I mentioned with Chairman Boozman, I do think this is a crisis, and I do agree with you. I think before my friend, RFK Jr., Bobby Kennedy, came on the scene—I believe that was in August, and became part of the America First movement—that this particular issue, while really important, was not necessarily at the top of the America First agenda. At AFPI, America First, we had some people working on it but did not expect it to be a priority in the Administration.

I am encouraged that it is now a priority, and I look forward to working with everyone.

Senator BOOKER. I am so grateful for that. This is not a question because my time has expired. Prop 12 coming out of California, Packers and Stockyards Act, I know you will be open to us bringing you small family farmers, independent family farmers, who show that Prop 12 has opened up new opportunities for them, and the Packers and Stockyards Act is protecting them, and they actually want to see better enforcement. I know you are open to us having that conversation.

Ms. ROLLINS. I will look forward to that. Thank you, Senator.

Senator BOOKER. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Thank you, Chairman, Ranking Member. Ms. Rollins, welcome.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you.

Senator MARSHALL. I just want to know if you agree with me that whole milk is the most nutritious drink known to humankind and belongs in our school lunches.

[Senator Marshall drinks milk.]

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, I do not know that you have met my mom yet, but this is all we had in our refrigerator growing up, not anything else, just whole milk. She is absolutely never going to let us forget this, the fact that this is coming up. Yes, this hits home to me very quickly. It brings back a lot of memories.

Senator MARSHALL. Ms. Rollins, like many of us on this Committee, you have a love, a passion, for rural America, for agriculture. Tell us where that comes from and why this job is important to American agriculture and rural America. Just from your heart.

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, thank you. The fact that I am sitting here today, that I am in the United States Capitol, that I am sitting in

front of this Committee, that I am serving at the appointment of the President of the United States as one of his potential Cabinet Members, but yet I grew up in a town of 1,200, with a single mom, with two little sisters, went to Texas A&M on an agriculture scholarship because it was my love but also we needed the money, that Future Farmers of America is the organization that set my path so many years ago, I am fighting for the next Brooke who is growing up in a little bitty town with a single mom, that her weekends are spent on horses and raising cattle and barrel racing and Friday night football, at least in the South, and making sure that those communities continue to raise and provide thriving and incredible opportunities for the next generation of leaders so that this country can continue, in the next 250 years, to do what we have done in the last 250, and that is to create and govern, under our founders' vision, of the greatest country in the history of the world. This work and this Committee and this moment in time is the backbone to all of that.

Senator MARSHALL. Yes, Ms. Rollins, it reminds me of the song, that growing up a Kansas farm boy is mostly having fun. I think that is what you are describing.

Ms. ROLLINS. That is right.

Senator MARSHALL. It was mostly having, it was a simpler time.

You pointed out earlier, 90 percent of rural America supported President Trump in the election, over 90 percent. Now every time I see the President, the first thing he asks me is, "Roger, how are your farmers and ranchers doing in Kansas?" Can you just share with this Committee President Trump's passion, compassion, for farmers and ranchers. Do you have similar conversations with him, as well?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes. Senator, one of the illuminating moments of my time with him in the last administration, and it was, as you can imagine, an adventure, beyond any imagination, to be next to President Trump for three years and then to continue to work with him after he left the White House, to build the America First Policy Institute, and continue the policies for the next 100 years, not just for this moment in time.

In the last West Wing, I believe I am speaking correctly, I was the only person with an agriculture background. That was not widely known, because I was managing the entire portfolio. Any time, in any senior staff meetings, or any time we were in the Oval Office and these issues would come up, he would always point to me and say, "Where are we on that?" It was so clear to me that that is where his heart is.

I will never forget a Cabinet meeting where we were having a discussion about some big corporate entity who had asked for a very large sum, in the multis of billions of dollars, for a project. That same week he had been asked for that project he had also visited some farmers in Georgia. I will never forget. I was sitting behind him, because I was not part of the Cabinet. I was part of the senior staff.

I will never forget. I do not think the media was in there, but he looked at the entire Cabinet, and then turned over his shoulder and looked at us, who were sitting behind him as his senior team, and he said, "I'm not here for those guys who are asking for bil-

lions of dollars for their new project and their market value is many, many billions and billions more. I'm here for those farmers. I am here for those men and women that I met in Georgia yesterday, who are hurting, but never complained, never miss a beat, never stop doing what they're called to do, which is to produce for the families across America and across the world. That is who I am here, and we all"—pointing to the Cabinet and the staff—"are here to serve."

I think that in maybe year two of the four, and I have never forgotten it. When he called me about this job, we talked about that again.

Senator MARSHALL. Yes, thanks, Ms. Rollins. Obviously agriculture and rural America is important to you. It is important to the President. Would you just speak for a moment how important biofuels are to the farmers, to ranchers who benefit from some of the substrates coming out of that process, and to rural America, as well, and specifically how 45Z might impact rural America.

Ms. ROLLINS. I think that everyone knows where the President is on this, and he often jokes that there were a lot of meetings, I think a lot of you were in. Senator Grassley, I know you were in many of those in the last White House, making sure that the President fully understood the importance of exactly what you are talking about, Senator, on biofuels, and especially to our farmers.

I believe that in the last 48 hours one of his executive orders on energy actually included a mention of biofuels. Also my role, if confirmed, is to defend all of American agriculture.

I believe, Senator, that you and others who hail from these states where this is a driver for your farmers and your ranchers and your economy, should feel very confident that you have a friend and a defender in this current Administration to make sure this continues. 45Z, obviously, my friend, Scott Bessent, if confirmed, over at Treasury, will be working on that. That is in his purview. I will ensure that he has the data and the voices and the opinions around him to make the right decision.

Senator MARSHALL. Yes. Just one more quick call on the 45Z. Certainly what we do not want is China to benefit from it——

Ms. ROLLINS. Correct.

Senator MARSHALL [continuing]. which is happening right now. We can go into that in more detail later, as well.

By the way, I was just sitting here thinking, I remember President Trump, the first primary back in 2016, in Iowa, I believe he came out, was the candidate that came out in favor of biofuels, as well, as I recall.

Ms. ROLLINS. He did. That is right.

Senator MARSHALL. Let's finish up on the regulatory environment. I am not sure if anything is a bigger concern to the American farmer right now than the regulatory environment. The two hot-button issues have been WOTUS, Waters of the U.S., and the Endangered Species Act. Can you tell us what your involvement was in rolling back that WOTUS regulation with the previous administration, and that, I think, is a good example, going forward, of what will be happening.

Ms. ROLLINS. I will, and I appreciate that so much because I do have extensive experience in many of these regulatory programs

that in the last administration we worked to make, roll back, but also align better for the needs of our ag communities and ensure that the Waters of the United States rule did not put more farmers out of business. Same with the Endangered Species Act. I know that is also a big issue in our forestry lane, as well.

I really encourage and look forward, and my policy heart is very happy at the opportunity to make those better, to understand the harm and follow the data on it, and really work with all of you to try to solve for that in the next four years.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Schiff.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and at the outset I want to tell you how very grateful I am to serve on this Committee. California has not had a Senator on the Agriculture Committee for over 30 years, and as a leading agricultural state I am really proud of the industry and all the people who work in it, and grateful to have a chance to represent them on this Committee.

Senator Marshall, I wanted to tell you that a California legislator once made a name for himself by drinking a beaker a malathion to demonstrate his view that he thought it was that safe. I will not be doing that today.

Ms. Rollins, thank you for being here today. When we met earlier this month to discuss your nomination, firefighters in Southern California had just begun efforts to contain two blazes. As we know now, this was only the beginning of what would ultimately amount to one of the most devastating wildfire disasters in the state's history, if not the Nation's history. Over the last 2½ weeks, in L.A., it has been difficult for me to put into words how truly catastrophic these fires have been. Just the scope of them is beyond anything I would have ever imagined, whole neighborhoods and communities just wiped out.

The Forest Service has been playing an amazing role in the emergency response efforts, working hand-in-hand with state and local partners to secure resources and personnel. To aid California's wildfire response, this month the Forest Service deployed 2,300 federal firefighters, 12 large air tankers, 20 helicopters, 6 scoopers, and 8 modular airborne firefighting aircraft. Without these federal resources the devastation in L.A. would have been far worse—and we are not done with it yet. We had the outbreak of another fire just yesterday.

If confirmed as Secretary, are you committed to deploying the same emergency resources to fight wildfires in blue states that would be deployed to fight wildfires in red states? Can we count on you not to discriminate among states in the vigor of the federal response?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, thank you, and obviously it bears saying, since you asked, 100 percent yes. To watch the devastation in your beautiful state has been heartbreaking for all of us, no matter if we are from red states or blue states.

I think that hopefully, if there is any good that comes from this, if I am confirmed, we can figure out how to be even a better, more impactful resource the next time this happens, and hopefully be able to work more closely, more quickly with those on the ground, across blue states and red states.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you. I very much appreciate that. Wildland firefighters have been putting their lives on the line to protect my communities back home, and we need to make sure that we continue to encourage people to become wildland firefighters and that their compensation is commensurate with the critical and dangerous work that they do.

I was speaking with one firefighter who was, I think, an L.A. Fire Department firefighter, not a wildland firefighter, but nonetheless facing the same risks, who told me that he was not sure he was going to make it out alive, that there were fires in front of him and behind him, his communications equipment was in and out, water was running low. He said it was the closest thing to hell that he could imagine.

The key, I think, to recruiting and retaining people to do that kind of vital and dangerous work is to make sure they are well compensated. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, signed by President Biden, included a long overdue pay raise for federal firefighters, but that raise is set to expire in March. This means our federal firefighters could once again be paid as low as $15 an hour to risk their lives to keep our communities safe.

If confirmed as Secretary, are you committed to fighting to extend the pay increase so that we can continue to recruit and retain these wildland firefighters?

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator Schiff, and the tens of thousands of firefighters at the Forest Service, at USDA, in our peak seasons, and even now I think we have close to 1,000 on the ground in your home state. I am 100 percent behind ensuring that we have the best firefighters, the best workforce that we can possibly have to fight these fires. I need to learn more about exactly what it is you are speaking about before a full commitment.

I will commit to this, that in all of my time with President Trump, in the 8-plus years I have been beside him, in serving in his administration and answering the call for this position, if confirmed, that he, too, believes that those who are putting their lives on the line every single day deserve the honor and the respect and the pay that goes along with those jobs. I look forward to working with you to ensure, as we move forward, that that is happening, in the most appropriate way.

Senator SCHIFF. I appreciate that. Let me turn to a different topic. During the President's first term, USDA had to allocate tens of billions of dollars to offset the financial impact of the terrorists and the reciprocal terrorists that other countries imposed on our agriculture and on our farmers. That financial assistance offered to farmers impacted by the trade war was not equally distributed.

Despite California's leading role in U.S. agriculture and the heavy tariffs imposed on specialty crop exports, California growers received far less than their fair share in tariff assistance under the 2019 Market Facilitation Program. Out of hundreds of specialty crops grown in the U.S., only eight crops received direct assistance, and in the end approximately 1 percent of the nearly $15 billion in USDA allocated resources went to California specialty crop growers. About 1 percent. As you know, we are the leading state when it comes to specialty crops.

If confirmed, are you committed to distributing all economic assistance, including trade relief, to states without regard for their political leanings?

Ms. ROLLINS. I am committed to that. I think, Senator Slotkin, even you and I discussed the specialty crops in Michigan when we met. I look forward to—I am not familiar with the data that you laid out, but I look forward to learning more about that and being committed to ensuring, to the very, very best of our ability, that this is appropriately adjudicated.

Senator SCHIFF. I appreciate that. I look forward to working together to make sure that that relief, if it should be necessary, is distributed equitably.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Tuberville.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Coach.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Coach.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you very much. Ms. Rollins, who would have ever known, 30 years ago, I am a young coach at Texas A&M and you are student body president, the first time we met.

Ms. ROLLINS. That is true. We sat next to each other in lots of meetings. That is exactly right.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Look where we are at now.

Ms. ROLLINS. I know. I know. It is an amazing world.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Congratulations.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir.

Senator TUBERVILLE. You are going to be awesome.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you.

Senator TUBERVILLE. I do not want to sugarcoat this because my farmers back home are hurting.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator TUBERVILLE. We are in trouble. Our farmers are in trouble. Small farms are selling right and left. I have got a bill on the floor—actually, I dropped it yesterday—about keeping foreign adversaries from buying our farmland. We are selling it right and left. I do not blame them, because they cannot make a profit. Row croppers in my State of Alabama are really getting killed. Cotton farmers last year, the input cost was about $400 an acre. They might have gotten $100 an acre out of their crop last year. That is the reason we had to do a supplemental right before Christmas. My phone was ringing off the wall. We have got to help our farmers.

They hate handouts. I will tell you that right now. They hate it, because they want to do their own work. You understand that. Being from Texas you understand it.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Again, it is a dire problem, and it not going to get fixed overnight. I am looking forward to seeing who your team is going to be around you.

I will tell you this. It is discouraging to know that you walk into the office building where you are going to have three or four thousand employees, and you can shoot a gun and not hit anybody. There is nobody there. Nobody has been working in the office for

four years. I mean, it is embarrassing. It is absolutely embarrassing. Our farmers need help, and we have got nobody working at the office.

We have to get input costs down. That is not your job. Six, seven years ago, a cotton picker cost $750,000 in Alabama. Today it is $1.5 million.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Fertilizer has gone sky high after the Ukraine war. I mean, it is embarrassing, to where we have gotten.

There is a $45 billion trade deficit in ag—$45 billion—and the only way that we can get commodity prices back up is handle that trade deficit. That being said, we need dialog. If confirmed, will you commit on doing dialog with President Trump and the people around ag to get our farmers an opportunity to have a better price for their crop?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, I will, Senator, and I so look forward to that. I think one of the things I read recently, that only 43 percent of our ag producers are net positive, net income positive. That is unsustainable. We have to find a better way, and it cannot come always through government subsidies. We have got to expand the market. We have got to figure out input costs. One of President Trump's top priorities was food inflation. Well, this comes before food inflation because this, itself, will drive the cost of food down if we do our jobs and if we are able to produce for our ag community the way that, Coach, I believe that we can, working together.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Yes. What we do not want to happen is what has happened to our drug industry. You know, we found in COVID, we look around going, you know, how do we keep people, you know, get people healthy, and all the drugs are made in China. We are going to end up in the same situation if we do not wake up and smell the roses. It is going to happen. Again, people are selling right and left, and you cannot blame them. Our small farms are going to end up being corporations like the packing houses. We have got, what, three companies now that are meatpackers, and one of them is owned by China. We are headed in a direction of unknown, and it is going to take leadership from your office to get that back on the right track.

Our forest industry, in my state, $36 billion a year. Now, with the USDA Forest Service under your purview, what priorities do you have for the health of our forests across the country, not just in Alabama, but we have to continue that to make sure that we have healthy wood, because it is something that we are very proud of.

Ms. ROLLINS. I know that is really important to Alabama and many of the other states that are represented here and across the U.S. Senate. My commitment is to hire an A++ team. We have already announced our Under Secretary, Mike Boren, for this position. I have great faith in his leadership. He is a businessman. I think bringing to the table, hopefully with a quick confirmation process from all of you, he will bring to the table a team that will take our great firefighters in the Forest Service and hopefully realign and reorganize in a way that makes the Forest Service, including forest management, more productive, more efficient, more effective, so that we do not have the issues that we have had in

these last number of years, and especially for our great producers in your state and other states.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Key word—forest management. Key two words. We have got to manage our forests and do it the right way. The American people across the country that are not in this business, they should not have to pay for everything, the mistakes that we make. You know, we are broke. We are $36 trillion in debt, and it is getting worse——

Ms. ROLLINS. That is right.

Senator TUBERVILLE [continuing]. every day, and we are printing $80,000 a second, by the way, and we cannot sustain that. The government is way too big.

Ms. ROLLINS. Agree.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Disaster relief. If we have had problems with tornadoes or floods or whatever in my state, it takes at least three years, at times, to get any kind of disaster relief, three years. You know as well as I do, farmers borrow money from banks, for a crop, and those bankers are looking around going, "Where is our money?" Well, we are waiting for disaster relief. The bankers should not have to deal with that, nor should the farmers.

I think there has to be a better plan for that, at the end of the day. Again, I am throwing all your problems out to you, and you probably do not want to hear that. We have got a lot of problems that need to be fixed.

Ms. ROLLINS. Well, Senator, Coach, I believe that you and I have been in conversation with our commander in chief, and the fact that it is taking three years to get relief will be unacceptable to him. It is unacceptable to me. I look forward to working with you to ensure that we do better, much, much better than that.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you. Good luck.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Welch.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much. I do not want the coach to be upset, but when he asked the question, how did you both get here, I kind of get it how you got here. I am still trying to figure out about the coach.

Ms. ROLLINS. How Coach got here?

[Laughter.]

Senator WELCH. You did another thing that is really astonishing. Senator Cruz gave you a very nice introduction. You know, I did not know something that he has kept on the down low. He actually has a sense of humor.

[Laughter.]

Senator WELCH. This is a pretty astonishing hearing.

Ms. ROLLINS. It is a new day.

Senator WELCH. It is. Thank you for your visit to my office and your enthusiasm about rural America. I am so delighted to be working with our new Ranking Member and our new Chair to try to strengthen rural America. I share the point of view strongly held by Members of this Committee, that rural America really is about the great values and strength of America—hard work, family, community. Rural America has been under brutal pressure, and I think every single one of us wants to do everything we can to strengthen it, because a strong rural America is a strong America.

A couple of things. We have been really blessed, in Vermont, with a very responsive Department of Agriculture. The Rural Development organization in Vermont has helped us through the floods of July '23 and July '24. It has used opportunities to strengthen the economy for farmers. I just want to make certain that some of the things that have really been helpful to us, we can have some confidence will continue should you be the new Secretary of Agriculture.

Number one, under the previous administration, Vermont received $40 million through the Rural Energy for America Program to help farmers and rural businesses invest in renewable energy projects or energy efficiency improvements. We do not have to have a debate about climate change and whether it is real or not, but my view is this—our farmers can help our farmers can help us deal with extreme weather events with the weather events, by doing things where they get income to sequester carbon.

Without having the climate change discussion, I want to make certain that I can have some confidence that our farmers, who are adopting regenerative agricultural practices, organic agriculture, are doing things that, by all estimations, make for good, healthy crops, but also reduce carbon emissions, that we will continue to make that possible, and they will get paid to do it, not just be asked through regulations to bear the burden.

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator Welch, thank you, and I loved visiting with you, and excited to come to Vermont, if invited. I loved our conversation, and we actually talked about the workforce at USDA, at least those that you have interacted with and worked with. Hearing from you how excellent the service was and the good job that they did meant a lot to me, and I look forward to learning more and meeting them, if confirmed.

I think it is important to recognize, Senator, I will always have an open dialog with all of you. I think I gave all of you my cellphone.

Senator WELCH. Yes, you did.

Ms. ROLLINS. I did.

Senator WELCH. Let me go on to the next one, because I just want to go through a few things. You know, another issue is labor on the farm. We cannot milk our cows without immigrant labor. I am for a secure border. I am also for legal immigration. That is a real challenge for our dairy farmers, and I want to make sure that whatever we do to secure the border does not deprive our hard-working dairy farms and farmers access to the labor that they absolutely depend on. Can you comment on that?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, yes, thank you, and I appreciate everyone's commitment to a secure border. You are not the only one on this side of the room that has made the point that that is really important. I know there is great concern amongst our ag community on what immigration under President Trump will look like.

My commitment to you is this, that understanding the data and understanding the impact of those in the ag community—dairy farms, I think, especially, are concerned, but everybody is—ensuring that we are working with the nominee over at Labor, Lori Chavez-DeRemer, who is from Oregon.

Senator WELCH. We will work together on that.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator WELCH. And, do you appreciate the importance of having access to that labor for our dairy farms and others, as well?

Ms. ROLLINS. I know that these cows need to be milked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It does not go away. If there is no one to milk them, that is big trouble.

Senator WELCH. I shared with you that a lot of the incredible challenges farmers have are because they do not control the weather. A lot of our small farmers are vegetable farmers. They do not have an insurance program that works for them. The insurance program for some of our vegetable folks, they only get paid wholesale, or reimbursed wholesale, when they sell at farmers markets at retail. They have to go through an incredible documentation process, where they have to report how many tomatoes they lost, how many beets they lost.

I have introduced the WEATHER Act as an effort to try to streamline the reporting requirements. We have to have crop insurance programs that help not just the big commodities, which is a challenge and an obligation we have, but these smaller farmers that are the future. Can I count on working with you on that?

Ms. ROLLINS. Well, streamline, the word "streamline" is my love line. Yes, you and I will absolutely work together on that. We have spent a lot of time this morning talking to everyone about restoring rural America and how important that is to the next 250 years of our country. That will happen because of our small family farms and our rural ranchers.

Senator WELCH. You know, another issue is it is so hard for young farmers to get into farming——

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator WELCH [continuing]. largely because they cannot get the farmland. There is a lot of concern expressed here, and I share it, about Chinese possibly buying up. You know who is buying it up? It is private equity. I want farmers to be able to buy up farmland. I mean, is that of concern to you? I know having access to farmland for young farmers is, and China may be a threat, but private equity is a threat too. Care to comment?

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, thank you. The average farmer today, the average age is 58 years old. If we really think we are going to have a sustainable, thriving ag community in 20 or 30 or 50 years, after you and I have probably gone to meet our maker, then we have to reverse that trend.

Senator WELCH. Okay. The last topic in this round, rural broadband has made such a difference for rural Vermont and for our farm communities, and your Department has played a major role in facilitating that. We have to continue that and get that last barn, on the longest dirt road, wired so they have the advantages that come with access to the internet. Care to comment?

Ms. ROLLINS. I 100 percent agree.

Senator WELCH. Okay. Thank you very much.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Justice.

Senator JUSTICE. Well, first and foremost, to all of those on this Committee, you know, I thank you for allowing me to be on the

Committee. I thank leader Thune, and I thank anyone that was responsible for me being here.

You know, I am a plain-spoken individual. I am hung up all the time on the truth. I will promise you, with all in me, that I know a tremendous amount about agriculture. You know, I think about—and, Brooke, I cannot call you Mrs. Rollins.

Ms. ROLLINS. You can call me Brooke.

Senator JUSTICE. I could call you Secretary. I have asked you over and over to call me Jim.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator JUSTICE. I would just tell you just this. All that is going to fall in your empire is astronomical. That is all there is to it. You know, I am amazed with President Trump's nominees, and that is all there is to it. They are qualified. They are absolutely experienced. They absolutely have what Brooke has. She is stuck on "on." Anybody that cannot see that is absolutely not looking. She approaches it with positiveness, and a big smile.

All of you that came, especially all of her family, you know, I am not amazed in any way. I know she is infectious around every last one of you, and absolutely you will be a tremendous Secretary.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Senator JUSTICE. That is all there is to it.

Now let me just say, let me deviate just a little bit, and let me just tell you just this, and this is my view. The American family farm has got to be protected like none other. Right today, right now, you know, what we have is the average size of the American family farm is 450, plus or minus, acres. You just think about it. What are they doing right now? What are they doing right now? You know, maybe in Wyoming it may very well be 30 below zero, and they are out on a snowmobile or a horse, trying to feed their cattle. Maybe, if they were a dairyman, you know, or lady, wherever it may be, there is never a day off, never a day off. The cows have to be milked. There is never a day off. Whether it be maybe just that little farm, that is sitting, trying to figure out how in the world, with fertilizer prices or whatever it may be, how in the world can we make ends come out, or ends work.

Just think about this. They are probably driving a 12-year-old pickup truck. They are trying every way they possibly can, and every year they are in a Texas Hold 'Em game where they shove everything all in, every single year.

Ms. ROLLINS. That is right.

Senator JUSTICE. Now, with all that being said, just think about it. What happens if we lose our American small farm? Where do we go? You know, corporate interests, and on and on and on. They are a productive engine like you cannot imagine on the planet. You can never imagine their productivity. They are a treasure to every single last one of us, and we best better protect them and keep them on that farm.

You know, they can cash out today with their land, most all, and have a lifestyle that is so much better than their earnings every single year. Why do they do it? They do it because of one thing—they love what they do. They are the best of the best, and they love what they do, and we have got to keep them there, and we have got to protect them, in every single way.

I know it, in my heart, and I believe it, with all my soul. You know, if you will just step back and look, the grocery stores, a mile long, food beyond belief. Now I know we have had an increase in food prices and we need to do something about that if we possibly can. We enjoy a luxury that is off the chart. What we throw away, many, many around the world would beg to have what we throw away. It is a luxury beyond belief, and that small farm that I am talking about provides us that luxury.

Brooke, I have really only got one question for you, and it is just this. I do not have enough time to go into all the specifics. From a value-added standpoint, you know, if I could deviate just a second to forestry, and I look forward to telling you about this because I have got a plan that really could very well help bring our furniture manufacturing, our cabinetry, you know, our flooring manufacturing back from it being in China, Vietnam, and Mexico, where we have lost it all, for all practical purposes, back to us. We will talk about that.

I want to hear that you are really supportive of value-added products, because it is so important to getting our manufacturing at home, and what President Trump absolutely believes and wants more than anything. Again, I am all in with your nomination, 1000 percent. You will do an amazing job. There is no question about it. Please comment in the value-added, please.

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, there is no excuse why everything in American agriculture, and America in general, but we are here to talk about ag, is not the best of the world, that everything that we work on is of the most excellent approach, and that we continue to build and feed and thrive and preserve the American heritage of the greatest farmers in the world.

Senator JUSTICE. I am telling you, and everybody should pay close attention, she is a superstar.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir.

Senator JUSTICE. We need her. We need her.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir. I am humbled.

Senator JUSTICE. It is premature, but congratulations.

Ms. ROLLINS. As long as I have Babydog's support, that is——

Senator JUSTICE. Oh, you have got Babydog with you every single day.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir. I so appreciate that. Thank you.

Senator JUSTICE. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Babydog was the difference in you getting on the Committee or not.

[Laughter.]

Senator JUSTICE. Babydog trumps me every single day.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Warnock.

Senator WARNOCK. I do not know how to follow that. Welcome to the Committee.

Senator JUSTICE. Thank you, sir.

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you, Chairman Boozman. I want to take a moment to congratulate you and Ranking Member Klobuchar on your appointments to lead this Committee. I look forward to working with both of you. I have met with each of you, and I have enjoyed our relationship and the work that we have tried to do and the work we have done.

Ms. Rollins, good morning——

Ms. ROLLINS. Good morning.

Senator WARNOCK [continuing]. and welcome to you and also to your family and all those who are here to support you, and congratulations on your nomination.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you.

Senator WARNOCK. I enjoyed also meeting with you last month to discuss your nomination and plans for USDA. This morning I would just like to follow-up on some of the issues, many of which we have already discussed.

First, it has come to my attention that a recent executive order has led to the potential termination of USDA's liaisons to our 1890 Land Grant Institutions, institutions like Fort Valley State University in Fort Valley, Georgia. There is strong bipartisan support for these institutions. They have done an incredible job, often doing so much for so many, with so very little, for such a long time, that people—it is lost on people that work at these institutions every day. I am deeply concerned about this and the actions to shut out their voices at USDA.

Ms. Rollins, if you are confirmed, will you commit to supporting our 1890 Institutions?

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, I believe Prairieview A&M is one of those 1890 Institutions, which I am very familiar with, and partnered as a student at Texas A&M and in the last administration worked with.

I am not familiar with exactly what you are speaking of, but my commitment to you is to find out and to continue a really important discussion and to learn more about the issue.

Senator WARNOCK. Well, the executive order could lead to the potential termination of USDA's liaisons to these 1890 Institutions, which help them to navigate their relationship with the USDA. Can I have your commitment to protect those who serve these institutions at the USDA?

Ms. ROLLINS. Again, sir, I would want to know more and understand more before I can make that commitment, but clearly those institutions are important, they are bipartisan supported, and you have my commitment to have a very robust dialog at any moment, any time of day or night, to ensure that we have all the data as we are making any decisions.

Senator WARNOCK. I appreciate that. I have good relationships and good work, bipartisan work, supporting these institutions, and I hope you will——

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator WARNOCK [continuing]. keep your eye on that issue.

Ms. ROLLINS. I will.

Senator WARNOCK. Last year I worked hard with my colleagues in a bipartisan manner to provide $21 billion to help farmers recover from natural disasters like Hurricane Helene. Farmers, as you know, do incredible work. It is a tough business. There is so much you do not control. The margins are narrow. I do everything I can to protect my growers in Georgia.

I cannot overstate how critical it is for USDA to distribute this assistance, this disaster assistance, to Georgia farmers as quickly as possible, but also as equitably as possible. If confirmed, briefly because I want to get through these questions, how will you work

to ensure disaster assistance is distributed both swiftly and equitably?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir, thank you, and I will try to answer quickly so we can go on. The day I got the call from President Trump, it was Saturday, November 23d. We were in our motor home, traveling across the country to an Aggie football game. Within a few hours of accepting the nomination I began to immediately pivot to how do we distribute this disaster, and so important, economic aid, working with a few of the Senators on this Committee.

Clearly I am not confirmed yet so this is going to await my arrival. In the meantime, sir, we have already announced the Under Secretary who worked on this in the last Trump administration, who is already building the team who distributed these funds, so they know what they are doing. We are not reinventing the wheel.

Senator WARNOCK. Well, will you work with our state agriculture commissioner to ensure Georgia producers, including our foresters, have the support they need from USDA to get that assistance without having to jump through a bunch of bureaucratic hoops?

Ms. ROLLINS. Of course.

Senator WARNOCK. Will you also commit to equitably getting that assistance to all eligible farmers, all eligible farmers, including those who have been historically left out of USDA assistance, often due to discrimination?

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, we will follow the law and ensure that that is the case.

Senator WARNOCK. Is that a yes or a no?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes.

Senator WARNOCK. Let me move on to the next subject. Thanks so much.

Fighting hunger has long been a part of my life's work, long before I was elected to the Senate. As you know, I am a pastor, and the one miracle story that is in all the Gospels, all four, is the feeding of the 5,000.

Ms. ROLLINS. That is right.

Senator WARNOCK. I constantly hear from Georgia families about how their dollar just does not go as far at the grocery store as it used to. The average Georgian participating in SNAP, a food assistance program that provides critical nutrition aid to our most vulnerable families, has about $6.15 a day to spend on food. In your view, is $6.15 a day adequate to avoid hunger for Georgia families?

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, this is a supplemental program. I am just getting my arms around it. There is few that will be in my role, if confirmed, that have a passion for this more than I do. Serving those who are most in need, as you and I discussed in your office, is a driving force of my entire life. It almost sent me to seminary, but I ended up in public policy instead.

You have my wholehearted commitment to look and ensure that the people who need this most are receiving it in the best way possible, but at the same time, ensuring that all of the tax dollars that are spent on it are also spent in the best way possible.

Senator WARNOCK. One of the things, as these families struggle, one of the things that I am concerned about are proposals to slash this critical assistance and create additional work verification red tape for families participating in these programs. Do you think cre-

ating more bureaucratic red tape for families will help them purchase nutritious food?

Ms. ROLLINS. I think it is extremely important that we take a wholesale look at every one of these programs and ensure that they are serving the people that are needing the programs and that they are the safety net they are truly set out to be. Obviously, I do not like the words "bureaucracy" or "red tape," but ensuring that we have set up the appropriate lifelines and the appropriate structure so that we can get these resources to the families that need them the most.

Senator WARNOCK. As we talk about work requirements, and I support work. I was raised by a father and a mother, commitment, we had a serious work ethic. We want to help these families have a basic safety net. Most poor people are children. I think it is important to remember that. Most poor people are children. SNAP lifts children, seniors, veterans, and folks with disabilities out of poverty, and it is proven to reduce health care costs and stimulate our local economies.

If you are confirmed I hope we can find ways to work together to ensure our most vulnerable families and our neighbors can afford groceries. I think, as someone again who preaches the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, I think it is the right thing to do, but I also think it is the smart thing to do.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. You have my commitment, and my friend, Dr. Alveda King, is here, and we have spoken of that multiples of times. Looking forward to working with everyone on that.

Senator WARNOCK. I am her family's pastor.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. I am very well aware. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Grassley.

Senator GRASSLEY. Congratulations. Like other Senators I think you will do a good job.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir.

Senator GRASSLEY. I want to start out by thanking you, like Senator Durbin did, for, during the Trump administration working with us on the First Step Act. You were actively involved in a lot of those negotiations between Democrats and Republicans on the Hill here, as well as between us and the first Trump administration. You worked hard.

I noticed after you took the oath the first question you got was, "Are you going to answer our letters?" Remember what I told you in my office?

Ms. ROLLINS. Oh yes, sir.

Senator GRASSLEY. As I tell every confirmed person coming to my office, that you ought to say maybe. Because I pointed out to you how I had 158 letters to the Justice Department that are still unanswered.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator GRASSLEY. They said yes, but they turned out to be liars, and that is true of Republican and Democrat administration, generally. I hope since you said "I do," you will tell all your colleagues in the Cabinet the same darn thing, or they are going to be liars.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. I hear you loud and clear, and I have to believe with 100,000 employees at USDA we will be able to answer your letters, to the best of my ability, sir. Yes.

Senator GRASSLEY. Okay. Now, at least one other person, my colleague, Senator Ernst, has brought up the importance of whistleblowers and information she got from them. I am not sure that I want to ask you a question. I just want to tell you what is on my mind, and that is you have got tens of thousands of people working under you. You cannot know what they do. You ought to listen to whistleblowers. It is not you, yourself, listening to whistleblowers. It is you establishing a culture within your agency that middle management is going to listen to whistleblowers, because then they do not have to come and bother me. I have got 38 different investigations going. Most of it has come from whistleblower information about fraud or about the law not being followed or misspending of money, and all that.

Listen to whistleblowers, will you?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. You have my 100 percent commitment. We talked about it in your office, and I really look forward to that.

Senator GRASSLEY. The next thing is the legal term, "actively engaged" in farming is not enforced. We have got too many people on Wall Street getting farm payments, that should not be getting them. I want to make sure that all of this manipulation that has gone on in the Department of Agriculture under both Republicans and Democrats to dilute the term "actively engaged"—and I am being a little facetious when I say this, but you ought to at least have dirt under your fingernails if you are going to get payments from the taxpayers for your farming operation. I expect "actively engaged" to be fully enforced by you, and whatever, however it has been diluted you ought to take a look at it and make sure that it is stiffer than what it otherwise was.

Then when we get into this negotiations on a 5-year farm bill—I do not expect you to answer this now, but just let me tell you, there can be tremendous savings to the taxpayers, and you can even discuss this with Mr. Musk of DOGE, and you can discuss it with people at OMB. If you can put a cap on what one farmer can get from the farm program, so we are not subsidizing big farmers. They get bigger, and I have got nothing wrong with the marketplace working for people to get as big as they want to get. We should be subsidizing.

The whole point of an agricultural 5-year farm bill safety net is to protect people that are medium-and small-sized farmers that cannot control what happens to them, whether it is a natural disaster or a Carter grain embargo, or some war in Kyiv. Big farmers can handle that, but small farmers cannot. That seems to me, for the same reason we put out disaster relief for farmers in the bill that just passed before Christmas, and you are going to administer, there is the same reason that we have a safety net for farmers on prices generally and things beyond their control.

I try every farm bill to get this done, and the most successful farm bill I had, and I hope I am successful in this farm bill, was 2015, when I got a cap put on in both the House and Senate in exactly the same language, and it should not have been diluted at all, or changed at all, when it goes to conference, because those are the rules of the conference. The Congressman from Texas—I do not know his name—that was Chairman of the Ag Committee at that

time—and you probably know who he was—he did not like it and he diluted it until it was practically meaningless at this point.

If you want to save some taxpayers money, look at that issue when I bring it up again.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir.

Senator GRASSLEY. Another thing is we had the first Trump administration, we had a couple of times in the Biden administration used money from the Commodity Credit Corporation that I do not think should have been used. The power of the purse, as you know, rests with Congress, under Article I of the Constitution, and money cannot be spent without authority of Congress. Billions have been wasted that way, and I hope you do not get involved in wasting those dollars again.

I will end with the Packers and Stockyards Act. I think it is stronger than anything that the Justice Department can do under antitrust laws to protect the welfare of the farmer to make sure that the marketplace is working. Thank God, Vilsack, just before he left office, put out some regulations that will help enforce powers of Packers and Stockyards Act, particularly to protect livestock producers and highly concentrated areas of agriculture or the Poultry Grower Payment System, the Capital Improvement Payment System.

The American Farm Bureau Federation has spoken positively about these issues. I think there were some more that are on the book that maybe you can take a look at that he did not get around to putting out, because maybe they are a little more controversial. The Packers and Stockyards Act is the most effective tool to make sure that the marketplace works for the American farmer. Thank you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator, and I am really looking forward to working with you and continuing to move forward, and especially focusing on our small family farms and rural America.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Slotkin.

Senator SLOTKIN. Thank you. Congratulations, Mr. Chairman and Madam Ranking Chairwoman. I am honored to be here as the successor of Debbie Stabenow, our esteemed former Chairwoman, the queen of Michigan agriculture. We miss her, and I have really, really big shoes to fill there.

Thank you for our conversation in my office. I appreciate your positive approach to meeting with everybody.

I have the honor to live on my family farm, which used to be beef cattle, is now soy and corn, alternatively. I am also a former CIA officer, Pentagon official. I really come to the Ag Committee with a sense that food security is national security, and the United States should always be able to feed itself by itself, and everything flows from there. If people agree then there are a lot of policies that become pretty clear, of the sale of our land to foreign governments or to private equity, all of those things. I think that is the approach that I tend to take.

I am also from Michigan. We are not Kansas. We are not Iowa. We are specialty crops, right. We have the second most diverse agricultural sector in the country, after California, and we take pride in not doing monocropping and doing a lot of fruits and vegetables and a lot of other things.

This is why I am particularly concerned about the tariffs. Everyone is talking about tariffs. Mr. Trump is throwing them around, and I just want to review the bidding to make sure, particularly with your agency, that we are all on the same page on what happened the last time President Trump put on tariffs, what happened specifically to our farmers.

Just to review the bidding, President Trump announced 25 percent tariffs on Chinese products—batteries, TVs, medical devices. Again, I certainly understand the instinct, as a CIA officer, right. I want to push back on China. China retaliated and put 25 percent tariffs on soybeans, fruits, pork, and some other items.

Then we got into a trade war. We started adding more things to the list. They started adding more things to the list. It went on and on and on, and back and forth. Suddenly, our farmers across the country are screaming bloody murder because the markets that they used to have access to, no one wanted to buy our stuff because it had that 25 percent tariff. We felt that very acutely.

What did we do? Because we felt, under the Trump administration, people rightfully felt like our farmers were getting the shaft here, they raided the CCC account, the emergency rainy day account that you will have control over, for $23 billion, to give subsidies to our farmers. We put on the tariff, got into a trade war, ended up our farmers were in trouble, we paid them off. Everyone here has said no farmer wants a subsidy. They want to work, right. They want to get paid a fair rate for their crop.

That emergency fund is the same fund that helps us with things like avian flu, that we are now dealing with all over the country.

You can imagine, as a Michigander, the throwing around of tariffs, particularly with Canada, Mexico, a bunch of other places. I am trepidatious that this is going to come back to our farmers. When you get confirmed, and it looks like you will, you will swear an oath to the Constitution of the United States, not to President Trump.

Can you say—I know you have said it—but for the Michiganders watching, that you will throw your body in front of the bus to make sure that any political talking point on tariffs that may sound good is actually truly tested against how it will impact our farmers, like it was not last time around?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, I appreciate your passion, I share it, and I think we are similar in a lot of ways. Yes, my commitment is that there will be no sleeping, that we will work around the clock to ensure that our ag communities across this country are represented in those discussions and at the table. I will do everything in my power to elevate, preserve, honor, conserve that backbone of America.

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes. I just want to know that you have a good relationship with President Trump, and that is a value add. Use it to help our farmers, not just a political talking point. We all want to punch back on China, most of us, but it has got to fit reality here and not end up boomeranging on us like it did last time.

Next is avian flu. We talked about this, as well, in my office. Michigan has been dealing with this. Lots of states around the country are dealing with it. We have had human beings, a few, get-

ting ill. One passed away. We now see it in cats, household pets that are eating birds that have it, that kind of thing.

What we have seen, you know, I think Michigan has gotten decently high marks for handling it well because we have cooperated with the Federal Government. There are a lot of folks around the country that are not so friendly with the Federal Government.

You are going to be the Federal Government, having to put some muscle behind some of our rules so that we do not see this spread. I mean, again, right now you cannot get a dozen eggs around Holly, Michigan, where I live, for less than $4.69 a dozen. It used to be two bucks.

Please tell me what you are going to do in the Federal Government role that you are about to take to make sure that we stem the spread of avian flu, even the states and farmers who are not so friendly with the Federal Government.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator, and I do remember our conversation, and it is certainly a top priority. I know in my opening remarks it is one of my top four priorities on day one, putting the right team in place to ensure that what you discussed and outlined is happening.

I do believe that with my depth of experience with working at all levels of government, specifically at the state level, I have been working closely—I believe probably mostly Republican, maybe all Republican, but all the ag commissioners, I am already in contact with, and if confirmed will continue to work closely with them.

I think there is no doubt that the all-of-government approach, working with the stakeholder community but also the state and local officials, is going to be extremely important.

To your point about food security at the top of your remarks, that remains paramount, I think, for all of us.

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes. Then, last, I will just echo some of Senator Warnock's comments. We have seen, in versions of the farm bill that were created in the past year, both in the House and the Senate, that SNAP is usually the bill payer for at least part of it, and cuts to SNAP, and then additional subsidies to some of our farmers, frankly particularly farmers down South.

I understand that that is popular. I would just ask you again to look into your heart. If the majority of poor people are children, that is not a work requirement that they can meet. Please just remember the children and be thoughtful about our approach on SNAP, not just, again, a political talking point.

Ms. ROLLINS. I will, Senator. Thank you.

Senator SLOTKIN. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Fischer.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Senator Boozman, and congratulations on your gavel. I look forward to working with you and with the Ranking Member. Thank you.

Ms. Rollins, so good to see you. I really, really appreciated you coming to the office last month and the great discussion that we had.

As you know, the agricultural industry is the economic engine of Nebraska. We grow a lot of corn and beans and wheat and sugar beets and livestock. We span the necessity of having that strong economy for our state, that food security, how important it is for

our country, and I look forward to working with you in the future on that.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you.

Senator FISCHER. You noted in your testimony that we must demand strong and steady markets for our agricultural bounty, and this is a statement that I hear consistently from our producers, as well. One of those really important markets for Nebraska's agriculture is biofuels. In his day one actions, President Trump emphasized the need for our country to be energy dominant. The President has long recognized that ag producers have a role to play in producing abundant, home-grown energy, and he took steps in his executive order declaring a national energy emergency so that we can continue to allow for the sale of E15 year-round.

I have long led an effort to make this policy permanent, and I look forward to working with my colleagues to deliver on that part of the President's agenda. We know that there is going to be a number of other biofuel decisions that will be made in the coming months that will have significant impacts on the biofuel market.

I know you have heard from a number of my colleagues on this Committee about the importance of that. Can you just speak briefly about how you view the importance of biofuel markets for our farmers?

Ms. ROLLINS. I will, and Senator, thank you. I loved being in your office and meeting Fred Fischer, and really look forward to hopefully having more conversations in your office and in your home State of Nebraska, which is one of the shining stars of our country.

In the last few months, since the announcement was made that I was going to be hopefully, if confirmed, joining this Administration and the Cabinet as the head of USDA, I have had multiples of conversations with many of you on the Committee and outside the Committee. Your Governor flew to Texas to give me a couple of hours of his time, to make sure I understood, specifically within your state, but frankly, how this affects so much of the Midwest and our corn states.

My commitment is to defend and protect and fight for all of American agriculture. Clearly, in the last administration, this issue was under the National Economic Council, Larry Kudlow, so I did not manage it under the Domestic Policy Council, but I was certainly in a lot of the meetings, which there were a lot of meetings, President Trump would tell you, in the Oval Office, about this. His executive order in the last few days mentioning biofuels as part of his all-of-the-above strategy to reclaim energy dominance across the world is important.

Senator FISCHER. Right. President Trump was very generous with his time in his previous time in the Oval Office, and he is correct. We had a lot of meetings in the Oval Office.

Ms. ROLLINS. I think he said 27.

Senator FISCHER. Truly. He would like to get this issue settled, as well. I thought maybe in the CR, but we will continue to push for that.

What we have seen over the last four years, and what I have heard, has been a lot of disappointment from Nebraskans about the lack of any kind of trade agenda from the Biden administration. In

fact, for the first time in decades we have an agricultural trade deficit, and as you said earlier, it is projected to hit a record-breaking $45 billion. I understand there can be a variety of factors that impact a trade deficit, but I am concerned that part of this stems from there being really any kind of clear agricultural trade agenda from the last administration.

We cannot see that happen again. Can you talk about how you would both hold our current trading partners accountable and the role that you will, or that you would want to see USDA play in developing these new export markets?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, Senator, and that $45 billion, what is remarkable about that is 42 percent of that is just in the last year.

Senator FISCHER. Yes.

Ms. ROLLINS. The wheels are falling off, and it is very, very important that the wheels get put back on as soon as possible. I think for those that know me for a long time, but even, Senator, you and I have just gotten to know each other in the recent months, know that I am a relentless cheerleader for whatever it is that I have been called to do. For this moment in my life, and to meet this moment, as scripture says, I am called to take agriculture to preserve our rural communities, and take our products to the world, and work around the clock to ensure that that sort of trade deficit begins to peel back, and hopefully by the end of our time here, in the next four years, is completely gone, and, in fact, we are back in the positive.

I believe we can do that. I mentioned earlier I think President Trump is the consummate deal maker. His heart for rural America and for our farmers and ranchers I think will hopefully lead the way. I certainly will be right next to him, whispering in his ear as we move forward on this. I think and hope and pray that we can begin to solve for this immediately.

Senator FISCHER. Great. Another area that I focused on is how precision ag technology can help our farmers and ranchers to achieve better yields and reduce environmental impact, improve economic returns. I have had a number of bills on that that I am going to be reintroducing and including, hopefully, in the farm bill that we work on.

Additionally, myself and really the entire Nebraska delegation, along with the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, have been working in a very close partnership with the Ag Research Service on the National Center for Resilience and Regenerative Precision Ag at the University Innovation Campus. Last May we broke ground on that facility, and I hope that I can continue to work with you to make sure that we get that facility completed.

Can I get your commitment to continue working with me on this facility? Can I get your commitment to come to Nebraska? We had Sonny Perdue out at the ranch and had a great barbecue, with neighbors. We can do that, and on another trip we can get you to Lincoln and see the ARS facility, what we are doing there.

Ms. ROLLINS. That would be my great honor.

Senator FISCHER. Great. Thank you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Luján.

Senator LUJÁN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Representative, welcome to the Committee, Representative Kerwin. I know that most folks have been recognizing you, but we just want to say welcome. I look forward to working with you in whatever capacity we can. My late father also served in the New Mexico legislature, and very much appreciated some of those good projects that he had with some of the new family, if you will, the extended family of members from Texas. I got to know the young person. Welcome to the Committee.

Mrs. Rollins, thank you for being here. I very much appreciated the conversation that we had in the office, as well. One of the areas I shared in our conversation is something that I hold deeply, as I expressed to you, which is that every American should be able to have food on their table. No one should go hungry in America, no matter what zip code or area code they live in, or no matter how much money they make.

I appreciated my colleagues raising issues in some of these areas with nutritional programs. Given the important role that the Secretary of Agriculture plays in administering federal nutritional programs, I would like to better understand your vision for that.

Now, I did my due diligence to go through the America First Policy Institute's documents, but I was not able to find anything that I could digest—which is probably the wrong word to use——

Ms. ROLLINS. No pun intended.

Senator LUJÁN [continuing]. when it comes to addressing hunger in America. Do you agree that in America that—let me ask it this way. Do you believe that in an America that is truly great that our children do not go hungry?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes.

Senator LUJÁN. Updates to the Thrifty Food Plan in 2021, a program that you would have a lot of say over, lifted about 2.4 million SNAP participants, including 1 million children, out of poverty. That is good. It is not great yet because we have not done it all, but it is a good start.

Ms. Rollins, yes or no, will you commit to opposing any cuts to SNAP that would prevent Americans, including millions of children, from putting food on their table?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, probably not surprising to you, I cannot commit to that. Obviously, it is of utmost importance to me, and you and I discussed that, that we solve this, that it is not just hunger, it is nutrition, as well, for so many of our children that do not have access to those programs.

I also know that I have a duty to the taxpayer who is funding, in significant numbers, those programs. I sincerely believe, Senator, that working together and working with other Members of this Committee, it is important to Chairman Boozman, as well, that we can find a solution that may or may not end up in cuts. I do not know. That is something I need to spend more time on, research the data, meet with more people. I cannot make that commitment to you today but I can make the commitment to you for a lot of time, a lot of thought, a lot of conversation as we move down that road.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that. You know, I am always reminded that budgets are a reflection of values, depending on how

those budgets are put forth, as well. I certainly hope that in America, while we all have a responsibility, a fiscal responsibility, that our priorities would say children should not go hungry in America. I hope that is something that we can find some commonality on down the road.

I want to drill into something more specific, which is a program called WIC. It is a program for women, infants, and children, also a food program. It is one of those acronym programs you talked about that are over at the Department of Agriculture.

For decades, Republicans and Democrats have supported full funding for this program, meaning that no eligible mother or child who applies for the program is turned away. In your capacity as Secretary, is this a program that we can count on your support with?

Ms. ROLLINS. I look forward—I believe that is one of the 16 nutrition programs across the United States Department of Agriculture purview. I have not spent as much time as I hope to in the coming days and weeks, once confirmed, to really dig into that. Clearly my heart, this Administration, I believe speaking for the full Administration, clearly America is the place where everyone should have the opportunity to be in part of a safety net when needed, and WIC, I realize, is an important part of that safety net.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that response very much.

Now in the area of specialty crops, everyone here brags on whose is best. We have it.

Ms. ROLLINS. It is New Mexico.

Senator LUJÁN. I am going to address that right away. I share the concern that many have shared up here today around small farms. Fifty-three percent of New Mexico farms are 50 acres or less. The one that I am on is under five. I am concerned, as well, with what has been happening with small farms across America, whether it is water rights that are being gobbled up and taken off for something else, away from agricultural water rights, or who is buying them, or what they are turning into.

It is one of the reasons I introduced a piece of legislation with Senator Moran, that is the Farmer to Farmer Education Act. I will never forget a conversation I had with a grower back home, where I was asking him about USDA programs years back, and he said, "Well, we don't do so well qualifying for those programs and all the rest." I said, "Well, you are doing okay. You are doing better than most. Tell me how." He said, "I had to learn now to farm USDA." Maybe that works for some but not for all.

I agree with everyone that has talked about the red tape that exists for some of these programs. We have got to find a better way. These are people that are spending time producing food, growing food. They should not be stuck behind a desk trying to figure out what document needs to go here or what document needs to go there. We have got to find a better way. I appreciate your commitment already in that particular area, and your commitment to work with small farms.

The other area I raised in our meeting, and I actually just got off the phone with someone, so I apologize for excusing myself, but the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon fire. This is a fire that started a few years ago that became the largest fire in the State of New

Mexico's history. What surprises a lot of folks, and I appreciate my Republican and Democratic colleagues for supporting me and helping me create a fund specifically for this fire, is that this fire started as a prescribed burn.

My brother actually called in to try to burn our ditches and some things around our house, and you have to call the local fire department, is the way our permit works. You call them up and you say, "Can I burn today?" They will tell you, "Nope. No burning today." He got a no burn the day that they started this prescribed burn. It got out of control. Then I got told by folks around USDA, "Well, very few percentage of our fires, prescribed fires, turn into big burns."

About two months later, guess what happened in New Mexico? We had another one. There was an investigation, and then that investigation showed that rather than using the infrared technology that we have all helped fund, some folks put their hands on the deal, and it did not feel warm, and they walked away, and the winds kicked up. We know what happens when a little coal gets a little bit of a breeze. Sometimes we do it ourselves, give it a little breath.

There has got to be a better way about ensuring that the technology we can secure, that firefighters get paid properly, but that we follow this so this does not happen anywhere in America again.

I will close with this, Mr. Chairman. I very much appreciate, Mrs. Rollins, your commitment to working with Governor Noem or with FEMA, and making sure that when these programs exist, that money gets out the door to the families that need it most. Just thank you for that. Good luck with everything.

Again, Representative, I am honored to have you here today. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Moran.

Senator MORAN. Mr. Chairman, I would defer to the Senator from South Dakota as the Majority Leader. Otherwise, I will feel too much pressure to be brief.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Well, they told me that the Majority Leader was here, and it is customary that he goes. He was trying to show his servant leadership and let you go.

Senator MORAN. Well, I was trying to do the same thing, and I defer and yield to the Senator from South Dakota.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Okay. Senator Thune. Again, I think it is a real tribute. Senator Thune right now is a busy person, trying to get the railroad going here and doing a lot of different things. It just shows how important agriculture is, not only to him but to his state.

Senator THUNE. Moran is just trying to get one up on me. You know. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Ms. Rollins, for your willingness to serve. This issue is incredibly important, as you already know, to folks on this Committee. It is the number one industry in our State of South Dakota. We know you are going to be great in this job, and we look forward to moving you along and getting you confirmed and off to work.

There are several things that need to be worked on. We have a record trade deficit in agriculture, which we have never seen that

before. It has been one area of our economy that we have always had trade surpluses. The Emergency Relief Program has not worked well. There have been a lot of glitches that need to be smoothed out. We want you to jump on that one, as well.

I would say among the issues that I want to touch on quickly, and you have been here forever, and I will try and keep this brief, although my colleague from Kansas can ask questions. I want to touch on a couple of things that are really in my home state.

As you know, I have been a long-time supporter of mandatory country of origin labeling for beef products. I would just say that South Dakota cattle producers work really, really hard, and tirelessly, to produce some of the highest quality beef in the world.

The system in which producers operate needs to be fair and transparent, which I think is critical that we take the steps to pass legislation tasking USDA and USTR to find a path forward on mandatory country of origin labeling. If confirmed, will you commit to working closely with my office, as well as with the U.S. trade rep to ensure a WTO-compliant path forward for mandatory country of origin labeling?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. I look forward to that, and hopefully I can be a value-add and a consensus-driven approach to that. I really appreciate your leadership and passion for this.

Senator THUNE. Thank you. I appreciate that very much. We will look forward to that.

As you know, the Black Hills is an important timber producer, and timber processors and communities depend upon the Forest Service for nearly 80 percent of their raw material, and in turn, the Forest Service depends on the capacity of the processors to care for and manage the forests. I know this has been touched on already, but I want to talk specifically about the Black Hills.

Since 2019, the Timber Sale Program in the Black Hills Forest has been cut drastically. In fact, sales announced for this fiscal year are approximately 25 percent of what is allowed for in the current forest plan. In 2021, one of the three primary sawmills in the Black Hills closed, citing a lack of U.S. Forest Service timber sales as the primary factor, and today the remaining sawmills are operating at 50 percent, incurring financial losses, and trucking in material from other states.

This is not sustainable. The Biden administration policies have decimated the timber industry, forest products industry in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It is not sustainable for companies, communities, or, frankly, for that matter, for the national forests. We have got to manage our forests in a way that reduces the wildfire risk that exists out there. We are starting to see evidence of another pine beetle epidemic in the Black Hills.

I guess my question is, if confirmed, will you commit to work with us quickly, and the entire delegation of the Black Hills National Forest footprint, and the forest products industry to understand the issues at hand and to get much needed attention and priority, and hopefully relief, to what is a very dire situation in the Black Hills National Forest?

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir, I have become acutely aware that not just in your home state but in multiples of home states this industry is just being decimated by current policies. I believe I speak for the

larger administration and President Trump that that is unacceptable. Whatever we need to do, within reason and within the law, to turn the ship on that, you have my full commitment and as much time as I can possibly give, building the best team, getting our Under Secretary in this arena confirmed as soon as possible.

We have already begun the path forward on that, and I really look forward to working with you ongoing and hopefully moving very quickly.

Senator THUNE. Thank you. We will work quickly to get you confirmed and hopefully the people who will have direct responsibility for this. It is that urgent. I mean, this is an emergency. I cannot tell you. People in the Black Hills and the jobs that go with it are really desperate.

All right. Finally, on just the beginning farmers, it is challenging, I think as you know, because of some of the barriers to entry to get into agriculture. Making that easier, not harder, and less expensive, not more expensive, is something that we have really focused on.

I have got a bill with Senator Klobuchar, which we can talk to you later about. Crop insurance has always been the foundation, the cornerstone of the safety net, and we have got other programs that we try to refine each time we do a farm bill. This farm bill, which the Chairman will lead us through, will be my fifth. As we do that, I would encourage you to work with us to find ways to strengthen and fortify the existing safety net programs and look at ways that we can provide incentives and encourage beginning farmers and young people who desire and aspire to become involved in production agriculture, to be able to do so.

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, thank you for that. The average age of the farmer in America is 58 years old. That is not sustainable. If we hope to revivify and restore our rural communities and go back to our family farms, we have to address this immediately. Whatever that looks like, whatever all of the wholesale approach could be or should be, I will be the biggest advocate, the biggest cheerleader. I will be in the White House all the time talking about it, all across America, working with all of you to fix that. I think it is of dire importance for the future of our country.

Senator THUNE. Great. Thank you, Ms. Rollins, and thank you again for your willingness to serve. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you so much, Senator.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Well, we are still on the first round. Senator Schiff has already gone, so Senator Moran.

Senator MORAN. Chairman, thank you, and Senator Thune, thank you. I am pleased to be a new Member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, and it took a waiver that probably involved the Majority Leader's approval, so I am pleased to now have that debt clear.

Ms. ROLLINS. You are all free.

Senator MORAN. I am all free. Ms. Rollins, thank you very much for the conversation we had in the office. Thank you for your interest in serving. I want to run through, I hope, maybe five things that I want to talk about briefly, some of which we did talk in person.

First of all, it has been described here the dangerous and dramatic circumstances that farmers and ranchers find themselves in across the country. It is certainly true in Kansas. We have the same difficulties that everybody else has across the country with high input costs and low commodity prices. I would add that almost 80 percent of the counties in Kansas are in a drought circumstance. You add to the problems that we cannot grow a crop is dramatic. This is the least amount of wheat harvested in Kansas since 1961. There are significant challenges. It highlights what Senator Thune said about the importance of a risk management program, crop insurance, and it is, perhaps, as important as anything else that we will do.

Our failure to pass a farm bill, and one of the reasons that I am excited to be on the Senate Agriculture Committee is this really does have to be our shot at getting the farm bill done. I cannot imagine there can be another excuse, and we will have an administration that is cheering us on. Senator Boozman and Senator Klobuchar are two people, I think, that we will see work together, and I pledge to do my part to accomplish that.

As a result of no farm bill and all these other problems, we passed disaster assistance, economic and natural disaster, I just want to again remind you the timeliness. Our farmers are going to their bankers, have been to their bankers. There is not time for a farmer to have to wait to see what the consequences were. If we could predict, if USDA could tell farmers how the program is going to be administered, even before the checks are determined, that would be very valuable if they put it into their planning process, helpful to them and helpful to their banker.

I would remind you that in my view, and I think my colleagues, certainly my farmers at home, the way that disaster assistance was implemented in 2022, did not help the farmers who suffered the greatest losses. The way that your predecessor implemented the disaster payments was very damaging, very discouraging, very disappointing. We would ask you to do so, to implement as the payments were determined in the 2018–2019 crop years, USDA disbursed the way—and in addition to asking that question, you would also be complying with congressional law and intent. We worked hard to make clear that whoever the Secretary of Agriculture was, in whatever administration, they could not go back and do it the way that provided almost, very little disaster assistance. That is number one, and if you happen to tell me yes——

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, and since we have Senator Thune still here, the quicker we can get our Under Secretary approved in that lane, the quicker we will be able to move. Obviously, my confirmation, as well, if approved, and I will be honored. We have already begun putting the team together that did this work under President Trump's first administration. Hopefully, my thought was that we will not have to reinvent the wheel. We can immediately begin moving. That is my commitment, and again, I will work all hours to ensure that that happens.

Senator MORAN. Thank you for that answer.

I also want to, again, highlight a few words that I mentioned in our conversation in the office. The National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Senator MORAN. In Manhattan, Kansas, near Kansas State University is this national center, created as a result of the fear of an introduction of some entity, something into our food supply system that would be a terrorist act, and do we have the capability scientifically to respond. That facility is a $1.5 billion facility. It employs 400 people. It has greater potential than what has been developed between the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Agriculture. It has been transferred to USDA. It is your responsibility. If could give me a point person, now or a few days from now, which could become my point person on the National Bio Agroscience Facility.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir. I cannot do it right at this moment, but I will absolutely get that to you as soon as I have the ability to do that. I do not know if I have to wait to be confirmed. If I do not, you will get that right away. If I do, hopefully that will come upon confirmation very soon.

Senator MORAN. It seems to me that we should be working for your fast confirmation.

Ms. ROLLINS. That seems like a really good idea.

Senator MORAN. Let me highlight NIFA and ERS. The Trump administration, in the past, decided that they wanted to help put departments, agencies, federal employees across the country, not totally centered here in Washington, DC, the Nation's capital. NIFA and ERS agencies were moved to Kansas City. I think what happened is in the circumstances here in Washington, DC, there were 650 or 700 employees. I am told that there are 400 employees now in Kansas City, but I am also, at least by press reports, only 20 percent of the people are actually working in the office.

If we want to have the kind of consequence in reviving rural America other places in the country, this is certainly a Kansas issue but it is a Kansas-Missouri-Nebraska-Iowa, where sometimes our farm kids cannot get a job back on the farm, cannot return to the family farm, but they want to work in agriculture. Or it is a spouse of somebody who is on the farm. Having those agencies and their employees in places like Kansas and Missouri and Iowa and Nebraska creates opportunities that would not otherwise exist.

In my view, the purpose of the move was defeated in the reality of telling people, "Well, you stay in D.C. and work from home." That fits in with a conversation a number of us have had about actually getting USDA and other federal employees back in the office.

Ms. ROLLINS. I 100 percent agree with you. I am extremely excited to get our workforce back into the office, whether it is here in Washington or out across the country. I think that in the business that we are in at USDA, a customer business, and being available for our customers, whether that is up in Senator Welch's Vermont or my Texas, wherever it is, your Kansas, that we have people in the office. That will be a very big priority of mine.

Senator MORAN. Thank you. I am involved in SAF, renewable aviation fuel. We have introduced legislation, Farm to Fly. It has been made a part of the draft of both the House and Senate farm bills. I would just ask for your awareness that there is an opportunity for agriculture across the country as we begin to fuel the aviation industry. In Kansas, the air capital of the world, along

with an agricultural center, has a great potential, but this is a potential for all farmers, as we talk about how to make sure if we have lost a market due to a tariff or as they struggle. We need every market we can get. It also requires a good definition from 45Z and the Treasury Department, which you have said you will advocate for.

Finally, we have an ARS Research Center in Manhattan, Kansas. Kansas State University has a tremendous amount of agricultural research. We would like to see cooperation between the two, including potentially the colocation of their work. The facilities for ARS are nothing that they should be. There is a lot of work that needs to be done, and there are a number of us, including the Chairman of the Committee, who are Members of the Appropriations Committee for the Department of Agriculture. We want to help you get better facilities, and I would just like to highlight the need for cooperation. If we are going to build better or expand a facility, can we do it in conjunction with the local university and get the bigger bang for the buck.

Ms. ROLLINS. I encourage that discussion. Obviously, it is a proud agriculture degree from Texas A&M, and I am still very close to the leadership there. In fact, our vice chancellor was hoping to be here today, but ended up having to give a speech to some livestock producers.

I really look forward. My heart is with a lot of these universities, with all of our land grants across the country.

Senator MORAN. That was a very fine answer. I like the response. Except there was something you should have said about the importance of other land grant universities, for example, Kansas State University.

Ms. ROLLINS. For example, Kansas State, Senator, yes. I appreciate that, and I am excited to continue that work with you.

Senator MORAN. Let me tell Mrs. Kerwin, thank you for raising a great daughter.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Schiff, 5 minutes. We are going to do 5-minute rounds now.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ms. Rollins, right now farm workers in Ventura County are picking strawberries in a brown haze, smoke from the fires. It is a surreal scene to look at images of working in those conditions. These are just some of the difficult conditions that farm workers are often in. They are working in 100-degree heat. They are working in the cold. They are some of the hardest-working people I have ever met. I want to raise the issue of the impact that mass deportations would have on them.

First and foremost, on people who are working so hard to put food on our table and just the, to me, grave injustice of deporting people who are doing such vital work to feed us, there is also the impact on their families. Many of them have children who are U.S. citizens, and will be U.S. citizens. It would have the effect of splitting up their families. Even if we set that aside, which we should not, it is estimated that perhaps half of California's farm workforce is undocumented.

My question is, how are you supposed to farm? How are farmers in California supposed to survive if there are truly mass deportations in which half of the workforce is sent out of the country? Americans do not want to do that work. It is, frankly, just too backbreaking. Who is going to work the farms?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, I know we talked about this in your office and had a productive, perhaps agreed to disagree, but still productive conversation, and I so appreciate that. We have talked about this within this Committee in the last three or four hours, as well.

President Trump ran and was overwhelmingly elected on the priority of border security and mass deportation. He and his team are, I am assuming, currently putting in place the plans to begin that process, of course first with those who have committed criminal offenses once they have been here.

The American people have asked for a secure border and a system where they do not have to be concerned with the millions and millions that crossed here illegally and brought a lot of strife and unsafe communities to America. I know this is not the committee where we discuss this, and I know probably the last thing you want to do is get into a debate right now over it, because I sure do not want to.

Let me answer your question. I will work around the clock with our new Labor Secretary, if she is confirmed, Lori Chavez-DeRemer. There is obviously, I think everyone would agree, H–2A, important changes that need to be made to recognize, within the agriculture community, the importance of a strong labor force.

Senator SCHIFF. Well, I still want to get back to my question, though. If they are gone, who is going to do that work?

Ms. ROLLINS. Well, sir, we do not know, first of all, who "they" are, right. I mean, we all throw numbers around, like 40 percent, 50 percent, 60 percent. The answer is we just do not know. As these processes and programs are being implemented under this new Administration, with the full support of the majority of Americans, I think that we, as the leaders in agriculture, myself as the leader at USDA, you on this Committee, along with others on the Committee, that we will work together to understand and hopefully solve for some of these problems, that the dairy cattle have to be milked.

If we have got a mass deportation program underway, then there is a lot of work that we need to do, through the Labor Department, with Lori Chavez-DeRemer, who is also an ag person, and working with Congress to solve for a lot of this through our current programs, our current labor programs that are already on the books.

Senator SCHIFF. Let me ask one other related question on this topic, and that is, if we deport a large percentage of our farm workforce, farm labor is going to be scarce. Isn't that inevitably going to push up food prices? If so, isn't that in sharp contrast with what the President said he wanted to do, to bring down egg prices and food prices and everything else?

Ms. ROLLINS. Well, first of all, we are speaking in hypotheticals, but certainly these are hypotheticals we do need to be thinking through, and I think it is a very fair point. The President has made food inflation and the cost of food one of his top priorities. I have worked alongside him. I have been part of his team for many years

now. I believe in his vision and his commitment to America and to his promises, and in so doing I believe that we will be able to find, in our toolkit, what we need to do to solve for any hypothetical issues that end up turning out to be real, moving forward, over the coming months and years.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I would just say that I hope they are hypothetical.

Ms. ROLLINS. I do too.

Senator SCHIFF. I fear they may be all too real.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, sir.

Senator SCHIFF. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Klobuchar is supposedly on the way, so I am going to ask one question.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, sir.

Chairman BOOZMAN. You are welcome to answer it. Then any thoughts that you have as you close. If she is here then, we are in great shape. If not, then we are out of here.

Ms. ROLLINS. I am available all the time.

Chairman BOOZMAN. You are doing a wonderful job.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. This hearing has been really good. We have had great participation, and because of that it just takes a while.

Ms. ROLLINS. Yes, no. I am honored.

Chairman BOOZMAN. As you have heard, there are lots of questions, lots of concerns, lots of concerns in farm country. Not only that but people forget how broad the portfolio that you are taking on. We could be talking about crypto. We could be talking about a lot of stuff.

Ms. ROLLINS. That is true.

Chairman BOOZMAN. We are not. Let me just ask you one thing that I do not think has come up is the fact that America's producers depend on USDA's voluntary, locally led conservation programs and conservation technical assistance to implement the most effective conservation practices that meet their operations' unique resource concerns.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the focus has identified a lot of other things that maybe a top-down approach of pushing, prioritizing carbon sequestration, related activities on water quality, erosion control, and drought mitigation. Those things are important. Yet again, what I want you to talk about is the fact that you would be committed to voluntary, locally led, incentive-based conservation model that has served our farmers and ranchers for so many years, very effectively.

Ms. ROLLINS. I would, Senator, and I know we all know that the best conservationists are our farmers and ranchers, certainly from the beginning of our country. One thing I do not think I have talked about with anyone on the Committee is that my family, on our farm in Minnesota, a piece of the land actually participated in one of those voluntary conservation programs. We actually have firsthand knowledge of what that looked like and how to do it, and believe certainly in how important and valuable it can be.

Yes, sir, I look forward to it. Other than my personal experience—my sister, Ann, really led it, so I cannot pretend to know

much, but I was very grateful for her and our family, that I do not know as much about it as I need to, and I look forward to learning more. Yes, you have my commitment that clearly that is an important piece of all of the work.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Have you got any closing comments?

Ms. ROLLINS. I do have closing comments, but I am guessing that Senator Warnock might have another question or two.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Warnock.

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you so very much, Chair Boozman. Just a couple more questions, and thank you so very much for your presentation this morning.

Farmers in Georgia are already talking to me. They are already concerned about potential retaliatory actions following President Trump's promises to levy heavy tariffs. They are already dealing with slim margins, as I said in my first round of questions. It is a tough business. Much you do not control, and it is not difficult to find yourselves in trouble there. They are dealing with slim margins due to high input costs, and the last thing they need is to be caught up in the middle of a trade war that could drive up food prices for all of us.

If confirmed, what will you do from your position at USDA to ensure that Georgia's farmers and families are not caught up in a trade war? Again, it is something I have worked on, by the way, with Republicans, helping to get our farmers' goods to market, so it is something we think about a lot.

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator Warnock, when I was in your office, I believe last month, we talked about your commitment to your farmers and what a priority this was to you. Georgia is a very important agriculture state. You are obviously pastoring a church and in the U.S. Senate. I was impressed at your commitment to your ag community in your state, and look forward to continuing to work with you.

It is very clear that the coming tariffs—and I think that there is no doubt that President Trump has been very transparent, that he believes this is an extremely important tool in his toolkit, to put America first, to revive the economy, to get us back to a place where he believes we need to be. I agree with him and hope to help him execute that vision.

It also should not be surprising that his heart and his commitment to our farmers and our agriculture community was certainly clear in the last administration. The number one answer from my perspective is working around the clock to expand market access and working on new trade deals and getting new partners from around the world. I have an Under Secretary already named, hopefully get him committed—confirmed; maybe committed and confirmed, Chairman Boozman—but to get him confirmed very, very quickly so we can begin to build those teams. The President is a consummate deal maker, and I feel very confident we will be able to expand those markets, begin to peel back the trade deficit, and get back to trade surpluses, which I know we are used to.

Immediately moving into the distribution of disaster relief, economic relief, the new farm bill that is coming out. I have already announced the Under Secretary and put the team in place to be able to deploy that.

Senator WARNOCK. Let me press on, just because I have so little time. I agree with you that access to farm markets is critical, and in Georgia we have got a lot of sectors that are relying on strong export markets—timber, poultry, pecans. Are you concerned that isolationist trade practices may harm our farmers' ability to access these foreign markets?

Ms. ROLLINS. I have full confidence in President Trump's ability to lead us on this, and hopefully he and many of you have confidence in my ability to help from the ag perspective.

Senator WARNOCK. All right. I look forward to continuing to engage you on this, if you are confirmed.

Ms. ROLLINS. Absolutely.

Senator WARNOCK. USDA has a long documented and unfortunate history of racial discrimination, even in recent history. I was proud to have secured funding in the Inflation Reduction Act to provide financial assistance to farmers who had previously experienced discrimination at the hands of their USDA farm lending programs. This was a meaningful step in rebuilding trust.

However, USDA still has a lot of work to do, and this will only be more difficult—more difficult—following the new Administration's executive order aimed at rolling back all of this progress. I was proud Congress passed my legislation in 2021 to require USDA to create an Equity Commission, and the commission's final report provides an excellent roadmap for continuing this work.

Chair Boozman, without objection, I would like to enter the USDA's 2024 Equity Report into the record.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Without objection.

[The document can be found on pages 119–209 in the appendix.]

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you so much. When we met last month you promised to read the equity report. Have you gotten a chance to read it yet?

Ms. ROLLINS. Ninety pages and 66 recommendations. Yes, sir. Now, that has been about a little over a month ago, so please do not ask me to quote page 66. Yes.

Senator WARNOCK. I am glad you got a chance to read it. I understand it has been removed from the website, or there is not access to it. I am glad you got a chance to read it.

Will you seriously consider the recommendations of the Equity Commission's report if you are confirmed?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, let me answer this way. I was really appreciative of the conversation. For me, more knowledge is always best, understanding where everyone comes from, whether I agree or disagree, recognizing what is in the past is important but also realizing the path ahead——

Senator WARNOCK. Will you——

Ms. ROLLINS [continuing]. and how we forge the path.

Senator WARNOCK. Will you consider the recommendations?

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, I will consider anything that is on the table. I think that is only fair. I also—President Trump won on the concept of removing the diversity, equity, and inclusion, making sure that we are basing our decisions on merit, and I obviously support that 100 percent, as well. I look forward, Senator, to continuing to talk about this. My friend, Alveda, has long talked to me about the

plight of Black farmers in Georgia and other places around the country. I am always open to discussions. Always.

May I say, there is no room for racism at the United States Department of Agriculture, or any——

Senator WARNOCK. In that regard, will you commit to recruiting more diverse employees who understand these communities, have relationships with these communities, so that we build trust between these communities and the lending offices?

Ms. ROLLINS. Sir, my commit is to recruit the best workforce in the history of the United States Department of Agriculture, period, full stop. I believe that will include many members of all different corners of our country.

Senator WARNOCK. Do you think a diverse workforce, high quality workforce are somehow oppositional objectives?

Ms. ROLLINS. I think always hiring based on who is the best person for the job, who is going to do the most excellent service, who is best equipped to execute on all of the promises is the promise of America. Also believe, to your point, and have long held that ensuring that we give all people a chance to succeed and to thrive and for equal opportunity is a bedrock foundational principle of America.

Senator WARNOCK. On that you and I agree. Thank you so very much.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Senator Boozman, and I am hoping these will be your last three questions. Your family looks like they might want to break for lunch, but they have been very good back there. I just want you to know that.

Ms. ROLLINS. How have the teenagers been?

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Yes, good.

Ms. ROLLINS. I have not been able to look at them, so they have not gotten any looks from me. Hopefully——

Senator KLOBUCHAR. According to recent reports, House Republicans are already eyeing nearly $300 billion in cuts to the SNAP program, roughly 30 percent cut. Now that is just reports. I think you have heard from some of my colleagues about how this is such an issue in rural America. In my state, as Senator Smith pointed out, our actual hunger rate is higher in rural than it is in the metropolitan areas.

What kind of an impact do you think a $300 billion cut would have to SNAP, and if confirmed, will you commit to supporting robust funding for USDA's nutrition programs?

Ms. ROLLINS. Senator, thank you. My commitment will always be to ensuring that these programs are effective and efficient, and I think I spoke from the heart, and I mean this sincerely, the importance of our leadership as a bipartisan body to ensure that those with the least among us are ably supported and do not go hungry. This is the United States of America.

I do not yet know what the numbers look like. I need to really dig down. My commitment to you is that we will talk about this until the very last minute. I will always be open to you, and I look forward to ensuring that we are able to do what the original core tenets of that program are called to do.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. I will follow-up on this in a written question, but I do want to know if you believe SNAP benefits should be calculated based on current food costs.

Ms. ROLLINS. Well, I will say that obviously current food costs, you know, the importance of the inputs into the program and understanding where the market is will always be a priority.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Congress made significant investments in climate-smart agriculture through the Inflation Reduction Act, giving more farmers access to popular conservation programs. We had a situation where a bunch of the farm groups actually were supportive of this part of the IRA.

I have always led bipartisan legislation on conservation, working with our hunting and fishing groups. One of the bills I have has been with Senator Thune, based on voluntary conservation program participation.

A recent executive order, issued just, of course, in the last two days, to pause disbursements from the Inflation Reduction Act would put some of these plans that I mentioned—CRP plans and the like—in jeopardy. What is your understanding of the impact of these executive orders, and will these orders to slow IRA disbursements impact farmers looking to use voluntary conservation programs?

Ms. ROLLINS. My commitment is to obviously understand exactly what the target and the goal of that executive order is—I have not been read in on that yet, but I will be—and then ensuring that that aligns with what is stated in that executive order. Again, President Trump and our Administration's heart is with the rural communities and the agriculture communities and ensuring that there is full understanding and data to support what this will do.

Of course, not surprisingly, Senator Klobuchar, I think the President has been very clear on his priorities on climate programs and whether taxpayer dollars should be supporting those.

You know, the robust conversation I think that we will have is to follow, and I look forward to that, and you have my commitment that I am always available to discuss that and to represent ag interests, where appropriate, in those discussions with the White House.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thank you. I also just wanted to thank you for your commitment to the next generation of farmers and ranchers. As you know, the average age is, well, not quite as old as the U.S. Senate, but it has been creeping up, and we need new people to go into agriculture. I hope just with your background and your FFA involvement and the like, I think that would be among your many priorities would be a really smart thing to go around and talk about. I know there are plenty of people on our side of the aisle that would join you in that focus. Thank you.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman BOOZMAN. I want to thank Mrs. Rollins for appearing before the Committee today, and also I would like to thank Ranking Member Klobuchar and all the Members of the Committee for the great participation that we had today. The Ranking Member and I have agreed that questions for the record are due by 6 p.m. tomorrow. This concludes today's hearing.

Ms. ROLLINS. Thank you so much. Thank you. What an honor to be here. Thank you.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 1:46 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

JANUARY 23, 2025

Opening Statement of Brooke Rollins of Texas
Nominee For Secretary of Agriculture
Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

January 22, 2025

Remarks as Prepared

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and distinguished Senators of the Committee—

First, my thanks to President Trump for his faith in me to lead the United States Department of Agriculture. His confidence fuels my determination to deliver, and he inspires me through what he's done, and will do, for our great country, including U.S. agriculture.

I also want to thank my dear friends and fellow Texans Senator John Cornyn and Senator Ted Cruz, for so graciously introducing me to this Committee. I've had the privilege of knowing and working with both my Lone Star State Senators for most of the past quarter-century. Senator Cornyn's work defending Texas as our State Attorney General was a major help in our work in Governor Rick Perry's policy shop. Senator Cruz has a heart on fire for liberty and America that was obvious to anyone — which was why we have been friends for over twenty years since first meeting in 2003 ... and which is also why he accepted my offer of a salary of zero dollars in 2010 to found our Tenth Amendment Center at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. He has been a partner and a friend ever since.

Thank you both, from the bottom of my heart, for bringing me here.

I also appreciate the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry for its careful consideration of my nomination. And equally important is the honor to potentially serve the men and women who daily, without pause or complaint, provide our great nation, and the world, with the most efficient food, fiber, and fuel. It is a privilege to appear before you today, and I look forward to your questions.

Throughout the past several weeks, I've met or spoken with all Republican and Democratic Members of the Committee — and I appreciate your insights, your concerns, and your counsel. It is clear we all agree farmers and ranchers are the cornerstone of our nation's communities; they are stewards of the land—the original conservationists—and they are foundational to American life. Yet the demands of American agriculture and the stakes our farmers take have never been higher. When farmers prosper, rural America prospers, and I commit to you today, if confirmed, that I will do everything within my ability to make sure our farmers, ranchers and rural communities thrive.

I also want to thank the many Senators and Representatives on Capitol Hill with whom I've had the opportunity to work during the last two decades: in my time with Governor Perry, in my time at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, in my various roles in the first Trump Administration, and since 2021, in my role founding and leading the America First Policy Institute. If I've learned anything from our conversations and our work, it's that each of you cares deeply about the American people whom we all serve. I'm excited to see that sentiment moved into action across the coming four years.

Before we begin, I want to take a moment to relay my prayers to those in California facing devastating loss from the ongoing wildfires. I cannot fathom what those families and first responders are going through. Please know, if confirmed, I will continue to deploy the tools and resources of the Forest Service to help in any way appropriate.

I wouldn't be here, of course, without the love and support of my family. My husband Mark and my four wonderful children: Luke, Jake, Anna, and Lily, who have always been with me whenever the country calls — and they know that my work for America is an expression of my love for them. My sisters, Helen

and Ann, and their families, know how much they mean to me. And my mother Helen Kerwin, who raised three girls in a small Texas farm community as a single mother, is the living example who led me to this.

Growing up in the small agriculture town of Glen Rose, Texas — population twelve hundred — is where my own story begins. Then, my world revolved around Future Farmers of America, 4-H, and the endless cycle of hay baling, livestock shows, and rodeo seasons that still constitute the calendar of our days in our corner of Texas. That experience sent me to Texas A&M, where I studied and majored in Agricultural Development and Leadership — and then to helm the policy shop of Texas Governor Rick Perry. It was there where I got my first direct leadership role in big-state agricultural policy. It was an awesome responsibility for a young woman still in her twenties — and I loved it, because I loved Texas agriculture.

I had been in office serving Governor Perry for a few short years when I received a call from Dr. Wendy Gramm, a professor at Texas A&M and the wife of one of the greatest Senators in Texas history, Phil Gramm. A small think tank based in San Antonio, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, needed a new president, and she and her Board colleagues wanted to know if I was interested. I was, and I stepped in the front door on January 1st, 2003 — to discover that the Foundation, operating out of rented office space with a skeleton crew, didn't have enough money in the bank to make the next payroll. What I'd taken on as a policy mission became first an institutional-rescue mission. So I got to work.

We righted the finances and embarked on a steady process of proper staffing. Most importantly, we fundamentally redefined the mission of a think tank: from just having ideas on policy to changing policy itself. I strongly believed that we had a responsibility, as citizens, to engage with an aim to changing Texas and America for the better — and that this responsibility doubled for those of us who dared to call ourselves policy professionals.

That reorientation made its mark. Among our many efforts, we engaged strongly with Texas rural and small-town communities, giving them the voice in governance too often denied to them. My colleagues and I constantly reminded the governing class that those Texans were fundamental to our way of life. We empowered the voices of ranchers at our unsecured southern border, and we pursued successful litigation to defend farmers, ranchers, and landowners against burdensome regulations that would have denied them the full and proper use of their own land.

We changed the game.

Changing the game is exactly why I accepted the invitation to join President Trump's Administration in 2018. Everything that we'd sought to do in Texas those last decades — to make policy for real change for real Americans — was being done in that Administration, and I was honored and excited to be part of it. I joined to run the White House's Office of American Innovation, to serve as the Assistant to the President for Strategic Initiatives, and in 2020, adding the role of Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council.

I was privileged to work with next-level minds and strong hearts for America, all of us sharply focused on the need for change on Americans' behalf. We worked tirelessly for the Americans in the forgotten corners of our country — the small communities, the rural areas — who feed us, clothe us, and provide for us too often without notice or thanks. We pushed back against policies like the misconceived Waters

of the U.S. rule that disproportionately targeted farmers and ranchers in the service of misbegotten ideology. And we developed an agenda for them that remains vital to their success today.

In January 2021, we understood that President Trump's second-term agenda would be delayed, and so — along with champions of liberty like Linda McMahon and Larry Kudlow — I had the privilege of establishing yet another institution of policy leadership, the America First Policy Institute, where I currently serve as President and Chief Executive Officer. The Institute has fulfilled several roles since its inception: it coalesced and helped define the America First ideology that our President returned to the forefront of American civics; it provided a gathering place for the policy and intellectual luminaries of that movement; and of course, it further engaged with and defended the interests of America's farmers and ranchers. On the last count, for example, we worked against Communist Chinese ownership of American farmland to preserve America First agriculture. These are themes I fully expect to execute and build upon at USDA, if confirmed.

The purpose of recounting all this is neither to tout my own achievements, nor to simply recite my biography. I'm just a small-town girl from Glen Rose, Texas, who was blessed with everything God and America had to give — and I have always felt a responsibility to give back. And across each role in my public life, I have been able to showcase my love for America, a focus on the forgotten, a talent for organization, a drive for action, and most importantly, a responsibility to serve.

Thanks to President Trump and to you, I may have the opportunity to bring that level of passion and commitment to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I need not tell you, of all people, that this is surpassingly important, because *agriculture* is surpassingly important to us *as a nation*.

In 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote to George Washington — then a private citizen and former General, not yet a President — on his vision for the new American republic. He declared that "[a]griculture ... is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end contribute most to real wealth, good morals & happiness."

The attachment of the man with the most claim to be the philosopher of the American Revolution to agriculture was not an expression of mere self-interest, and still less self-regard. Jefferson, after all, for all his prodigious intellect, was never a rousing success as a farmer. But he was a perceptive observer of human nature and "the course of human events," and he understood that agriculture — the working of the land by the citizen — was something important, unique, and *constitutive* in the life of a republic. Planting and its surpluses were foundational to civilization itself, but when undertaken by free men, they yielded a free republic. Our whole civics was a function of the citizen, his land, his work, and its fruits — and it would stand or fall according to its defense and promotion of that citizen.

All Americans are important. But the farmer, the worker of the land, who makes possible all the others, is the American important to all Americans.

To borrow a phrase beloved of the Chief Executive who presided over the establishment of the United States Department of Agriculture in 1862, free men require free soil to which they may give their free labor. That truth and its defense constitute the fundamental mission and purpose of USDA — and it is the same mission and purpose commended by Jefferson, advanced by Lincoln, and now under the stewardship of President Donald J. Trump.

We must remember that history, and that purpose, because there are straits ahead. I fully recognize that if I am confirmed, I am stepping into this role during one of the most economically challenging

times in American agriculture. With that in mind, I want to share with you some of my key priorities for Day One:

- First, we must ensure the disaster and economic assistance authorized by Congress is deployed as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- Second, we must work with the great men and women of USDA and the stakeholder community to immediately and comprehensively get a handle on the state of animal-disease outbreaks, including H5N1 and New World Screwworm, and do everything possible to eradicate them.
- Third, I look forward to working with this Committee, and with the House Agriculture Committee, to pass a Farm Bill that provides the certainty and predictability our farm families need.
- Fourth, we must immediately reconstitute, rebuild, and revivify the United States Department of Agriculture, responding to the clear needs and desires of the American people as set forth so well by the President of the United States across this historic week. This Department, with its tens upon tens of thousands of public servants across the nation and beyond, must be aggressive, effective, and focused on its core mission of serving *all* American agriculture — and *all* the American people. It must, to borrow a phrase, put America First.
- Finally, we understand that serving *all* American agriculture and *all* the American people means ensuring that our rural communities are equipped and supported to prosper not just today, but tomorrow. This includes exploring improvements to the Department's rural development programs, demanding strong and steady domestic and export markets for our beautiful agricultural bounty, eliminating burdensome and costly regulations that hamper innovation, ensuring nutrition programs are efficient, and putting in the work to make sure we have a healthy and prepared next generation of farmers, ranchers, and entrepreneurs for the next century of American greatness.

These are just four of my top priorities. I'm excited to continue to explore how we truly unleash the power of U.S. farmers and ranchers together — not just in this hearing, but in my prospective tenure as Secretary.

My aim, after all, is the same as yours: the same that brought you to the Senate, and the same that brought Donald J. Trump to the Presidency —

To serve the people.

And that's a good place to conclude this statement, I think, because Abraham Lincoln himself remarked that "[t]he Agricultural Department ... [is] the people's Department, in which they feel more directly concerned than in any other."

It is altogether fitting that, as far as "[t]he Agricultural Department" is concerned, the people's work begins here, today, with their champions and defenders in the United States Senate.

Thank you.

DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

JANUARY 23, 2025

January 15, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chair, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

We write in support of Brooke Leslie Rollins' nomination to be the 33rd Secretary of Agriculture. We represent farmers, ranchers, growers, hunters, forest owners, conservationists, cooperatives, state departments of agriculture, renewable fuel producers and agribusinesses nationwide —encompassing all aspects of American agriculture, food, nutrition and rural America — and we look forward to Ms. Rollins' strong leadership at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Ms. Rollins has been engaged in American agriculture since an early age, baling hay and raising livestock in Glen Rose, Texas. Rollins spent summers working on her family's farm in Minnesota and participated in all levels of 4-H and FFA. She continues to raise livestock today and is now passing her passion for agriculture on to her children, who are also involved in FFA and showing steers. Rollins' strong foundational knowledge of agriculture also extends to her formal education, attending Texas A&M, where she received her Bachelor of Science in agricultural development on scholarship.

Throughout her career, she has brought the perspectives of the American farmer and rancher to her work. She served as deputy general counsel and policy director for former Texas Governor Rick Perry, where together they advanced many agricultural priorities. She also championed rural priorities across the federal government as President Trump's former Director of the United States Domestic Policy Council.

In addition, her experience as an executive, building and running two large public policy organizations, has prepared her to provide effective executive leadership for USDA's important, wide-ranging activities and large workforce. Her close working relationship with incoming President Trump will ensure that agriculture and rural America have a prominent and influential voice at the table when critical decisions are made in the White House.

It is important for Congress to act on Agriculture Secretary-designate Rollins' nomination in light of the many difficulties facing America's farmers and rural America. We need her leadership now at USDA to advocate for a new farm bill, stabilize an agricultural economy in decline, support the full food and agriculture and forestry value chain, and continue American agriculture's long history of providing the most secure, affordable and nutritious food supply in the world. USDA has the power to help turn things around with strong leadership. We look forward to Agriculture Secretary-designate Rollins bringing her unique experience and capabilities to tackle the challenges facing agriculture and rural America once confirmed.

As such, we urge your Committee and the entire U.S. Senate to promptly confirm Ms. Rollins as the next Secretary of Agriculture. Thank you for your consideration, and for your dedication to our nation's agricultural community.

Sincerely,

Agriculture Retailers Association
American Farm Bureau Federation
American Feed Industry Association
American Seed Trade Association
American Soybean Association
American Sugarbeet Growers Association
CropLife America
Farm Credit Council
International Fresh Produce Association
Meat Institute
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
National Association of Wheat Growers
National Corn Growers Association
National Cotton Council
National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
National Farmers Union
National Grain and Feed Association
National Milk Producers Federation
National Pork Producers Council
National Sorghum Producers
The Fertilizer Institute
USA Rice
21st Century Equipment, LLC
Adam Farms LTD
Adams Land & Cattle
Agribusiness Association of Iowa
Agribusiness Council of Indiana
Agricultural Council of Arkansas
Agriculture Teachers Association of Texas
Alabama Agribusiness Council
Alabama Farmers Federation
Almond Alliance
American Association of Crop Insurers
American Beekeeping Federation
American Forest Foundation (AFF)

American Frozen Food Institute
American Fruit & Vegetable Coalition
American Livestock Markets and Dealers Association
American Meat Science Association
American Pistachio Growers
American Pulse Association
American Sheep Industry Association
American Sugar Alliance
American Sugar Cane League
American Wood Council
Animal Health Institute
Applewood Seed Co.
Archery Trade Association
Arizona Dairy Producers Trade Association
Arkansas Farm Bureau
Arkansas Rice
Arkansas Soybean Association
Associated Milk Producers Inc. (AMPI)
Associated Oregon Hazelnut Industries
Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO)
Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Bayer
Brownsville Irrigation District
California Ag Irrigation Association
California Alfalfa and Forage Association
California Association of Wheat Growers
California Association of Winegrape Growers
California Bean Shippers Association
California Cherry Growers and Industry Association
California Citrus Mutual
California Dairies, Inc.
California Date Commission
California Farm Bureau
California Grain and Feed Association
California Pacific Seed Association
California Pear Growers
California Pork Producers Association
California Poultry Federation
California Prune Board
California Rice Commission
California Seed Association
California State Floral Association
California Sweetpotato Council

California Warehouse Association
California Wool Growers Association
Cayuga Milk Ingredients
CEA Alliance
Central Valley Ag Cooperative
ClearPath Action
Colorado Dairy Farmers
Colorado Farm Bureau
Colorado Pork Producers Council
Colorado Potato Administrative Committee
Colorado Wool Growers Association
Connealy Angus
Connecticut Farm Bureau Association
Cooperative Milk Producers Association
Corn Refiners Association
Corteva Agriscience
Cotton Warehouse Association of America
Council of Producers & Distributors of Agrotechnology
Crop Insurance and Reinsurance Bureau
Crop Insurance Professionals Association
Dairy Farmers of America
Dairy Producers of New Mexico
Dairy Producers of Utah
Dallas Safari Club
Danielski Farms
Delaware Farm Bureau
Delta Waterfowl
Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S.
DNA Genetics
Ducks Unlimited
Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative
Empire State Forest Products Association
emPower Rural America
Equine Sports Council
Farm Journal Foundation
FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative
First District Association
Florida Citrus Mutual
Florida Farm Bureau Federation
Florida Fertilizer & Agrichemical Association
Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association
Florida Rice Growers

Florida Strawberry Growers Association
Florida Sugar Cane League
FMI - The Food Industry Association
Foremost Farms USA
Forest Landowners Association
Forest Resources Association
Fresh Produce Association of the Americas
Georgia Agribusiness Council
Georgia Farm Bureau Federation
Georgia Milk Producers, Inc.
Georgia/Florida Soybean Association
Global Cold Chain Alliance
GO Seed
Gowan SeedTech LLC
Grain and Feed Association of Illinois
Gro Alliance
GROWMARK, Inc.
Growth Energy
Hawaii Farm Bureau
Houston Safari Club
Idaho Dairymen's Association, Inc.
Idaho Farm Bureau Federation
Idaho Grain Producers Association
Idaho Potato Commission
Idaho Wool Growers Association
IL Corn Growers Association
Illinois Farm Bureau
Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association
Illinois Milk Producers Association
Illinois Pork Producers Association
Illinois Seed Trade Association, Inc.
Illinois Soybean Association
Imperial Beef LLC
Inari
Independent Bakers Association
Independent Cattlemen's Association of Texas
Indiana Corn Growers Association
Indiana Ethanol Producers Association
Indiana Farm Bureau
Indiana Sheep Association
Indiana Soybean Alliance
International Dairy Foods Association
International Wood Products Association

Iowa Farm Bureau
Iowa Pork Producers Association
Iowa Soybean Association
Iowa State Dairy Association
JE Meuret Grain Co. Inc.
JSMM Farms
Kansas Agribusiness Retailers Association
Kansas Dairy Association
Kansas Farm Bureau
Kansas Grain and Feed Association
Kansas Livestock Association
Kansas Sorghum Producers
Kansas Soybean Association
Kentucky Dairy Development Council
Kentucky Farm Bureau Federation
Land O'Lakes, Inc.
Latham Hi-Tech Seeds
Livestock Marketing Association
Livestock Marketing Association of Texas
Louisiana Agricultural Consultants Association
Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation
Louisiana Forestry Association
Louisiana Independent Rice Producers Association
Louisiana Rice Producer Group
Maine Potato Board
Maine Sheep Breeders Association
Maola Local Dairies
Maryland Farm Bureau
Maryland Sheep Breeders Association
Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation
Massachusetts Forest Alliance
MayerSeedline, LLC
Michigan Agri-Business Association
Michigan Bean Shippers
Michigan Corn Growers Association
Michigan Farm Bureau
Michigan Milk Producers Association
Michigan Nursery & Landscape Association
Michigan Pork Producers Association
Michigan Sheep Producers Association
Michigan Soybean Association
Mid Atlantic Soybean Association

Midwest Council on Agriculture
Midwest Dairy Coalition
Midwest Dry Bean Coalition
Midwest Food Products Association
Milk Producers Council
Minnesota AgriGrowth
Minnesota Corn Growers Association
Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation
Minnesota Lamb & Wool Producers Association
Minnesota Soybean Growers Association
Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation
Mississippi Land Bank, ACA
Mississippi Rice Council
Mississippi River Trust
Mississippi Soybean Association
Missouri Corn Growers Association
Missouri Farm Bureau
Missouri Pork Association
Missouri Rice Council
Missouri Soybean Association
Montana Agricultural Business Association
Montana Farm Bureau Federation
Montana Grain Growers Association
Montana Wool Growers Association
Mount Joy Farmers Cooperative Association
National All-Jersey
National Association of FSA County Office Employees
National Barley Growers Association
National Bobwhite & Grassland Initiative Foundation
National Chicken Council
National Cotton Ginners Association
National Farmers Union
National Fisheries Institute
National Grocers Association
National Lamb Feeders Association
National Oilseed Processors Association
National Peach Council
National Pecan Federation
National Pest Management Association (NPMA)
National Potato Council
National Rural Electric Cooperative Association
National Seasoning Manufacturers Association
National Sunflower Association

National Thoroughbred Racing Association
National Turkey Federation
National Wild Turkey Federation
NC Agribusiness Council
NCA - The National Confectioners Association
Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation
Nebraska Pork Producers Association
Nebraska Soybean Association
Nebraska State Dairy Association
Nevada Farm Bureau Federation
New Jersey Farm Bureau
New York Corn & Soybean Growers Association
New York Farm Bureau
North American Blueberry Council
North American Coalition for Insect Agriculture
North American Export Grain Association
North American Falconers Association
North American Grouse Partnership
North American Millers' Association
North American Renderers Association
North Carolina Farm Bureau
North Carolina Potato Association
North Dakota Corn Growers Association
North Dakota Grain Growers Association
North Dakota Soybean Growers Association
Northeast Agribusiness and Feed Alliance
Northeast Dairy Producers Association
Northland Potato Growers Association
Northwest Dairy Association
Northwest Horticultural Council
Nutrien
NYS Agribusiness Association
NYS Maple Producers' Association
Ohio AgriBusiness Association
Ohio Dairy Producers Association
Ohio Farm Bureau Federation
Ohio Pest Management Association
Ohio Pork Council
Ohio Sheep Improvement Association
Ohio Soybean Association
Oklahoma Farm Bureau
Oregon Dairy Farmers Association

Oregon Farm Bureau
Oregon Feed & Grain Association
Oregon Hop Growers Association
Oregon Pork Producers Association
Oregon Seed Council
Oregon Women for Agriculture
Pacific Egg and Poultry Association
Pennsylvania Dairymen's Association
Pennsylvania Farm Bureau
Pennsylvania Sheep and Wool Growers Association
Pheasants Forever
Pillen Family Farms
Pivot Bio
Plains Cotton Growers, Inc.
Plant Based Products Council
Potato Growers of Michigan, Inc
Prairie Farms Dairy
Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania
Quail Forever
Red Angus Association of America
Renew Kansas Biofuels Association
Renewable Fuels Association
Renewable Fuels Nebraska
Rhode Island Farm Bureau Federation
Rio Grande Valley Sugar Cane Growers
Rocky Mountain Agribusiness Association
Rural Investment to Protect our Environment (RIPE)
Safari Club International
Sharp and Sharp Certified Seed
SNAC International
Snake River Sugarbeet Growers Association
Society of American Florists
South Carolina Corn and Soybean Association
South Carolina Farm Bureau Federation
South Carolina Sheep Industry Association
South Dakota Ethanol
South Dakota Pork Producers Council
South Dakota Sheep Growers Association
South Dakota Soybean Association
South East Dairy Farmers Association
South Texas Cotton & Grain Association
Southeast Milk, Inc.
Southeastern Food Processors Association

Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association
Southern Crop Production Association
Southern Seed Association
Southwest Council of Agribusiness
Southwest Meat Association
Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance
Summit Seed Coatings
Sweetener Users Association
Tennessee Dairy Producers Association
Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation
Tennessee Feed & Grain Assn
Tennessee Pork Producers Assn
Tennessee Sheep Producers Association
Tennessee Soybean Association
Texas Ag Industries Association
Texas Agricultural Aviation Association
Texas Association of Dairymen
Texas Cattle Feeders Association
Texas Citrus Mutual
Texas Corn Producers Association
Texas Cotton Ginners' Association
Texas Farm Bureau
Texas FFA Association
Texas Forestry Association
Texas Grain and Feed Association
Texas Grain Sorghum Association
Texas Hemp Coalition
Texas Independent Ginners Association
Texas International Produce Association
Texas Irrigation Council
Texas Irrigation Panel
Texas Pecan Growers Association
Texas Pork Producers Association
Texas Poultry Federation
Texas Rice Council
Texas Rice Producers Legislative Group
Texas Seed Trade Association
Texas Sheep & Goat Raisers' Association
Texas Soybean Association
Texas Vegetable Association
Texas Vegetation Management Association
Texas Watermelon Association

Texas Wheat Producers Association
The Center for Dairy Excellence
The Conservation Fund
The Meat Sheep Alliance of Florida
The Poultry Federation
The Texas Cotton Association
The Utah Wool Growers Association
Thomas Family Farms, Inc.
Thomas Livestock Co Inc
Tillamook County Creamery Association
TN Feed & Grain Association
U.S. Apple Association
U.S. Beet Sugar Association
U.S. Canola Association
U.S. Custom Harvesters, Inc.
U.S. Hemp Roundtable
U.S. Pea and Lentil Trade Association
U.S. Peanut Federation
United Dairy Farmers of Florida
United Dairymen of Arizona
United Egg Association
United Egg Producers
Upstate Niagara Cooperative, Inc.
US Conference on Irrigation and Drainage
US Dairy Export Council
US Dry Bean Council
US Rice Producers Association
US Sweet Potato Council
USA Dry Pea & Lentil Council
USA Poultry & Egg Export Council
Vermont Dairy Producers Alliance
Virginia Farm Bureau
Virginia State Dairymen's Association
Walnut Council
Washington Apple Commission
Washington State Dairy Federation
Washington State Fruit Commission
Washington State Potato Commission
Washington State Tree Fruit Association
Western Growers
Western Peanut Growers Association
Western Pulse Growers Association
Western States Dairy Producers Association

Weyerhaeuser
Wildlife Mississippi
Wisconsin Agri-Business Association
Wisconsin Farm Bureau
Wisconsin Pork Association
Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association
Wisconsin Soybean Association
Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation
Wyoming Pork Producers
Wyoming Wool Growers Association

cc: Honorable John Thune
Honorable Charles E. Schumer

Office of the President

January 2, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
The Honorable Amy Klobuchar Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

On behalf of the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA), I am writing in support of President Trump's nomination of Brooke Rollins to serve as the Secretary of Agriculture.

AF&PA serves to advance U.S. paper and wood products manufacturers through fact-based public policy and marketplace advocacy. The forest products industry accounts for approximately 5% of the total U.S. manufacturing GDP, manufactures about $350 billion in essential products annually and employs about 925,000 people. The industry meets a payroll of about $65 billion annually and over 75 percent of our facilities are located in counties that are over 80 percent rural. The forest products industry is circular by nature. AF&PA member companies make essential products from renewable and recyclable resources, generate renewable bioenergy and are committed to continuous improvement through the industry's sustainability initiative — Better Practices, Better Planet 2030: Sustainable Products for a Sustainable Future.

One of the primary policy challenges for our industry is ensuring the federal government recognizes the carbon neutrality of our biomass energy. The pulp and paper industry is a leading producer of carbon-neutral bioenergy, and our efficient use of forest products manufacturing residuals provides two-thirds of the energy used at our pulp and paper mills and also provides bioelectricity for the grid. We look forward to working with the Agriculture Department to recognize the carbon benefits of our bioenergy and create regulatory certainty for the industry.

We believe Ms. Rollins is eminently qualified for this important role and will execute President Trump's agenda in a thoughtful, impactful manner with a focus on American jobs. Ms. Rollins extensive experience as member of the President's Domestic Policy Council will prove beneficial to the country when it comes to ensuring Americans have a true champion at the Department of Agriculture.

Based on our knowledge of Ms. Rollins and her background, we believe her expertise, experience and professionalism make her an excellent candidate for this important position.

Kind Regards,

Heidi Brock
President and Chief Executive Officer

AEM
Association of Equipment Manufacturers

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January 21, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar, Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

The Association of Equipment Manufacturers supports the nomination of Brooke Rollins to be Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The equipment manufacturing industry supports 2.3 million jobs and contributes $316 billion to the U.S. GDP annually. The men and women who make the equipment that builds, powers, and feeds the world are not only welders and machinists. Many are also farmers and ranchers, and 1 in 3 of them live and work in rural communities. Our industry is not only connected to rural America — we are a critical part of it.

The Association of Equipment Manufacturers has long advocated for policies that strengthen the bonds between agriculture and equipment manufacturing, from promoting precision agriculture technologies to strengthening the supply chain that supports our nation's farmers and ranchers. At the same time, we remain focused on the challenges facing the agriculture sector, including market access, workforce shortages, and regulatory burdens.

Ms. Rollins' rural roots, deep policy experience, and strong support for rural communities will serve her well as she deals with the many issues within the U.S. Department of Agriculture's diverse portfolio.

Thank you for scheduling the January 23 hearing on the nomination, and for continuing the Committee's strong track record of bipartisan, expeditious action on this critical cabinet position. We look forward to prompt action in moving this nomination forward.

Sincerely,

Megan Tanel
President
Association of Equipment Manufacturers

cc: Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Beef Alliance
www.BeefAlliance.com

January 23, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
555 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
425 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

We write to express our strong support for the nomination of Brooke Rollins to serve as the United States Secretary of Agriculture. The Beef Alliance is an organization of diverse cattle feeding producers who collectively represent 30% of the nation's fed cattle supply and are committed to improving sustainability, transparency, and consumer satisfaction in the beef industry. Beef Alliance members own multiple feedyards across several states within the USDA's five-area Livestock Mandatory Reporting regions and the Pacific Northwest. These feedyards often serve as the primary employers and the economic backbone of their rural communities.

Food security is national security, and the Beef Alliance recognizes and values the essential role of the USDA across the entire beef value chain. Cattle feeders are significantly impacted by many USDA programs and agencies. This includes providing guaranteed operating loans for beginning farmers and ranchers to publishing vital data for risk management purposes. The Office of the Secretary plays a pivotal role in promoting free-market principles that drive innovation, enabling cattle feeders to deliver delicious, nutritious, and affordable beef products to family dinner tables across the nation and around the world.

Brooke Rollins will be a steady, forward-thinking and free-market-oriented Secretary. She has demonstrated a strong commitment to strengthening rural communities and supporting American agriculture through her roles as Acting Director of the Domestic Policy Council and Assistant to the President for Strategic Initiatives. Her experience in Texas Governor Rick Perry's administration, combined with her work at the America First Policy Institute, highlights her ability to think innovatively, engage new partners, elevate grassroots voices, prioritize fiscal responsibility, and uphold the competitive free-market principles essential to the mission of Department of Agriculture.

Strong leadership at USDA is vital for ensuring the long-term viability of the U.S. fed cattle industry. The Beef Alliance strongly urges the Committee to support Brooke Rollins' nomination without delay and to encourage the Senate to confirm her for this critical role promptly.

Sincerely,

Beef Alliance

SUSAN COMBS
4608 Eagle Feather Drive
Austin, Texas 78735
512/970-5599
susan@susancombs.com

January 10, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chair, Senate Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member, Senate Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

I write today in support of a swift confirmation of Secretary-designate Brooke L. Rollins to be the 33d Secretary of Agriculture. Her family background in agriculture, and her educational background in agriculture make her an ideal candidate for this position.

As the elected Texas Commissioner of Agriculture from 1999 through 2006, I knew Ms. Rollins in a variety of roles. Not only did she serve a vital position for Governor Perry in policy, she also later worked with the founders of the Texas Public Policy Foundation to issue and articulate, pragmatic, cogent and thoughtful policy papers. She continued this while working at the Domestic Policy Council and the American First Policy Institute, which she founded.

In her role as Secretary, she will work to maintain a robust agriculture food supply system for both the United States but the world; securing a bright economic future for rural America, applying such essential tools as rural broadband; playing a vital role through the U.S. Forest Service in advocating for sound policies to reduce the likelihood of catastrophic wildfire as we have just seen in California, with its devastating effects on so many impacted.

As the former elected Comptroller/Treasurer for Texas , I knew that it was clearly essential that unnecessary and duplicative burdens be eliminated. We achieved that in Texas and were able to achieve significant as the Assistant Secretary for Policy Management and

Budget at the Department of the Interior during the first Trump administration. I have absolute confidence that Secretary-designate Rollins will do a stellar job at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, leaving a powerful and positive mark on it for the incoming Trump administration and the American public.

Further, her already deep experience in working in the White House has given her an unparallelled understanding of policy processes and how to navigate an unfortunately complex system in our government. I have every confidence that Ms. Rollins will be a superb Secretary of Agriculture, driven not only by her background and passion for rural America, but also by her desire to deliver positive change for the administration and the American people.

Right now, we are at a crossroads: will we deliver a better future for Americans? Yes. I believe we will, and Secretary-designate Rollins will be a major, essential part of that team.

Sincerely,

Cc: Honorable John Thune
Honorable Charles E. Schumer

THE FERTILIZER INSTITUTE

January 14, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Chairman Boozman & Ranking Member Klobuchar:

I am writing on behalf of The Fertilizer Institute to offer my endorsement and full support for the nomination of Brooke Rollins as Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Ensuring that food prices remain affordable for all Americans is a critical priority, and we are confident that Ms. Rollins leadership will address this essential need while supporting agricultural innovation and growth.

Throughout her distinguished career in public service and leadership, Ms. Rollins has demonstrated a profound commitment to advancing policies that empower rural communities, strengthen agriculture, and foster economic growth across America. Her dedication to pragmatic and innovative solutions aligns with the values and priorities of American farmers, ranchers, and agribusinesses.

The USDA requires a leader who understands the dynamic challenges facing American agriculture, from increasing global food demand for crop inputs that enhance yields, to the necessity of a reliable and expanding supply of domestic fertilizer. Ms. Rollins proven ability to navigate complex policy landscapes and her dedication to collaboration and engagement with diverse stakeholders make her uniquely qualified to lead the Department. Her tenure in prior leadership roles, including serving as Director of the Domestic Policy Council and Assistant to the President for Strategic Initiatives under President Donald Trump, as well as her current position as President and CEO of the America First Policy Institute, has been marked by an unwavering focus on improving economic opportunities for rural Americans and supporting agricultural innovation. By ensuring a stable and efficient agricultural sector, Ms. Rollins has consistently prioritized keeping food prices within reach for all families.

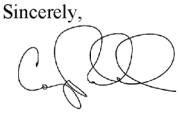
Ms. Rollins roots in agriculture run deep. A native Texan, she graduated from Texas A&M University with an undergraduate degree in agricultural development. Her early involvement with the Future Farmers of America (FFA) as a state officer in Texas underscores her lifelong dedication to the agricultural sector. The Fertilizer Institute is particularly encouraged by Ms. Rollins commitment to enhancing food security, promoting innovation, and ensuring that USDA programs remain accessible and beneficial to all segments of the agriculture community. Her focus on affordability and accessibility for consumers demonstrates her understanding of the interconnectedness of agriculture and household food costs.

As Secretary, we are confident that she will prioritize the interests of farmers and ranchers while addressing the broader challenges of our food systems with a forward-looking perspective. The agriculture sector is a cornerstone of the American economy, supporting millions of jobs, advancing technological innovation, and providing the world with safe, affordable, and abundant food. As

representatives of this vital industry, we recognize the importance of leadership that values proactive, transparent, and inclusive decision-making. Brooke Rollins embodies these qualities, and her leadership will undoubtedly benefit American agriculture and the broader economy, while ensuring that affordable food remains a cornerstone of American life.

The Fertilizer Institute strongly encourages the Committee to approve Ms. Rollins nomination and supports her confirmation by the full Senate. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Corey Rosenbusch
President and CEO
The Fertilizer Institute

cc: Members of the United States Senate

INTERNATIONAL FRESH PRODUCE ASSOCIATION

January 17, 2025

Secretary Designate Brooke Rollins
United States Department of Agriculture
Washington, DC

Dear Secretary Designate Rollins,

On behalf of the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), I would like to extend our sincere congratulations on your nomination to be the next Secretary of Agriculture of the United States. We are excited to collaborate with you at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to advance the prosperity of the American fresh produce sector and the nation's health. IFPA stands ready to support your success in leading USDA and federal food and farm policy.

IFPA is the largest and most diverse association serving the entire fresh produce and floral supply chain worldwide and the only one to seamlessly integrate advocacy and industry-facing support. IFPA proudly represents member companies, from small family businesses to large corporations, throughout the fresh fruit and vegetable supply chain, including growers, shippers, fresh-cut processors, wholesalers, distributors, retailers, food service operators, industry suppliers, and allied associations.

IFPA shares the President's longstanding commitment to U.S. farmers and producers, especially the produce growers who represent nearly half the nation's cash value for crops. Like all food and agriculture, the fresh produce sector is under extreme economic pressure from the marketplace and Mother Nature. Those pressures are increasingly compounded by regulatory demands and government interventions that challenge our members' growth, ability to meet consumer demand, and, in some cases, operational viability.

We are encouraged by President Trump's pledge to reduce regulatory burdens, improve health and nutrition, and support economic growth. Streamlining regulations can help our industry continue delivering fresh produce efficiently and affordably while maintaining high standards for food safety.

Increasing Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables, Improving Health Outcomes
The fruits and vegetables our members provide should be half of every American's plate. With the Trump administration's strong commitment to enhancing health and reducing diet-related diseases, the fresh produce industry is perfectly positioned to help finally achieve these goals.

For years, Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) have recommended that Americans make "half the plate" of fruits and vegetables. Sadly, only one in ten of us meets those consumption targets. USDA plays a critical role in addressing this nutrition crisis, both by prioritizing fruit and vegetable availability and consumption in federal nutrition programs at schools, food banks, and retail and by supporting the overall strength of the fresh produce supply chain to support truly better making Americans healthier. *We believe these actions would go a long way towards increasing the vitality of the fresh sector and improving health outcomes: 1) Incentivize fruit and vegetable consumption in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); 2) Maintain the fruit and vegetable benefit in the Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and building out online WIC; 3) Support fruits and vegetables in the School Meals Programs including the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program; and,4) Improve variety and options of fresh produce in USDA procurement programs, including The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).*

Elevate Agriculture's Voice with the Department of Labor
The most significant threat to the long-term viability of US produce growers and processors is the lack of an available, willing, legal workforce. Though the USDA does not have authority over the laws that govern employment on farms and factories, the Secretary of Agriculture has a crucial role in influencing interagency coordination and data used to regulate the agricultural workforce.

Agricultural employers participating in the Department of Labor's (DOL) foreign agricultural worker H-2A visa program must pay a federally mandated wage known as the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR). Unfortunately, the current method of calculating the AEWR—using each year's average wage to set the following year's minimum—artificially inflates agricultural wages nationwide, often exceeding actual market conditions. This creates a unique and unsustainable challenge for agricultural employers, jeopardizing their businesses and displacing domestic farmworkers. *To improve this information used to regulate, we urge you to work with the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to adjust the Farm Labor Survey to mitigate artificial inflation by collecting data specifically on the "base wage." This would involve excluding bonus pay, piece-rate pay, incentive pay, and overtime from the survey. Since the AEWR was originally intended to serve as a minimum wage for agricultural work, this adjustment would provide a more accurate representation of the base wage in the industry. We also ask that you encourage DOL to revise the definition of AEWR to base it on the "base wage of field and livestock workers combined" to fully implement these critical improvements.*

Over the last year, IFPA and other agriculture organizations began collaborating with USDA and the Department of Labor (DOL) to highlight the value of having an empowered liaison between the DOL and USDA, specifically focused on the needs of agricultural employers. While USDA recognizes agricultural employers as key stakeholders, historically, DOL's approach has not been receptive to grower and farm employer concerns. *To improve agriculture's standing within the federal government, we encourage you to work with DOL to establish a dedicated liaison to ensure that policies across agencies work harmoniously with USDA's efforts to support farmers.*

Amplifying USDA's Role in Crop Protection

USDA's Office of Pest Management and Policy (OPMP) is a vital partner in agriculture's engagement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on policies associated with the use of pesticides and protections for endangered and threatened species. Pesticides are irreplaceable tools for efficiently producing abundant food and are highly regulated by EPA to ensure safe use. *We ask that you ensure that OPMP is robustly supported in its efforts to work with growers and EPA to provide evidence and data on the benefits of pesticides and find common-sense solutions to mitigate risks.*

Supporting the Critical Role of Marketing & Regulatory Programs (MRP)

With the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Congress created the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) to provide more meaningful federal support for specialty crop producers by providing grants to state agriculture departments to enhance those crops' competitiveness. Since 2006, USDA has invested more than $953 million through the SCBGP to fund 11,331 projects that have increased the long-term successes of producers and broadened the market for specialty crops in the U.S. and abroad. Similarly, the National Organic Program is vital to fresh produce growers who have dedicated considerable time and resources to organic production. In 2019, crops accounted for 58 percent of organic sales, with vegetables and fruits leading the way at $9 billion in revenue. *For AMS, we urge you to prioritize the expansion of the SCBGP and National Organic Program to meet the increasing consumer demand for fresh produce.*

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is the first line of defense protecting American specialty crops (fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, horticulture crops) from foreign pests and diseases. In the spirit of strengthening the border, APHIS champions keeping U.S. growers safe from these very real and devastating threats. *We ask that you prioritize resources for APHIS to ensure the agency can effectively prevent and prepare for foreign pest and disease risks.*

During the President's first term, APHIS finalized its updated biotechnology regulations, known as the SECURE Rule—the first comprehensive revision of APHIS' biotechnology regulations since their establishment in 1987. This rule provided clarity to plant breeders and encouraged innovation across the agricultural sectors. Unfortunately, in December 2024, the federal courts vacated the rule, upending years of regulatory certainty. We commend USDA-APHIS for its swift action to reopen the regulatory

process and support innovation under the pre-2020 rules. However, the old rules are sufficient. Modernizing biotechnology regulations remains essential to build tomorrow's farm and food economy. *We ask you to quickly take the necessary steps to address the Court's requirements and fully restore the intent of the SECURE Rule through updated regulations.*

Valuing the Impact of Trade on Fresh Produce

IFPA believes that every nation that can feed itself should do so. Like most agricultural organizations, our members support fair, strong trade among nations because it can grow markets, increase their prosperity, and ensure everyone can access the healthiest, freshest foods.

U.S. fresh produce growers and suppliers proudly feed Americans and the world every day, and the world wants to do business with the U.S. in return. Fresh produce, specialty crops, and florals are robustly traded across the North American market. Growing seasons and regions mean that a North American market serves US consumers, and American consumers demand year-round access to a robust variety of fresh produce. There are also some products for which there is no or minimal U.S.-based production due to the lack of appropriate growing conditions, e.g., bananas and most tropical fruits. As we have graphically learned from recent acute supply chain disruptions, marketplace volatility, and supply limitations threaten growers' stability and result in consumers paying higher prices at the grocery store.

Many programs at the Trade and Foreign Agriculture Agency (TFAA) help U.S. specialty crop growers compete worldwide. Our trading partners have historically used non-tariff trade barriers, such as overly stringent maximum residue levels (MRLs) and packaging standards, to keep U.S. fruits, vegetables, and nuts out of important trading markets. To counter those barriers, *IFPA asks that you fully fund and support the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) and Assisting Specialty Crop Exports (ASCE) program.*

Our Commitment to USDA

Under your leadership, we look forward to working with USDA to champion policies that help the fresh produce industry prosper. IFPA looks forward to working with the Trump Administration as you strategize the next steps for all policies that impact food and agriculture. We are encouraged by the President's plans to make Americans healthier and reform onerous regulations that we believe are the biggest threats to growers and the nation's food security. Reducing regulatory burdens, such as the need for more crop protection tools, easing the escalation of labor wages, and addressing the critical lack of access to water resources, are the best ways to help U.S. producers thrive and compete in both the domestic and international marketplace.

We extend an early *invitation for you to join us when hundreds of IFPA members come to Washington, D.C., June 9-1, 2025, for The Washington Conference, our annual policy conference and fly-in*. This event allows members to engage with administration leaders and congressional offices. We would be honored

if you shared your valuable insights while discussing key issues affecting our fresh sector. IFPA will reach out soon with more details about the event.

Thank you for your time, and again, we offer our sincerest congratulations on your appointment. IFPA welcomes the opportunity to meet with you and other senior leaders soon to support your leadership during this critical time for the fresh produce industry. We look forward to scheduling those meetings soon. Please contact me directly at radcock@freshproduce.com or (703) 501-9371 if IFPA or I can assist you in any way.

Kindly,

Rebeckah Freeman Adcock
Vice-President, U.S. Government Relations

IndependentWomen®

Independent Women Supports the Confirmation of Brooke Rollins as Secretary of Agriculture

January 20, 2025

Dear Senators,

Independent Women, which advances policies that enhance opportunity and well-being, fully supports the confirmation of Brooke Rollins to serve as Secretary of Agriculture. President Trump deserves the team he wants so that he can carry out the directive given to him by the American people.

There is no question that Mrs. Rollins is incredibly qualified to serve as Secretary of Agriculture.

Ms. Rollins is poised to protect America's farmers and review the sprawling responsibilities of the Department of Agriculture to make it work better for the people. Through her experience with Future Farmers of America and 4H, she has been closely involved with the agricultural community and her time working in public policy has prepared her for the difficulties of managing a large department.

Independent Women is proud to support the nomination of such a qualified nominee to serve as Secretary of Agriculture. We urge senators to provide Brooke Rollins with a fair and respectful hearing and to confirm her as Secretary of Agriculture.

Respectfully,

Heather R. Higgins
CEO
Independent Women's Voice

Carrie Lukas
Vice President
Independent Women's Voice

January 14, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chair, Senate Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member, Senate Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

We write today in support of a swift confirmation of Secretary-designate Brooke Leslie Rollins to be the 33rd Secretary of Agriculture.

As leaders of State Departments of Agriculture, we are the primary individuals tasked with advancing and defending our state and regional agricultural interests, all of which contribute to a robust domestic food supply and economy. Collectively, we also work to identify new markets for American agriculture abroad. Our success heavily relies on having strong leadership at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). As such, we believe Secretary-designate Rollins is an ideal candidate to lead the Department.

Secretary-designate Rollins has been engaged in American agriculture since an early age in both Texas and Minnesota. She attended Texas A&M on scholarship where she received her Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Development and has enjoyed years of generational family involvement in both 4-H and FFA.

Notable for us, Secretary-designate Rollins has had the unique experience of being on the frontlines and working in state government. Specifically, she served as deputy general counsel and policy director for Texas Governor Rick Perry. We are most fortunate to have a nominee for U.S. Secretary of Agriculture that understands the importance of a positive working relationship between state and federal government. Additionally, she has led two large public policy organizations, experiences of which

have contributed to her qualifications to lead one of the largest federal entities in USDA.

Finally, and arguably of the utmost importance, Secretary-designate Rollins has a strong working relationship with President Trump as she is his former Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council. We are confident President Trump's vote of confidence in her will yield tremendous results for our state governments and all of U.S. agriculture.

Given the unexpected recent natural disasters, economic hardship and disease threats faced by U.S. agriculture, it is imperative Secretary-designate Rollins is quickly able to get to work at USDA, so that our states may begin partnering with her on addressing these and other important issues. As such, we urge your Committee, and the entire U.S. Senate, to expeditiously confirm Secretary-designate Rollins as the next Secretary of Agriculture.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rick Pate
Alabama Commissioner of Agriculture & Industries

Shawn Jasper
New Hampshire Commissioner of Agriculture

Bryan Scoresby
Alaska Director of Agriculture

Jeff Witte
New Mexico Secretary of Agriculture

Wes Ward
Arkansas Secretary of Agriculture

Doug Goehring
North Dakota Commissioner of Agriculture

Wilton Simpson
Florida Commissioner of Agriculture

Brian Baldridge
Ohio Director of Agriculture

Tyler Harper
Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture

Blayne Arthur
Oklahoma Secretary of Agriculture

Chanel Tewalt
Idaho Director of Agriculture

Hugh Weathers
South Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture

Don Lamb
Indiana Director of Agriculture

Hunter Roberts
South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture & Natural Resources

Mike Naig
Iowa Secretary of Agriculture

Charlie Hatcher, DVM
Tennessee Commissioner of Agriculture

Jonathan Shell
Kentucky Commissioner of Agriculture

Sid Miller
Texas Commissioner of Agriculture

Mike Strain, DVM
Louisiana Commissioner of Agriculture & Forestry

Craig Buttars
Utah Commissioner of Agriculture

Andy Gipson
Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture

Matt Lohr
Virginia Secretary of Agriculture & Forestry

Chris Chinn
Missouri Director of Agriculture

Joe Guthrie
Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture & Consumer Services

Sherry Vinton
Nebraska Director of Agriculture

Kent Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

Julian Joseph (J.J.) Goicoechea, DVM
Nevada Director of Agriculture

Doug Miyamoto
Wyoming Director of Agriculture

cc: Honorable John Thune
Honorable Charles E. Schumer

Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project
2327 Lincoln Avenue SE
Sidney, MT 59270
Phone: 406-433-1306
lyip@midrivers.com
FAX 406-433-9188

January 20, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

On behalf of the Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project (LYIP) and its four districts — Lower Yellowstone Irrigation District #1 Montana, Lower Yellowstone Irrigation District #2 North Dakota, Intake Irrigation District, and Savage Irrigation District — we write to express our strong support for Brooke Leslie Rollins' nomination to serve as the 33rd Secretary of Agriculture. The LYIP, as the crown jewel of eastern Montana and western North Dakota agriculture and drought preparedness, embodies the grit, determination, and perseverance that define America's rural heartland—qualities we see reflected in Ms. Rollins' career and vision for American agriculture.

Ms. Rollins has deep roots in agriculture, reflecting her lifelong commitment to the farming and ranching communities that form the backbone of our nation's agricultural success. She has consistently championed rural priorities, from her service under Texas Governor Rick Perry to her leadership in the federal government as Director of the United States Domestic Policy Council.

Established in 1909, the LYIP has been a cornerstone of agricultural success for over a century, transforming semi-arid landscapes into thriving farmlands even during the worst historical droughts. Today, our 59,000-acre irrigation system sustains family farms and supports a vibrant agricultural economy in Richland and Dawson Counties in Montana, and McKenzie County in North Dakota through all the greatest droughts since 1909. Important cash crops such as alfalfa, wheat, barley, rye, corn, and beans flourish under the LYIP's lifeline of reliable water, contributing to our nation's agricultural dominance and drought resilience. Ms. Rollins' leadership at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) will be pivotal in addressing the unique challenges faced by rural communities like ours and ensuring the continued success of projects such as the LYIP.

We are confident that Ms. Rollins will bring a unique blend of experience, dedication, and successful leadership to the USDA. Her ability to unite diverse stakeholders and advocate for comprehensive agricultural policies will help stabilize and advance rural economies, support the full food and agriculture value chain, and reinforce America's global agricultural leadership and food security.

As such, we urge your Committee and the entire U.S. Senate to confirm Ms. Rollins as the next Secretary of Agriculture. Her leadership is essential to tackling the challenges facing rural America and ensuring a sustainable, prosperous future for farmers, ranchers, and agricultural communities nationwide.

Thank you for your consideration and your continued commitment to America's agricultural heritage.

Sincerely,

James Brower
Project Manager
Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project
Lower Yellowstone Irrigation District 1 & District 2
Savage Irrigation District
Intake Irrigation District

The Mission of the Mule Deer Foundation is to ensure the conservation of mule deer, black-tailed deer, and their habitat.

January 20, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chair, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member, Senate Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

On behalf of the thousands of members of the Mule Deer Foundation (MDF) and Blacktail Deer Foundation (BDF) we write in support of Brooke Leslie Rollins' nomination to be the 33rd Secretary of Agriculture. MDF and BDF represent passionate individuals from all walks of life who care about mule deer, black-tailed deer and their habitats. Our membership includes hunters, conservationists, farmers, ranchers, private forest owners, outdoor retails businesses, and many others. The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides key oversight and leadership to National Forests and Grasslands and private lands which support deer habitat. It is essential that the USDA works with partners to ensure the future of wildlife and agriculture, and we look forward to Ms. Rollins' strong leadership at USDA.

Ms. Rollins' upbringing in Glen Rose, Texas and her illustrious career shows that she knows what agriculture and the people who work on farms, ranches, and forests mean to this great country. Her dedication and experience make her an excellent choice for USDA Secretary and a champion for rural America, open spaces, and wildlife.

It is vital for Congress to act quickly on Agriculture Secretary-designate Rollins' nomination to address the many challenges facing America's farmers and rural America. We need her leadership now at USDA to advocate for a new farm bill, support sustainable forestry, provide leadership to the agencies under USDA that work that work with partners on the stewardship of our natural resources. We look forward to Agriculture Secretary-designate Rollins bringing her unique experience and capabilities to tackle the challenges facing agriculture and rural America once confirmed. As such, we urge your Committee and the entire U.S. Senate to promptly confirm Ms. Rollins as the next Secretary of Agriculture. Thank you for your consideration, and for your dedication to our nation's agricultural and natural resources community.

Sincerely,

Gregory Sheehan, President/CEO
Mule Deer Foundation & Blacktail Deer Foundation

cc: Honorable John Thune
Honorable Charles E. Schumer

Rich Nolan
President & CEO

January 13, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

As President and CEO of the National Mining Association (NMA), I am pleased to express NMA's support for Ms. Brooke Leslie Rollins' nomination to serve as Secretary of Agriculture. Her extensive experience in economic development, regulatory reform, and rural policy positions her as an outstanding choice to lead the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) during this critical period for rural communities and public lands management.

The NMA is the only national trade organization that serves as the voice of the U.S. mining industry and the hundreds of thousands of American workers it employs before Congress, the federal agencies, the judiciary, and the media, advocating for public policies that will help America fully and responsibly utilize its vast natural resources. We work to ensure America has secure and reliable supply chains, abundant and affordable energy, and the American-sourced materials necessary for U.S. manufacturing, national security, and economic security, all delivered under world-leading environmental, safety, and labor standards. The NMA has a membership of more than 280 companies and organizations involved in every aspect of mining, from producers and equipment manufacturers to service providers.

Ms. Brooks previously served as Deputy General Counsel and Policy Director for Texas Governor Rick Perry, where she played a key role in advancing natural resource initiatives. As President-elect Donald J. Trump's former Director of the Domestic Policy Council, she led efforts to champion rural priorities across federal agencies. Additionally, her leadership experience as the head of two prominent public policy organizations has equipped her with the executive skills necessary to effectively oversee USDA's expansive programs and workforce. Her strong working relationship with incoming President Trump ensures that agriculture and rural communities will have a powerful advocate during key policy discussions at the White House.

101 Constitution Ave. NW / Suite 500 East / Washington, D.C. 20001 / Phone: 202. 463. 2600

Mining operations on forest lands provide high-paying jobs, support infrastructure improvements, and contribute to local tax bases that fund schools, healthcare, and essential public services. The Forest Service's management of permitting processes for resource development must balance environmental stewardship with economic opportunity. We believe Ms. Rollins' leadership will foster greater collaboration between federal agencies, state partners, and resource-dependent communities to promote a balanced approach that respects conservation while strengthening rural economies.

We are confident that Ms. Rollins will bring thoughtful leadership and a collaborative approach to the USDA. Her commitment to advancing economic growth and sustainable resource development makes her an ideal candidate for this role.

I respectfully urge the Committee to approve Ms. Rollins' nomination and move it forward without delay. We look forward to working with you throughout this important confirmation process.

Sincerely,

Rich Nolan

NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION
CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY

January 22, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
328A Russell Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

On behalf of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and our undersigned state affiliate organizations, we write to express our strong support for the nomination of Brooke Rollins to serve as the United States Secretary of Agriculture. NCBA is the nation's oldest and largest trade association representing American cattle producers, with 26,000 direct members and more than 178,000 members through our 44 state affiliates. The cattle industry constitutes the largest single sector of U.S. agriculture, and we are proud of the incomparable mark we have left on our country's history, economic development, cultural identity, dietary preferences, and environmental conversation. Cattle producers steward one third of the U.S. continental landmass, and form the backbone of countless rural communities. Our livelihoods – and the food security of the nation – depend on commonsense, collaborative leadership at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and that is why we urge the Senate to confirm Mrs. Rollins to the position of Secretary without delay.

A country's first and most indispensable job is feeding itself. USDA's Office of the Secretary truly could not have a more critical responsibility to our country, both to the families we feed at home, the consumers we serve abroad, and the producers whose continuous innovation and dedication have turned American agriculture into the most productive and sustainable powerhouse in the world. Cattle producers are directly impacted by many of the risk management, data and research, food safety, nutrition, disaster relief, conservation, trade, and animal health programs the Department undertakes. We have always valued our partnership with the Secretary, and we hope to continue that collaborative approach with Mrs. Rollins.

Brooke Rollins will be a steady, forward-thinking, and judicious leader. She has demonstrated her commitment to strengthening rural communities and supporting American agriculture through her work as Acting Director of the Domestic Policy Council and Assistant to the President for Strategic Initiatives. In her prior positions with Texas Governor Rick Perry's administration and the America First Policy Institute, she has shown a keen ability to think outside of the box, bring new partners to the table, prioritize and elevate the voices of grassroots stakeholders, exercise fiscal responsibility, and safeguard the competitive free market values that undergird our economy.

Strong leadership at USDA is essential for a strong, profitable, sustainable cattle industry. NCBA urges the Committee to support Brooke Rollins' nomination and calls upon the Senate to confirm her to this critical role in a timely manner.

Sincerely,

National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Alabama Cattlemen's Association
Arizona Cattle Feeders Association
Arizona Cattle Growers Association
Arkansas Cattlemen's Association
California Cattlemen's Association
Colorado Cattlemen's Association
Colorado Livestock Association
Florida Cattlemen's Association
Georgia Cattlemen's Association
Hawaii Cattlemen's Council
Idaho Cattle Association
Illinois Beef Association
Indiana Beef Cattle Association
Kansas Livestock Association
Kentucky Cattlemen's Association
Louisiana Cattlemen's Association
Michigan Cattlemen's Association
Minnesota State Cattlemen's Association
Mississippi Cattlemen's Association
Missouri Cattlemen's Association
Montana Stockgrowers Association
Nebraska Cattlemen
Nevada Cattlemen's Association
New York Beef Producers Association
North Carolina Cattlemen's Association
North Dakota Stockmen's Association
Ohio Cattlemen's Association
Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association
Oregon Cattlemen's Association
Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association
South Carolina Cattlemen's Association
South Dakota Cattlemen's Association
Tennessee Cattlemen's Association
Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association
Texas Cattle Feeders Association
Utah Cattlemen's Association
Virginia Cattlemen's Association
Washington Cattle Feeders Association
Washington Cattlemen's Association
Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association
Wyoming Stock Growers Association

PARENTS DEFENDING EDUCATION ACTION

Chairman John Boozman
Ranking Member Amy Klobuchar
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

January 7, 2025

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar,

As the executive director of PDE Action – a nonprofit social welfare organization created to advocate for parental rights at the local, state, and federal level – I wish to convey our organization's support for Brooke Rollins as the United States Secretary of Agriculture under incoming President Donald J. Trump.

Over the past four years, parents around the country were appalled when the Biden administration tried to leverage the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s National School Lunch Program[1] to push a political agenda on children - holding billions of dollars' worth of school lunch funding as ransom in a clear-cut attempt to coerce school districts to adopt their anti-female Title IX policies.[2] This ill-conceived power grab was both a direct affront to local control of schools and a clear violation of parental rights, and the fact that it passed departmental muster demonstrates a clear failure of leadership at the Department. Under no circumstances should the federal government bully states and local school districts into adopting the ideological and partisan beliefs of a small cohort of activists – particularly when those policies are clearly in opposition to the preferences of the vast majority of American parents.[3]

---

[1] National School Lunch Program. U.S. Department of Agriculture: Economic Research Service. https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program/

[2] "No Free Lunch: Biden Admin Will Pull Meal Funding for Schools That Don't Comply With Its LGBT Agenda." Washington Free Beacon. June 1, 2022. https://freebeacon.com/biden-administration/no-free-lunch-biden-admin-will-pull-meal-funding-for-schools-that-dont-comply-with-its-lgbt-agenda/

[3] Poll: Parents Support Girls-Only Spaces in Schools, Oppose Parental Exclusion Policies and Grading for Equity, Parents Defending Education. January 6, 2025. https://defendinged.org/press-releases/parents-defending-

The USDA desperately needs a strong leader with a proven track record of opposing government overreach, and we believe that Brooke Rollins is exactly the kind of visionary leader that this role demands. Ms. Rollins possesses the wisdom, experience, and humility needed to reorient the USDA's focus back to President Abraham Lincoln's original vision of "the People's Department," balancing the needs of American's agricultural sector while faithfully executing this important nutrition program for students in a way that will not infringe on parental rights.

Ms. Rollins' extensive resume speaks for itself; she possesses decades of experience in public policy both at the state and federal level, having served in the previous Trump administration as the Director of the Domestic Policy Council and as the Assistant to the President for Strategic Initiatives. Thanks to her tenure as policy director for former Texas governor Rick Perry, she possesses a unique understanding of how states and the federal government can work together to achieve mutually beneficial policy objectives. As the head of both the Texas Public Policy Foundation and the America First Policy Institute, she has been the tip of the spear developing and advancing important policy solutions aligned with President Trump's vision for the country. She has critical agriculture credentials, having graduated with honors from Texas A&M with a degree in agricultural development – and perhaps most importantly, she is a proud mother of four children who personally understands how federal policies can and do impact American families.

At Parents Defending Education Action, we are proud to endorse Brooke Rollins as the next Secretary of the USDA and urge your committee to move quickly to officially confirm her position. As a fellow nonprofit leader who has worked alongside Brooke for the past eighteen years, I have the utmost confidence in her ability to effectively lead the USDA and faithfully execute President Trump's agenda.

Sincerely,

Nicole Neily
Executive Director
Parents Defending Education Action

---

education-poll-parents-support-girls-only-spaces-in-schools-oppose-parental-exclusion-policies-and-grading-for-equity/

U.S. Seafood Policy Council
Washington, D.C.
(202) 931-0990
SeafoodPolicy.us

January 15, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chair, Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition and Forestry
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition and Forestry
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

The U.S. Seafood Policy Council (USSPC) is pleased to support Senate confirmation of Brooke L. Rollins as the 33rd Secretary of Agriculture. We are encouraged by her commitment to supporting American farmers and revitalizing agricultural communities. The USSPC is a public-private partnership that promotes and supports a strong American seafood industry. We collaborate with federal, state, tribal, multilateral, and industry partners to advance policies that enhance the sustainability, resilience, and profitability of America's domestic seafood industry.

Ms. Rollins has been deeply involved in American agriculture from a young age. Raised on a family farm, she actively participated in youth agricultural programs, including 4-H and the National FFA Organization. Her formal education further solidified her agricultural foundation. She attended Texas A&M University on scholarship, earning a degree in Agricultural Development. Throughout her career, she has consistently brought the perspectives of American farmers and ranchers to her work, including in her policy roles at the state and federal level.

During her tenure at the Domestic Policy Council, she was engaged in policy activities aimed at strengthening America's seafood industry by streamlining regulations, bolstering commercial fishing activities, combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and establishing an interagency seafood trade strategy.

We look forward to collaborating with Ms. Rollins to strengthen America's seafood sector. We are particularly eager to work together on advocating for a new bipartisan farm bill, building a robust domestic aquaculture program, enhancing U.S. seafood policies, supporting American workers, and ensuring the sustainability and competitiveness of our industry. The USDA will continue to play a pivotal role in advancing the interests of the seafood community, promoting sustainable practices, and supporting the economic vitality of our coastal and rural communities.

The USSPC urges your Committee and the entire U.S. Senate to promptly confirm Ms. Rollins so that we can begin this important work together, and we appreciate your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

Members of the U.S. Seafood Policy Council

cc: Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

January 17, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

The undersigned associations from the forestry and wood products sector support Ms. Brooke Leslie Rollins's nomination to be the next Secretary of Agriculture. We urge the expeditious reporting of her nomination by the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee and confirmation by the full Senate so that Ms. Rollins can quickly provide needed leadership at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) during this crucial time for our industry.

More than one-third of the United States is covered by forests, and 47% of U.S. forests, approximately 360 million acres, are private working forests owned by families, small and large businesses, Tribes, and investors often seeking to simultaneously maximize economic returns and environmental benefits. Further, USDA is responsible for the management of the 193-million-acre National Forest System, which provides wood fiber, recreation, and watershed services to millions of Americans. The forestry and wood products sector supports $288 billion in sales and manufacturing, 2.5 million jobs, and accounts for approximately 5% of the total U.S. manufacturing GDP. In addition to these economic benefits, healthy markets for wood products also provide clean air, clean water, and wildlife habitat.

The forestry and wood products sector is vital to the America's rural economy but faces significant challenges. These include declining forest product markets and associated rural employment, trade barriers, uncertainties with securing seasonal H-2B labor essential to tree planting and forest management, the wildfire crisis, and forest health concerns. Additional issues include inefficiencies in conservation programs, a lack of sufficient disaster recovery options for private landowners, and regulations that hinder growth and innovation. Regarding the National Forest System, active management is the most immediate tool to combat wildfires and outbreaks of insects and diseases. The USDA plays a critical role in addressing all these challenges through its direct program management, oversight, partnerships, and influence. Ms. Rollins's leadership will drive positive market stability, trade, and employment outcomes needed to ensure the prosperity of our sector and the rural communities that depend on it.

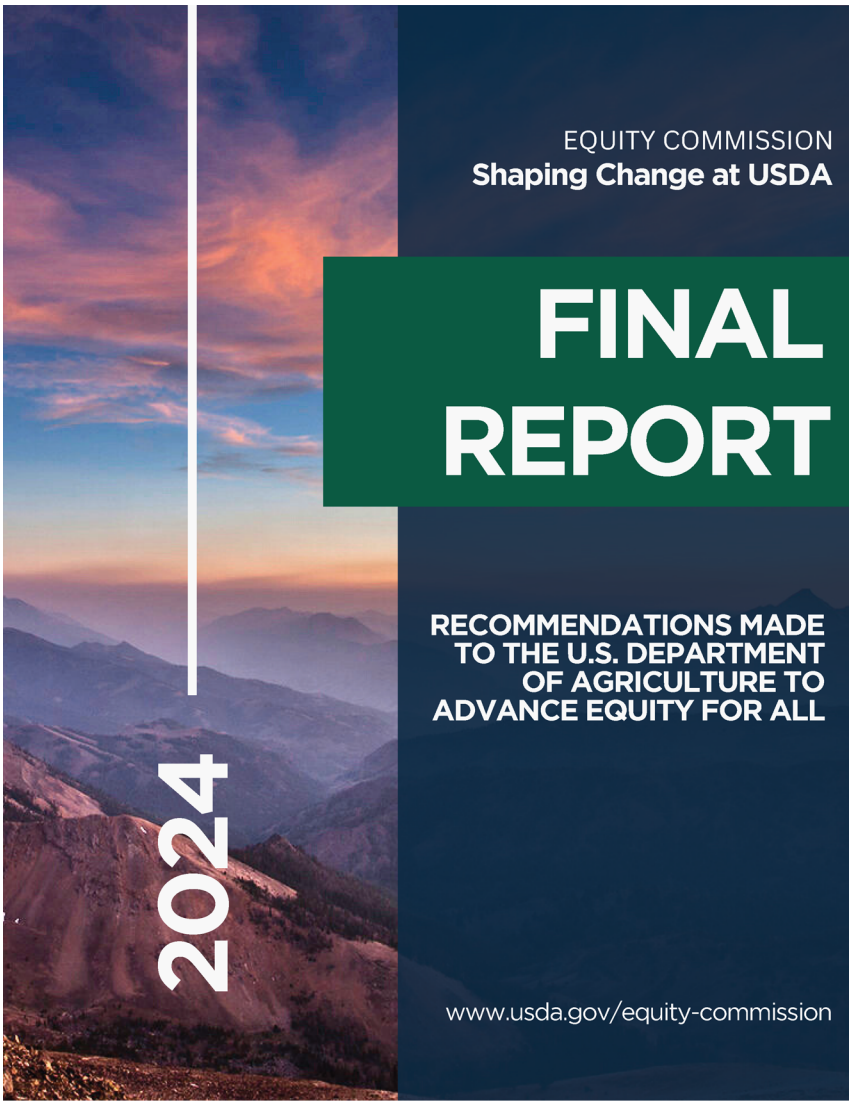
Ms. Rollins has deep, hands-on connections to rural land management, having worked on her family's farm and raising livestock throughout her life. Her leadership in public policy, including her role as Director of the Domestic Policy Council under President Trump, has equipped her with expertise to address the complex issues and pressures facing our sector. Her proven ability to collaborate with diverse stakeholders—from local landowners to national policymakers—positions her as an ideal nominee for Secretary of Agriculture.

We strongly urge the Committee to swiftly advance Ms. Rollins's nomination and call on the full Senate to confirm her as Secretary of Agriculture. Her confirmation is essential to enabling the implementation of policies that support sustainable forest management, strengthen the wood products market, sustain rural jobs, and provide the regulatory certainty needed for the sector to thrive. With Ms. Rollins's leadership, we are confident the USDA can take decisive steps to ensure the health and prosperity of America's forests and its sustainably harvested products.

Sincerely,

National Alliance of Forest Owners
American Wood Council
Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association
Forest Resources Association
Federal Forest Resources Coalition
Forest Landowners Association
The Hardwood Federation
National Wooden Pallet & Container Association
National Association of State Foresters
The National Willd Turkey Federation
American Forest Foundation

cc: Honorable John Thune
Honorable Charles E. Schumer


EQUITY COMMISSION
Shaping Change at USDA
FINAL REPORT
RECOMMENDATIONS MADE TO THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE TO ADVANCE EQUITY FOR ALL
2024
www.usda.gov/equity-commission

Letter to the Secretary

February 22, 2024

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

The USDA Equity Commission recognizes the progress the Department has made in its commitment to equity since January 2021, when President Biden signed Executive Order 13985 On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. In acknowledgement of this commitment, we appreciate the opportunity to make the enclosed recommendations to further advance equity at USDA. At the outset we must also acknowledge and express our gratitude for your personal commitment and actions to address equity issues at USDA.

In preparation for this final report, the Equity Commission held six public meetings:

- February 28, 2022
- May 10-11, 2022
- September 21-22, 2022
- January 31 – February 2, 2023
- June 27-29, 2023
- October 24-26, 2023

At each of the public meetings, input was gathered from the public through written and oral comments. The comments were shared with members of the Equity Commission for their consideration and are posted on the public Equity Commission website.

Appendix A includes a list of USDA Staff from whom the Equity Commission members received briefings from during their tenure.

Additionally, USDA provided a library of resources to the Equity Commission including relevant Executive Orders, American Rescue Plan documents, Government Accountability Office (GAO) Reports and Findings, USDA internal reports and findings, USDA advisory committee reports and findings, and USDA strategic plans and Equity Action Plans. Appendix B is a list of these resources.

The attached final report includes our set of 66 recommendations, 32 of which were included in our interim report, and all of which were approved unanimously at the sixth public meeting.

Our goal was not to duplicate the significant efforts already underway at USDA, but to identify additional steps for embedding equity into USDA's policies, practices, and

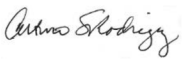
processes. Many of the issues and recommendations we identified are not new. However, they will require renewed commitment from USDA to improve its customer-facing business processes and address historical inequities whose impacts continue to the present moment. Our recommendations are rightfully focused on underserved farmers, ranchers, rural communities, and other eligible USDA program recipients. We also strongly emphasize that our work is ultimately aimed at making USDA a better institution for every American. The Commission was unified in its view that the needs and concerns of farmworkers, immigrants, and their families are of vital importance to the highly productive and successful U.S. farm economy and rural development in general. Agricultural policy makers must begin to make consideration of these critical issues a regular part of their discussions going forward.

Since the interim report, we have spent time researching and further refining recommendations while also working with the Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee to develop an additional set of recommendations. It is an honor to be a part of this important work.

On behalf of our fellow Commission members, we want to thank you again for the opportunity to help advance equity at USDA.

Sincerely,

Ertharin Cousin
Co-Chair,
USDA Equity Commission



Arturo S. Rodríguez
Co-Chair,
USDA Equity Commission

Equity Commission Members

Asterisks (*) indicate Special Government Employees (SGE). SGEs provide temporary service to the Government, not to exceed 130 days during any period of 365 consecutive days with or without compensation.

- **Shorlette Ammons***, *Farm Aid*
- **Dr. Jewel Bronaugh**, *Former USDA Deputy Secretary (Co-Chair 2021-2023)*
- **Todd Corley***, *Carhartt*
- **Ertharin Cousin**, *Food Systems for the Future*
- **Derrick Johnson***, *NAACP*
- **Yvonne Lee***,*U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (Retired)*
- **Elizabeth Lower-Basch***, *Center for Law and Social Policy*
- **Dr. Mireya Loza***, *Georgetown University*
- **Dr. Ronald Rainey***, *University of Arkansas*
- **Charles Rawls***, *USDA (Retired)*
- **Dr. Hazell Reed**, *National Black Growers Council (Retired)*
- **Arturo S. Rodríguez***, *United Farm Workers*
- **Shirley Sherrod**, *Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education*
- **Poppy Sias Hernandez***, *State of Michigan*
- **Rick Smith**, *Dairy Farmers of America (Retired)*
- **Toni Stanger-McLaughlin**, *Native American Agriculture Fund*

Agriculture Subcommittee Members

- **Erica Lomeli Corcoran**, *United Farm Workers Foundation*
- **Dr. Gina Eubanks***, *Louisiana State University AgCenter*
- **Janssen Hang**, *Hmong America Farmers Association*
- **Phillip Johnson (P.J.) Haynie, III**, *Haynie Farms LLC*
- **Savonala "Savi" Horne***, *North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project*
- **Michelle A.T. Hughes**, *National Young Farmers Coalition*
- **Kari Jo Lawrence**, *Intertribal Agriculture Council*
- **Gary Matteson**, *Farm Credit Council*
- **Dr. Alexis Racelis***, *University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*
- **Russell Redding**, *State of Pennsylvania*
- **Shari Rogge-Fidler**, *Farm Foundation*
- **Dr. Jennie Stephens**, *Center for Heirs' Property Preservation*
- **Sarah Vogel**, *Sarah Vogel Law Office*

Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee Members

- **Calvin Allen**, *MDC Rural Forward Initiatives*
- **Valerie Beel**, *Valerie Enterprises LLC*
- **David Carrasquillo-Medrano**, *¡Planifiquemos!*
- **Shonterria Charleston**, *Housing Assistance Council*
- **Nils Christoffersen**, *Wallowa Resources*

- **Cheryal Hills**, *Region Five Development Commission & North Central Economic Development Association*
- **Larry Holland**, *Holland Hills Farm*
- **LaTonya Keaton**, *CoBank*
- **Doug O'Brien**, *National Cooperative Business Association*
- **Terry Rambler**, *San Carlos Apache Tribe*
- **Lakota Vogel**, *Four Bands Community Fund*
- **Curtis Wynn**, *SECO Energy*

Staff

The Commission would like to express appreciation and gratitude to the Designated Federal Officer Cecilia Hernandez and the supporting staff.

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- Dallas Selle (2023-2024)
- Tanika Whittington (2023-2024)
- Jessica Medina (2023)
- Karen Patyk (2023)
- Laura Crowell (2022)
- Courtney Niegocki (2021-2022)

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- Duane Tolson
- George Logan Vega
- Beth Williams
- Lucy Williams

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I. Executive Summary

In the pursuit of a more equitable food, agricultural, and rural landscape, the USDA Equity Commission presents its final recommendations – a comprehensive guide for long-lasting change within USDA programs, policies, and procedures. Mandated by Section 1006 of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), as amended by Section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), the Commission has systematically researched a plethora of documents, including historical reports and audits, analyzed hundreds of public comments, and engaged with numerous USDA leadership and program staff to develop a total of 66 recommendations. This final report marks the culmination of these efforts and builds on the Interim Report findings submitted to Secretary Vilsack in February 2023. These recommendations, each approved unanimously by the Commission, outline actionable steps the Commission suggests both USDA and Congress take to address documented historic discrimination, eliminate any and all barriers to accessing Department programs, and ensure equity for all Americans touched by USDA.

Informed by Executive Orders on racial equity and diversity (EO 13985, EO 14035), the Commission remains steadfast in guiding USDA's efforts to address historic and current discrimination and promote equity. This final report serves as a roadmap for meaningful and lasting change, setting the stage for a more inclusive, just, and responsive USDA. The subsequent sections of this report provide detailed insights into the Commission's mission and structure, historical context, and the 66 specific recommendations to the Secretary with justifications.

The recommendations focus on the following areas for near and long-term action:

1. Advancing Department-wide Equity
2. Working with Farmers and Ranchers Day-to-Day
3. Supporting Farmworkers and their Families
4. Strengthening Research and Extension Programs
5. Ensuring Equitable Nutrition Assistance to those in Need
6. Recognizing Immigrants and their Families
7. Enhancing Rural Development Operations
8. Supporting Rural Communities
9. Strengthening Rural Economies

These recommendations represent the Commission's interpretation of the priority issues affecting the equitable access and availability of USDA services and programs. The reexamination of past actions as well as briefings on the USDA present and ongoing Department-wide equity related changes informed the Commission's critical and exhaustive review of existing USDA structures, programs, and services. The Commission recognizes the USDA is about the people – the tens of thousands of decent hardworking people serving within the Department and the millions served by the Department. The Commission was privileged to hear from many of those dedicated public servants throughout our work process. While acknowledging the positive ongoing efforts of this Administration, the recommendations reflect the Commission's shared recognition that for too many Americans, the collective impact and compounding harm of inequitable past practices endure today.

Moreover, it is critical that the Department build the infrastructure for an equitable future, across leadership and administrations.

This Commission committed to and now proudly recommends sweeping and generational change. The recommended changes seek to interrupt the perpetuation of any and all USDA discriminatory and unfair systems, operations, policies and actions. Equity is not about one versus another; it is about ensuring ALL receive equitable treatment. The operational changes thoughtfully recommended by the Commission reflect our shared vision of "the People's Department" – a just and equitable USDA at every level, across every agency now and for the future. The Commission hopes that Congress and the Department embrace the recommendations as a roadmap to that future.

II. Support of the Federal Government's Focus on Equity

In January 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 13985 On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government and committed to creating an Equity Commission as part of his rural agenda and commitment to closing the racial wealth gap by addressing longstanding inequities in agriculture.

In March 2021, Section 1006 of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) (as amended by Section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022) directed USDA to establish the Equity Commission and provided funds sufficient to ensure the Commission is well staffed and positioned to deliver on its charge. A report on the implementation of the ARP provides details on how each Federal Agency, including USDA, has taken steps to ensure that equity was part of the fabric of the program. Additionally, each Federal Agency was required to submit an Equity Action Plan to the White House.

To inform USDA's Equity Action Plan, the Department issued a request for information (RFI) on June 16, 2021, which sought information from the public to help identify opportunities in current USDA policies, regulations, and guidance that would be useful in addressing systemic inequities. USDA received more than 400 public comments from individuals, advocacy organizations, Tribal entities, state, and local governments, and more. These submissions informed USDA's Equity Action Plan, published February 10, 2022, which states a clear and strong commitment to equity in the programs and operations of the Department, and provides a roadmap, in broad terms, for the equity work of the Department and each of its Agencies for the future.

The Commission supports and applauds ongoing USDA Equity initiatives including, but not limited to:

- USDA Equity Action Plans
- Mission Area and Program Initiatives
- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Strategic Plans
- Creation of a USDA DEIA Office and hiring of a Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer
- ARP and IRA Funding and Implementation

III. Historical Context

The Commission applauds the recent Administration's actions on equity to address historical and systemic discrimination. It is clear that Secretary Vilsack is striving to make USDA a leader in this challenging work. The Commission considers its primary equity charge to be forward looking: What data is useful to detect and document disparities in USDA programs and personnel so that it can move forward in a more equitable way? What barriers can we identify and eliminate to improve access and availability of USDA programs and services for all eligible Americans moving forward?

Across America and many parts of the world, dedicated individual employees of USDA do important work to accomplish the Department's many missions. A report on these various programs and activities and their successes would fill many volumes. USDA feeds millions of food insecure Americans every day, ensures a safe and wholesome food supply, provides clean water to thousands of rural communities, conducts vital research, provides critical solutions for plant and animal diseases, provides quantifiable soil and water conservation and forest management for a better environment, promotes markets for U.S. agricultural products, and provides stability and an economic safety net for America's farmers and ranchers.

USDA serves the American public every day in hundreds of ways. Therefore, it is vital that its programs are delivered equitably, efficiently, and fairly. Studies, listening sessions, and personal testimony informed the Commission, confirming that discrimination and unfair treatment has existed in numerous USDA programs—loans, grants, and services—as well as internally within hiring and promotion practices. Unfortunately, many inequities continue still today.

Historic injustices have created barriers to access to USDA programs which have caused present day challenges regarding wealth disparity, heirs' property issues, lack of awareness and use of innovative technology, and relatively smaller farm sizes. Unfortunately, some individuals who have interacted with USDA have come away with the belief that discrimination, bias, or unfairness played a role in limiting their access to services and benefits. Such issues have been the subject of USDA Commission reports and class action lawsuits.

The United States has long recognized Tribes as sovereigns, negotiating numerous treaties and agreements in exchange for land and peace. Nearly 200 treaties have agriculture related provisions and include such things requiring the U.S. government to provide agricultural products and other assistance on farming. Throughout history, however, Federal laws and policies did not consistently foster a nation-to-nation relationship with Tribes. Tribal land loss is a staggering historical reality; it encompasses the reduction of lands originally possessed by American Indians and Alaska Natives from millions of square miles to roughly 56 million acres—or about 220,000 square kilometers—managed in trust by the United States for various tribes and individuals by the dawn of the 21st century.[1] This dramatic contraction signifies a loss exceeding 98 percent of their ancestral territories. Moreover, contemporary conditions reveal that a significant portion of Tribal agricultural land, totaling 26.44 percent, is currently leased to non-native producers.[2]

Up until 1990, USDA informed Tribal communities that they should pursue Department of the Interior programs for conservation resources. In 1990, there was a Congressional directive for USDA to provide these funds and services across Indian Country. Historically, USDA policies and eligibility requirements often supported western models of agriculture and did not reflect Indigenous Knowledge or practices. For example, most Tribal lands are held by the federal government in trust for the benefit of a Tribe or Tribal members. USDA historically categorized these lands as "federal lands" and, therefore, were deemed ineligible for certain agriculture resources and grazing permits. Additionally, although Tribal and Native people were America's first producers, their traditional practices and agricultural education was typically excluded from the national network of agricultural extension, as their academic institutions were not viewed as being included as land-grants until 1994.

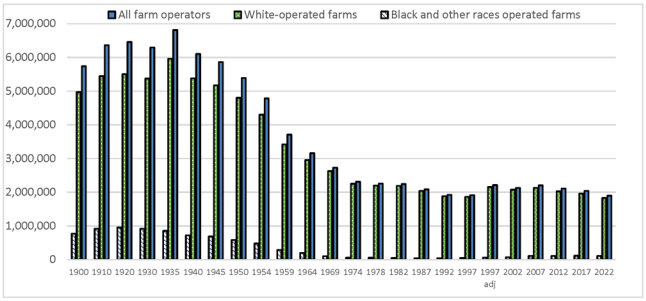
Since the founding of USDA, historical exclusionary practices and policies have disproportionately impacted minority groups. As a result, generations of these groups have been placed at a disadvantage. Several months after President Abraham Lincoln signed the legislation that created the USDA, he would issue the Emancipation Proclamation. And from the onset, USDA neglected to support aspiring African American farmers and rarely addressed the additional challenges they faced. From enslaved labor toiling on plantations to Black farmers who pushed for the unfulfilled promise of "40 acres and a mule," African Americans have faced additional hurdles to participate in agriculture.

[1] U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. "Land Area of American Indian Reservations." BIA Annual Report, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021.
[2] Village Earth. "Lost Agriculture Revenue Database: Quantifying Disparities in Agricultural Revenue on Native Lands." Native Land Information System, July 16, 2022, https://nativeland.info/explore-topics/lost-agriculture-revenue-database/

Beyond the creation of the USDA, President Lincoln deepened the nation's commitment to agriculture by signing the Morrill Act in 1862 which would create the land grant college system focused on teaching agriculture through a three-pronged approach: teaching, research, and extension. And while the USDA supported research and teaching of agriculture at historically white land grant universities, they provided very little support to African American universities. It was not until 1890 that the Second Morrill Act selected and funded historically black colleges and universities to become land-grant institutions. Racially excluded from many farmer organizations, Black farmers created their own organizations during the late 19th century including Colored Farmers' National Alliance and New Farmers of America (NFA) to keep young African American students invested and learn about agriculture.

While the size of Black farmland grew from the 1860s-1920s, during the remainder of the 20th century there was a rapid decline in both the number of Black farmers and their land. Public data provides irrefutable evidence that between 1910 and 1997 Black farmers lost nearly 90 percent of their valuable farmland (See Figure 1).[3] The declining number of Black farmers and the loss of farmland is often erroneously framed as solely a result of the great migration and a declining interest within the Black community to farm. While Black farmers have lost their farms at a disproportionately higher rate than white farmers, it is also clear that farms across the nation have declined rapidly since the turn of the century. This decline is in no small part due to policies that have made it increasingly difficult for all small and mid-sized producers to compete.

Figure 1. Farms by Race of Principal Operator, 1900 to 2022[4]



[3] The issue of black land loss is pervasive, encompassing a broad range of factors and consequences throughout the United States (see generally Francis et al.). Francis, Dania V., et al. "Black Land Loss: 1920–1997." AEA Papers and Proceedings, vol. 112, 2022, pp. 38-42. DOI:10.1257/pandp.20221015.

[4] United States Department of Agriculture. 1840-2021. "USDA Census of Agriculture Historical Archive." USDA Census of Agriculture Historical Archive. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture. https:// agcensus.library.cornell.edu/.

Policies such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 led to the displacement of many Black tenant farmers and sharecroppers. AAA also gave local committees (also known as county committees) the power to implement policies, and these local committees, by and large, were composed of white farmers who had little to no interest in supporting Black farmers. Equitable representation of minorities on these influential committees that control access/eligibility to a number of USDA programs is a struggle that continues in 2024. AAA policies also favored large scale commercial farmers over smaller more diverse agricultural operations. Programs initiated by the AAA often failed to address the needs of Black farmers and exacerbated the disparities within the agricultural sector. Black farmers who participated in the civil rights movement often faced violence and intimidation tactics which also played out within county committees who withheld resources from Black farmers who called for social justice, civil rights, and political change. And many Black farmers documented their experience with discriminatory county committee practices by writing to USDA officials who too often ignored their requests and continued with the status quo.

Additionally, well-documented data confirms the long-lasting impact of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,[5] Alien Land Laws and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II which resulted in a loss of Asian agriculture ownership from the late 19th to mid-20th century. While difficult to quantify, the data also substantiates that inequitable practices have harmed the success and contributed to the loss of farms for Hispanic and Indigenous farmers. Anecdotal and recorded evidence substantiates the fact that limited access to credit and unreasonable bureaucratic requirements are persistent barriers to economic development and success for Native American and Native Hawaiian producers. Recorded data also verifies that the lack of access to language services, outreach, and nutrition programs negatively impact Asian American and Hispanic farmers and other immigrant farmworkers and their families.

When nearly all other American workers won the right to organize into unions, and to be paid a minimum wage and overtime under the New Deal in the 1930s, farmworkers were—and remain—excluded. Economic benefits accrue to landowners as a result of exclusionary policies on health and workplace safety available to all other workers in the U.S. Undeniably there is a strong element of racial discrimination involved. While Hispanic farmworkers have dominated in the West and are now nationally disbursed, African American farmworkers were largely concentrated in the South.

[5] United States. Congress. "An Act to Execute Certain Treaty Stipulations Relating to the Chinese." Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1996, 6 May 1882, General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11, National Archives. National Archives, www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act.

During the 1950s- '60s civil rights movement, Filipino workers joined the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee founded by Phillip Vera Cruz, Larry Itliong, and other leaders. In 1965, they began the historic Delano grape strike and asked the Latino National Farm Workers Association, led by Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Gilbert Padilla, to join them. The two unions merged in 1966 to form the United Farm Workers. The five-year grape strike and a three-year international boycott of California table grapes—backed by millions of consumers—convinced grape growers to sign their first union contracts in 1970, creating the first enduring farm worker union in U.S. history. Solidarity between the races was a key factor with little support from USDA on behalf of workers.

This long history of systemic discrimination has left an indelible mark on many communities across the country. The "Get Big or Get Out" USDA mantra has pushed many programs and policies that have further strained marginalized communities and influenced our existing agricultural structure. In fact, since January 1981, 536,000 farms and 165 million acres of farmland have been lost.[6] This trend cannot continue. To shape a better tomorrow, we must recognize the past and acknowledge the numerous practices and policies that have, intentionally or inadvertently, left many farmers, producers, and their communities at a disadvantage in the current American landscape.

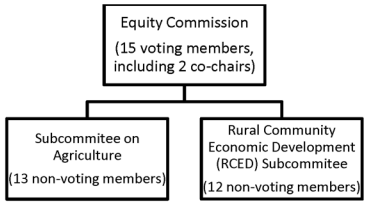
[6] United States Department of Agriculture. *2022 Census of Agriculture: United States Summary and State Data, Volume 1, Chapter 1.* National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022. U.S. Department of Agriculture, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/usv1.pdf Accessed 19, February 2024.

IV. About the Commission and its Subcommittees

The purpose of the Equity Commission is to advise the Secretary of Agriculture by (1) providing USDA with an analysis of how its programs, policies, systems, structures, and practices contribute to systemic discrimination, construct barriers to inclusion or access, and exacerbate or perpetuate racial, economic, health and social disparities, and (2) recommending corrective actions. The Equity Commission is subject to the requirements of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) and its membership and charge are established under a charter, as required by FACA.

The Equity Commission includes a Subcommittee on Agriculture, and a Rural Community Economic Development (RCED) Subcommittee (See Figure 2 below). The recommendations of the Agriculture Subcommittee in this report address issues and concerns specifically related to agriculture and conservation. The recommendations of the RCED Subcommittee address issues and concerns related to rural housing, rural utilities, and rural business and community development, persistent poverty, and underserved communities.

Figure 2. Structure of the Commission and its Subcommittees



In September 2021, the Federal Register Notice called for nominations for the Equity Commission and its Subcommittee on Agriculture. Members were appointed by the Secretary in accordance with the membership balance plan in February 2022. Nominations for the RCED Subcommittee were solicited in the Federal Register in April 2022, with members named in August 2022.

Under its charter, the duties of the Commission are solely advisory. Commission recommendations will aid USDA in achieving its goals by helping the Department improve access to programs and services for all Americans and serve all its diverse stakeholders with greater fairness and equity.

V. Goals of the Commission and its Subcommittees

Based on stakeholder engagement and former recommendations, the following goals for the Equity Commission and its Subcommittees were established by USDA.

Equity Commission Goals:

- Identify and recommend actions to remove barriers to equitable access and use of USDA programs, policies, systems, structures, and practices, including impediments that are internal, external, discretionary, or statutory.
- Recommend actions and solutions that address racial equity issues, expand assistance, and provide support for historically underserved customers and communities needed for equitable access to USDA programs and services.
- Recommend actions and solutions that address broader and more systemic equity issues at USDA.
- Recommend actions that will ensure USDA is a modern, competitive workplace with an organizational culture that prioritizes diversity, equity, inclusion, and access for its staff and customers alike.

Subcommittee on Agriculture Goals:

- Improve technical assistance necessary for navigating USDA programs and services.
- Improve access to capital.
- Improve access to programs and services related to agriculture and land use.
- Implement programs and services to mitigate effects of climate change, including improvements in risk management, conservation, and forestry programs.
- Address access to land, including financing programs and addressing unique issues related to heirs' property, fractionated land, and other land access/retention issues.
- Increase market access to facilitate expanded access for value added opportunities (e.g., processing, trade, and marketing).
- Enhance customer service via improved USDA staffing, training, and transformation of the organizational culture within USDA.
- Review supporting functions such as county committees, conservation districts, and advisory boards.
- Improve use of data and technology both to ensure access and to increase accountability.
- Improve USDA performance measurement and program evaluation so that implemented recommendations can be monitored, tracked, and reported with real outcomes.
- Make recommendations for ways to hold USDA accountable by requesting an implementation strategy and an action plan on recommendations.

Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee Goals:

- Improve technical assistance, capacity building, and place-based economic development strategies necessary for navigating and accessing USDA programs and services.
- Improve access to capital for business growth and development in rural and Tribal communities.
- Improve USDA's program delivery strategy to ensure investments are equitable now and into the future, including data-driven outreach and program design.
- Reduce climate pollution, implement environmental justice standards, and ensure better management of natural resources.
- Minimize disproportionate effects of climate change by increasing infrastructure resilience and economic support to rural and Tribal communities.
- Improve access to high-speed internet for all rural and Tribal residents.
- Ensure equitable access to safe, affordable housing.
- Ensure equitable access to safe, affordable, and resilient water and wastewater infrastructure.
- Improve equitable and sustainable access to natural resources, including recreational facilities.
- Enhance customer service via improved USDA staffing, training, IT modernization, and transformation of the organizational culture within USDA.
- Improve use of data and technology both to ensure access to programs and services and to increase accountability.
- Improve USDA performance measures and program evaluation so that the implementation of recommendations can be monitored, tracked, and reported with real outcomes.
- Make USDA accountable by requesting an implementation strategy and an action plan on recommendations.

VI. Commission Workplan

The Equity Commission and Agriculture Subcommittee members were appointed and the first public meeting was held in February 2022. In accordance with FACA guidelines, the public was given the opportunity to provide comments for consideration to committee members in written and oral form. All public meetings were streamed virtually to allow maximum participation.

During the first public meeting the members were given their goals as stated above and subsequently grouped into three focus areas: Access, Service, and Performance. Following that meeting, members expressed the need to know where USDA implementation or consideration stood on the many equity-related recommendations that other committees and reports made over the years. In response, the Department started a Compilation of Historical Recommendations initiative based on relevant reports identified by the Commission. Further discussion of the initiative is included in Part VII of this report.

During the second public meeting held in May 2022, members received historical perspectives from USDA leadership and updates about current equity work being done at the Department. Members brainstormed a list of potential recommendations to explore further and collaborated on next steps for developing the Interim Report. Following the meeting, Farmworker, Nutrition, and Department-wide focus areas were added and subsequent workgroups were formed to align to the themes. Additionally, an Interim Report writing team was formed leveraging the varied expertise and stakeholder representation from the members.

During the third public meeting held in September 2022, members presented draft recommendations from the workgroups to ensure collective clarity and understanding of each recommendation. The Equity Commission members deliberated and voted on each recommendation to be included in the Interim Report. Other recommendations were deferred for further review and possible action during future meetings.

During the fourth public meeting held in February 2023, members revisited the interim recommendations as some changes were made since the previous public meeting vote. Members presented, deliberated, and voted to include the 32 recommendations within the Interim Report. One recommendation was tabled for further research and deliberation.

During the fifth public meeting held in June 2023, members heard from USDA leadership on the implementation status of Interim Report recommendations. The RCED subcommittee members presented recommendations related to rural development, persistent poverty, and underserved communities. The Commission deliberated and voted to include an additional 22 recommendations from the RCED in the final report. They tabled an additional three for further refinement and consideration.

During the sixth public meeting held in October 2023, members heard from USDA leadership on the implementation status of interim recommendations. Members presented on new recommendations and refinements to previously passed recommendations. The Commission deliberated and voted on 66 recommendations to include in the Final Report.

VII. Promoting Accountability and Transparency: Compilation of Historical Recommendations

The recommendations of the Commission are forward looking. However, at the beginning of the Commission's formation, members recognized the benefits of knowing the status of the various recommendations that have been made in the past on—or closely related to—equity issues at USDA. Reports dating back to 1965, beginning with the Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs Report, demonstrate concerns with inequality at USDA. In response, USDA staff supporting the Commission conducted a department-wide review process documented as a "compilation of historical recommendations" (CHR).

The Commission received a preliminary briefing on the summary of findings of the CHR at its third public meeting in September 2022. As part of this effort, 748 historical recommendations from 11 reports were compiled by the staff into a single inventory and assigned to the relevant mission areas and agencies for review and comments related to implementation status.

Recurring issues identified for the Commission included lack of workforce diversity, cumbersome program processes, lack of technical assistance, county committee adverse impacts, and civil rights accountability and program complaints. Common challenges or obstacles to implementing past recommendations included lack of clear USDA ownership and authority to act, budgetary resources needed for implementation, and the need for metrics to measure and track progress. The briefing also noted the lack of standardized practices that would enable USDA to systematically incorporate stakeholder input, historical reports, and the outcomes of program evaluations into strategic planning, policy design, and regulatory development in a cohesive way.

While not final, the Commission is grateful for the significant work produced by USDA, and for the cooperation demonstrated by the various offices and agencies that participated in the review. This effort will be an important legacy of the Commission.

VIII. Advancing Department-wide Equity

The structure of the Department and how it serves the Nation has changed significantly over time; however, some structures, policies and cultural norms have persisted that no longer serve the American people and in fact have perpetuated inequity or widened the gaps that existed among Americans over time. USDA is currently made up of 29 agencies spread across the United States and overseas, serving more than 4,500 locations. The Equity Commission recognizes and applauds USDA for restoring a standalone Office of Tribal Relations and appointing a Senior Advisor for Racial Equity in the Office of the Secretary. The following recommendations outline proposals for department-wide change that affects the Department's structure, leadership responsibilities, and overarching accountability and data collection.

Recommendation 1: Institutionalize Equity

Lasting and long-term organizational change requires consistent leadership attention, adequate resources, and accountability. The Equity Commission understands that USDA has experienced uneven levels of commitment and success related to equity over the years, especially across changes in administration. We are making this recommendation to establish leadership responsibility and organizational accountability within the Office of the Deputy Secretary to ensure that equity efforts are institutionalized throughout the Department.

1. **Institutionalize equity within the Department to drive compliance, accountability, and culture change across all of USDA.**
   a) Utilize existing leadership structures with line authority to provide consistent leadership attention for institutional change and organizational accountability.
   b) Task the Deputy Secretary, through a Departmental regulation, to review Agency equity plans and ensure, through the annual budget process, that those plans are faithfully carried out and senior executives are accountable for making measurable improvements in equity in programs and services.
   c) The Deputy Secretary should use any staff and resources under its control beyond the Mission Areas, including operational, budgetary, administrative, financial, and economic analysis functions to carry out these responsibilities.
   d) Support workforce diversity and cultural competency by enhancing and improving job descriptions and hiring requirements. This should include utilizing specialized experience and selective placement in recruitment actions to prioritize demonstrated experience with target populations, where applicable.
   e) Conduct an Annual Convening on Equity to have data available to inform the ongoing work of the Equity Commission.

Recommendation 2: Legislation to Ensure Accountability for Equity

There have been many studies, reports, and recommendations over time across several groups outlining the need for change within USDA; however, the Equity Commission recognizes the need for a sustainable and consistent framework within USDA that is transparent to the public, USDA staff, USDA customers, and partners.

For all equity efforts outlined in this report and those currently taking place across USDA to be successful, there is a need to enact legislation and policy to ensure that continued work towards equity in programs and services is a priority of USDA leadership over time. More importantly, USDA should be measured and held accountable for its progress against impacting populations most affected by unfair or inequitable programs, services, or practices.

2. **Support legislation to provide standing authority and accountability for the Secretary and senior leadership to carry out a continuous program to improve the equitable availability and distribution of services and program benefits to all eligible American residents.**

   Key elements of the legislation would include the following:

   a. The Secretary shall be responsible for directing and carrying out a continuous program to ensure all applicants and participants have equitable access to services and program benefits at USDA.
   b. The Secretary shall collect data, information, and conduct studies and analysis to understand and document the extent to which underserved communities are not participating equitably in the programs and benefits provided or administered by the Department, including those administered through state or local agencies, County Commissions, or nonprofit organizations. This shall include research and information sharing on the best ways to collect demographic information that do not rely on third-party visual observations, including both best practices for encouraging voluntary provision of demographic information and statistical methods to incorporate missing data.
   c. Use data to evaluate programs and policies to identify and understand communities in need, where the funding is distributed, and who benefits. Participants benefitting from funding distributions should align with communities in need so that the investing efforts effectively reduce disparities.
   d. The Secretary shall provide a publicly available annual report to Congress and the American public that provides details on the data collection and studies conducted, and the results thereof. The report shall also include discussion of efforts to implement necessary improvements to equity so identified, including metrics and timelines.
   e. Performance evaluations of Agency heads and senior executives shall reflect an individual's appropriate and direct efforts to improve equity in the programs and services within their span of control or authority.
   f. If the Secretary identifies an opportunity to improve equity in a particular program or service but lacks authority to make the necessary changes, Congress shall be notified and provided a recommendation for a legislative change. If the Secretary identifies the need for additional resources to improve equity, Congress shall be notified and provided an explanation of the needed resources.
   g. Revise definitions as needed: Such as "Equity," "Equitable," and "Underserved Communities" as defined from the Executive Order.
   h. Funds and staff required to implement these provisions shall be from within existing budgets and appropriations.

Recommendation 3: Elevate the Office of Tribal Relations

The Equity Commission agrees with a repeated recommendation from the 2021 RFI (Request for Information) Listening Sessions about the need for USDA to respect Tribal nations' sovereignty. By elevating the Office of Tribal Relations to the Assistant Secretary level and providing dedicated resources, USDA can strengthen the Nation-to-Nation relationship with Indian Tribes and help improve support for Tribal ownership, protection, and conservation of land. In addition, the Tribal Liaison positions throughout USDA should have direct access to senior decision-makers in their agencies and mission areas or offices and, moreover, be a combination of both career and appointed positions to ensure appropriate oversight and continuity over time.[7]

3. **Elevate the Office of Tribal Relations from its current office to become The Office of the Assistant Secretary of Tribal Affairs.**
   a. Establish the Assistant and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Tribal Affairs positions.
   b. Align or create Tribal Liaison positions within each Agency, Mission Area, and Offices that have access to the highest ranking official within those areas; some of these positions already exist, some may need to be created, some should be elevated within their area to serve as the highest ranking official or career leader (example: Senior Executive Service [SES], Assistant Secretary, Administrator or Chief). These positions should also have the authority to coordinate and work with the Office of Tribal Relations or newly elevated Office of the Assistant Secretary of Tribal Affairs.
   c. Dedicate a Tribal Affairs attorney (GS-15 or SES) within the Office of General Counsel (OGC) to act as a support for the office and Agency-level Tribal Relations staff.

Recommendation 4: Language Access

The Equity Commission recognizes language as a barrier for linguistically and culturally diverse communities trying to access USDA programs and services. It also recognizes language access as a key element of the U.S. Department of Justice Policy Guidance "Enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 - National Origin Discrimination Against Persons with Limited English Proficiency" (LEP Guidance). The Commission appreciates USDA's release of an updated Language Access Plan on November 15, 2023. By adhering to these policies and improving language accessibility, USDA can become a more equitable, inclusive, and culturally competent Department.

4. **Ensure equitable language and culturally competent access to USDA services.**
   a. Designate an executive level career staff member to be responsible for Language Access guidance, compliance, and oversight.

[7] Native Farm Bill Coalition. "Legislative Proposal for Exempting the USDA Assistant Secretary of Tribal Affairs from Senate Confirmation." *Native Farm Bill Coalition's Recommendations for the Upcoming Farm Bill*. Native Farm Bill Coalition, 2023. The Native Farm Bill Coalition intends to propose legislative amendments in the upcoming Farm Bill, advocating that the position of Assistant Secretary of Tribal Affairs within the USDA should not require Senate confirmation. This move aligns with changes to other federal positions, simplifying the appointment process and potentially allowing for a more efficient response to the needs of Tribal nations. The Coalition's goal is to streamline the integration of Tribal insights into agricultural policy-making and reinforce the government-to-government relationship between the United States and Tribal nations. Currently, the following Presidential Nominations that no longer require Senate Confirmation within USDA are Assistant Secretary for Administration, Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service Administrator, Department of Agriculture and The Directors (7) of the Commodity Credit Corporation.

b. Cultivate a sustainable department-wide culture of equity and inclusion by investing in long term financial partnerships with women and Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) servicing educational institutions and Tribal, territorial and community service organizations to build Language Access capacity for current and next generation of agricultural partners, farmworkers, agricultural workers, stakeholders, and department workforce.
c. Increase funding for technical assistance to be linguistically and culturally appropriate and invest in local community serving organizations and communities through cooperative agreements with tribes, acequias, and organizations.

Recommendation 5: Customer Experience

The Equity Commission has identified the need for USDA to improve its customers' experience and establish consistent and high-quality service across all agencies. By institutionalizing a routine, robust, and coordinated customer feedback loop into USDA's programs and services, USDA can improve its efforts to provide more equitable and consistent services to all individuals that seek service from and engage with USDA.

5. **Improve Customer Experience through institutionalizing customer feedback, service delivery, and program design.**
   a. Establish an enterprise-wide feedback loop for all USDA agencies and offices to hear from stakeholders through multiple mechanisms such as evaluations, surveys, dial-in calls, QR Codes, newspaper advertising, radio, etc.
   b. Ensure feedback opportunities and responses are provided in multiple languages.
   c. Provide specific feedback opportunities for individuals with lived experience and compensate them for their time and expertise.
   d. Train USDA staff to be culturally sensitive, understand their constituents and include community-based organizations in USDA language contracts to interpret and translate with more accuracy and cultural competence.
   e. Increase staff knowledge of farmer and rancher customer profiles to adequately match relevant services and programs with USDA's customers.

Recommendation 6: Annual Compliance Reviews

The Equity Commission supports the USDA's adherence and execution of Section 14006 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) that mandates USDA prepare an annual report on each of its agencies' civil rights complaints, resolutions, and actions. By designating a responsible party for administering reports, providing the related data to inform compliance and customer service, and authorizing funding to conduct audits, USDA can increase trust, transparency, and accountability to its stakeholders.

6. **Fund, establish, and maintain accountability for the execution or conduct of annual civil rights compliance reviews across all USDA agencies.**
   a. Complete and execute annual civil rights compliance reviews across all USDA agencies as mandated by the 2008 Farm Bill (section 14006), starting FY 2023.
   b. Ensure reports and related data are accessible to the public and shared with Congress.

c. Designate a responsible party for administering reports by the end of each fiscal year.
d. Annually collect and publicly report program application and participation data for socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers.

Recommendation 7: Equity Audits

The Equity Commission reviewed reports and stakeholder input that detailed problems with the program complaint system such as the timeliness, complexity, and lack of transparency of the results of audits and reports. The Commission agrees with the 2021 Office of the Inspector General (OIG) determination that USDA needs to develop a stronger internal control environment over its civil rights program complaints processing to ensure that complaints and findings are timely, appropriately handled, and made publicly available. By complying with the existing statutory audit requirements, USDA can leverage targeted research and analysis of existing publicly available data to identify and address patterns of complaints, discrimination, and systemic issues.

7. **Under existing authorities, conduct periodic system-wide audits to look at equity across USDA's services. Publish results on the USDA website and release underlying data to independent researchers. Analyze program complaints and make use of findings.**
   a. Hire a third party to conduct an analysis of all program complaints received over the past five years and identify patterns for complaints, looking for programs, specific offices, and types of discrimination that have been alleged. These patterns should be used as a basis for identifying immediate fixes that can be made (e.g., making buildings and websites accessible, translating materials into additional required languages), prioritizing audits and statistical analysis of disparities in services received.
   b. Conduct periodic audits across USDA system-wide to look at service of underserved customers. Publish results on USDA website. Release underlying data (with personally identifiable information removed) for independent researchers to replicate and build on official audits.

Recommendation 8: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights

The Office of the Assistance Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) has received much attention through testimony and reports from organizations such as the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, USDA's Office of Inspector General, and the Government Accountability Office. The Equity Commission notes that oftentimes relief is found through class-action lawsuits versus working through the OASCR process due to backlog, capacity issues, and lack of expediency. Concerns persist around addressing backlogged complaints, processing times of incoming complaints, and capacity and staffing within OASCR. Ensuring program participants can effectively navigate the complaint process and receive timely resolutions will be instrumental in USDA's ability to achieve its equity goals.

Customers of USDA must have immediate access to a fair and workable solution for addressing perceived discrimination and filing civil rights issues within USDA. We applaud the recent advancements and innovations advancing customer service within the OASCR such as successfully eliminating the backlog of program complaints and establishing a new processing timeframe to ensure complaints are addressed in a timely manner. In order to continue building trust among customers across USDA, those advancements must be continued. We hope that continued efforts will seek to expand options for farmers/ranchers to seek clear and efficient resolutions to their grievances. [8]

8. **Transform and adequately fund the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR).**
   a. Allocate necessary funding to ensure OASCR capacity to deal with ALL civil rights violations in a timely manner.
   b. Provide adequate funding and resources to OASCR so they can process customer cases within 180 days.
   c. Explore alternative program complaints models, including changing rules and regulations (consider using parts of the National Appeals Division as a model).

Recommendation 9: Private-Public Partnerships

The Equity Commission supports increasing the role of the private sector in advancing farming and agriculture programs. By piloting "private-public" partnerships, with organizations that have strong DEIA plans on file, both USDA and the partners can benefit from mutual learning and expanded access to capital with the intention of building out programs that garner longevity and sustainability for communities served.

9. **Enhance private-public partnership authorities that empower program leaders across thousands of offices and in headquarters to pursue innovation independently and rapidly, but with a central mechanism to manage funding, monitor results, and disseminate and scale best practices to create a shared responsibility. Such an authority can be established as a new program through Congress and Secretarial authority, and/or by leveraging existing authorities.**

   The Secretary shall explore opportunities to:
   a. Pilot a "private-public" partnership whereby the private sector partner (with more than 1,000 full-time employees) matches at a minimum of $20,000 per award from USDA to a nonprofit or community-based organization that is serving members of a distressed community and has a diversity, equity, and inclusion plan on file with USDA's office of equity. Prior to the partnership, private sector partners will be evaluated for credibility by way of interviews and any other necessary avenues. Nonprofit or community-based organizations may also be evaluated on credibility and commitment to serving distressed communities.
   b. Pilot a "private-public" partnership whereby the private sector partner (with more than 1,000 full-time employees) matches each $20,000 award from USDA to a nonprofit, community-based organization or college/university that is helping

[8] Discussed at length during USDA Equity Commission public meetings was the proposal for an integrated dispute resolution process. This streamlined approach would combine NAD, OASCR, and mediation methods to enhance efficiency and fairness in handling civil rights claims, although a conclusive vote was deferred.

farmers and ranchers create farm management plans that generate more output while conserving water resources and rebuilding soil health.

c. Pilot a "private-public" partnership whereby the private sector partner provides financial assistance (e.g., renewable tuition-scholarship) to a scholarship fund to assist an admitted student attending a land grant university; federally designated Minority Serving Institution (MSI); or a Hispanic Serving Agriculture College and University (HSACU). USDA and said private sector partner will select the student recipients.
d. Pilot a "private-public" partnership whereby the private sector partner is strongly encouraged to leverage its social media platforms to highlight their support of USDA programs and opportunities that advance equity; create brand activations/cause-related campaigns (e.g., "Giving Tuesday") that increase public support and engagement for USDA programs and opportunities that advance equity; and promote existing and recognized efforts in the public sector, like Challenge.gov in order to stimulate innovative ideas and solutions.

Additional opportunities USDA should consider:

e. Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) – USDA, as a large Research & Development sponsor, posts hundreds of opportunities annually for small business participation. Thousands of companies across the U.S. have been created through SBIR, often in partnership with higher education. The Commission suggests a portion of SBIR funding be directed towards projects that impact the equity recommendations.

Recommendation 10: Procurement

The Equity Commission recognizes USDA's supplier and procurement contracting programs are vital for small agriculture businesses to build on generational wealth and experience that could sustain and expand their businesses. Systemic racism and historical discrimination have excluded Native, BIPOC, and women owned agricultural businesses from accessing and qualifying for USDA programs. By focusing on procurement and supplier diversity, USDA can rectify the generational exclusionary practices that have effectively precluded disadvantaged businesses. Procurement systems and culture need to change simultaneously to ensure there is greater opportunity for funding organizations who are not historically funded each year.

10. **Establish a dedicated team within the USDA Office of Procurement and Contracting focused on procurement and supplier diversity, specifically collaborating with the socially and economically disadvantaged agricultural businesses from underserved and underrepresented agricultural communities. To build the requisite capacity and experience for equitable access to the USDA's supplier and procurement programs:**
    a. Create set-aside programs for minority, Tribal, and women-owned small agricultural businesses.
    b. Create a special 8(a) category for minority, Tribal and women farm, agricultural and food businesses by lowering the threshold for entry to the program.

   i. Provide technical and financial assistance to support socially disadvantaged small agricultural and food businesses to meet necessary standards toward successful participation to the 8(a) program.
   ii. Increase 8(a) set aside programs for qualified small agricultural businesses; partner with the SBA to explore ways to ease the entry criteria into the program for minority, Tribal and women owned farm/agricultural businesses.
   iii. Partner with nonprofit, community service organizations to provide technical assistance to support socially disadvantaged small agricultural and food businesses to qualify for the 8(a) program.
   iv. Collaborate with external stakeholder organizations to formulate a resource guide and host workshops to help them document their individual social disadvantage narratives.
c. Establish limited competition programs within each of these categories.
d. Incentivize major contractors to form partnerships with underserved and disadvantaged small agricultural businesses as subcontractors.
e. Partner with the SBA to establish a database of minority, Tribal and women-owned small agricultural businesses who are eligible for subcontractor opportunities.
f. USDA should enter a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with professional community organizations such as the National Minority Supplier Development Council to build up the base of Minority Business Enterprises (MBEs) in agriculture for government procurement.
g. Create a federal advisory council specializing in small business and the agricultural industry.
h. Update the Agriculture Acquisition Regulation (AGAR) to disqualify vendors with serious labor violations.
   i. Coordinate with the SBA to maintain an updated list of firms known to have breached workplace health and safety regulations, committed unfair wage practices, provided inadequate housing, and engaged in other unethical behaviors like child labor. Until these issues are addressed, these firms should be ineligible for government contracts.
   ii. Engage with the Interagency Task Force to Combat Child Labor Exploitation regardless of the child's place of birth.
i. Release and update a roster of eligible prime and secondary contractors from the USDA, detailing past awards.
j. The USDA Office of Inspector General should implement a tracking system ensuring prime contractors collaborate with listed subcontractors post contract awards.
k. The USDA Office of Ombudsman should curate a resource guide focusing on the confidential reporting of potential government contract abuses. This guide should accompany all published procurement and contracting opportunities.
l. Initiate a 3-year pilot project within the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).
   i. This project should select five municipalities based on their consumer and agricultural business diversities. These municipalities should

commit that at least 25 percent of school meal and pantry program purchases come from local underserved agricultural businesses familiar with the cultural practices and dietary needs of their communities. By the project's conclusion, the aim is for 50 percent of contract funds to benefit underserved and socially disadvantaged agricultural businesses.

a. FNS should offer technical assistance, reimbursement flexibilities, and additional funding to address extra costs.
b. FNS should collaborate with local or regional stakeholders, including agricultural businesses and community organizations, to pinpoint and assist qualified vendors.

m. Annually release a report and maintain a publicly accessible live database that shows recipients of USDA funds. This database should be transparent, user-friendly, and should detail contract awards and financial distributions (subsidies, grants, etc.). Additionally, it should incorporate award information about both prime contractors and subcontractors.

Recommendation 11: Biennial Research Report

The Equity Commission believes that the creation of a biennial research process assessing the state of BIPOC producers would offer tremendous insights into the impacts various policies, fundings and programs have on the viability of BIPOC producers. The intensity of focus would be on greater inclusion within agriculture and significant resources targeting BIPOC communities. This study would be undertaken by key organizations providing financing and capacity-building support, sharing field-based observations and quantitative assessments that could correlate to the efficacy of policies focused on creating an enabling environment for farmers of color, and providing an assessment of the progress as it pertains to financial and ecological outcomes, resulting from capital and resource allocations across public and private sector players.

11. **Create and publish a biennial research report assessing the state of BIPOC producers focused on identifying insights into the impacts that USDA policies, funding and programs have on the viability of BIPOC producers.**

Recommendation 12: Strategic Outreach

The Equity Commission has appreciated the transparency and frequency of the updates that USDA has provided regarding its efforts to advance equity. To ensure information about the initiatives, programs, and services have the greatest level of impact, the American public must know about the advancements being made. Dedicated outreach grounded in transparency and inclusion helps the USDA equip diverse constituencies to advance the mission of equity. Communication is not an afterthought, but an integral strategy to gain backing, expertise, and accountability as recommendations shift from words into civil rights in action. Intentional and continual public engagement will accelerate an arc towards justice.

12. **Increase visibility of USDA's equity-focused initiatives, programs, and services, designed to impact stakeholders, through coordinated marketing and strategic outreach activities.**

IX. Working with Farmers and Ranchers Day-to-Day

The work of the Equity Commission is to address broad-reaching and systemic issues that prevent equitable access and use of USDA programs and services. The Equity Commission and Subcommittees focused several recommendations on supporting the farmers, ranchers, and producers that make up today's agricultural industry. The Commission and Subcommittee on Agriculture were informed by the current USDA structures, policies, laws, lived experiences, and public comments submitted to the Commission or shared during public meetings to form the body of recommendations. Furthermore, the Commission was given preparatory briefings on the current ongoing USDA activities that promote equity in agriculture which include relending programs and other support for underserved farmers. The Commission applauds these efforts and offers the following recommendations to further advance equity for farmers, ranchers, and producers.

Recommendation 13: Heirs' Property and Fractionated Land

The Equity Commission recognizes that heirs' property, as defined in the Uniform Partition Heirs Property Act, and fractionated land are barriers that prevent historically underserved[9] producers, farmers, ranchers, and other landowners from accessing USDA programs, such as loans offered by Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Rural Development (RD), and cost-share programs offered by Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Forest Service (FS). Currently, the only USDA option for heirs' property owners/producers to resolve their title issues to access USDA programs is the use of the loans through the FSA Heirs' Property Relending Program (HPRP). The HPRP provides loans through third-party intermediaries such as community development financial institutions (CDFIs) that in turn makes loans to individuals to cover estate and/or succession plans and the cost to acquire legal counsel to resolve their title issues. Historically underserved/limited resource heirs' property producers have difficulty receiving cost-share program funds from programs such as Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), because they must compete with more experienced producers who have higher rankings.

13. **Provide non-loan options for producers to prevent the creation of heirs' property and fractionated land that would reduce the barriers this type of land ownership encounters when accessing USDA programs.**
    a. Appropriate funds for grants and cooperative agreements for community-based nonprofit organizations to address and resolve heirs' property and fractionated land issues for underserved producers through the delivery of legal technical assistance, education, and drafting of estate plans.
    b. Provide multi-year grants and/or cooperative agreements to 501c3 organizations to deliver legal technical assistance and education that will prevent the creation of heirs' property and remedy title issues which caused heirs' property and

[9] The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) outlines four groups defined by USDA as "Historically Underserved," including farmers or ranchers who are: Beginning; Socially Disadvantaged; Veterans; and Limited Resource, socially disadvantaged, beginning, limited resource, and veteran farmers and ranchers. The Equity Commission acknowledges that the definitions as currently written in the Farm Bill and other USDA policy may add to existing barriers to access programs and funding and continues to assess this and other definitions related to requirements to access funds, programs, or services.

fractionated land. These 501c3 organizations must have at least five years of experience delivering legal services to indigent persons.

c. Require all state Natural Resources Conservationists establish separate allocated funding of 10-15 percent of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) cost-share funds for heirs' property owners and socially disadvantaged producers (i.e., historically underserved minority producers). Currently, the requirement is 5 percent, but these landowners must compete with the more experienced producers who will receive a higher-ranking score. Creating a designated funding pool allows for more equitable competition and increases chances that disadvantaged producers will receive funding. Currently, the state conservationists in Alabama and South Carolina have used their discretion to establish such a pool for these producers.

Recommendation 14: Land Access

The Equity Commission recognizes that USDA land-related programs have not been accessible to all, including farmers who are young, new and beginning; women; and BIPOC, and farmworkers. By funding community-led land access and transition projects, USDA will increase access to all farmers and ranchers, and increase engagement in programs and initiatives that can improve their land security, which is their greatest need to ensure a viable future for the agriculture industry.

14. Ensure equitable funding to community-led land access and transition projects.

a. Continue to direct funding to community-led land access projects designed to create land security for farmers. This USDA funding should be available to a wide variety of entities, such as tribes, municipalities, nonprofits, and cooperatives, with priority for projects led by and benefitting underserved farmers and ranchers. This funding should be available as a line of credit or grant prior to purchase, enabling eligible entities to act quickly in the real estate market.

b. Amend and fund the Land Access and Farmland Ownership Data Collection Land Tenure data collection as authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill to require the National Ag Statistics Service to include in the Tenure, Ownership and Transition of Agricultural Land (TOTAL Survey) survey questions relating to which land is held in absentee ownership; and in heirs property land held in undivided interests and no administrative authority; and the impact of these farmland ownership trends on the successful entry and viability of beginning farmers and ranchers and the impact of land tenure patterns, categorized by race, gender, and ethnicity; and state, county and region.

c. Amend and fund the Commission on Farm Transition established in the 2018 Farm Bill to study land access and transition to inform policy setting that facilitates equitable access to land.

d. Provide the Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) with the authority to immediately appoint a Designated Federal Officer from OTR to help facilitate the nomination process for seating the Tribal Advisory Committee authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill. This committee will provide advice to USDA on Tribal-related issues and policies throughout the Department.

e. Increase investments in the Heirs' Property Relending Program as the program grows and expand funding eligibility to include administration of program funds by relending entities.
f. Provide direct family loans to close heirs' property estates and be inclusive of legal costs.
g. Maintain and expand the level of funding and technical assistance related to the Highly Fractionated Indian Land Loan Program, created by the 2014 Farm Bill.
h. Engage with Indigenous[10] and community-based organizations and other interested entities in ensuring that heirship issues also address "fractionization" issues that Tribal communities face.
i. Ensure USDA land-related programs are accessible to all young, new and beginning, women, and BIPOC farmers specifically, and next generation farmers as a whole, by accommodating eligibility for collective, cooperative, and communal non-family entities, and tracking and publicly reporting demographics data on program participants.
j. Provide continued funding for cooperative agreements with community-based organizations, such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service Cooperative Agreements for Racial Justice and Equity.
k. Implement thorough racial equity informed evaluation and reporting requirements to not only measure who is benefitting, but also to measure program effectiveness in facilitating secure land tenure for young, new and beginning, women, and BIPOC farmers.

Recommendation 15: Conservation

The Equity Commission recognizes that USDA climate programs have historically targeted large-scale producers and have not supported traditional sustainable practices. By including equitable climate justice actions, USDA can ensure Indigenous practices are integrated into the Natural Resources Conservation Services' (NRCS) sustainable agriculture programs and support smaller, non-traditional farmers in accessing Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding and other environmental programs.

15. **Include equitable climate actions in USDA conservation programs to address environmental justice.**
    a. Increase incentive payments for implementation of climate-resilient practices to ensure limited-resource farmers can participate in cost-share programs. Automatically provide EQIP advance payments for historically underserved producers. The Commission recommends that NRCS reduce the required number of years a producer must be in production on a particular parcel of land to qualify for EQIP.
    b. Adjust EQIP and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) practice standards to better integrate, and to equitably compensate for, the use of Indigenous knowledge and land management practices. Federal conservation programs should streamline support for producers embodying these practices, not create a

[10] Please note that within the United States, the terms "Indigenous" and "Tribal" carry distinct definitions and implications. When the term "Indigenous community" appears in this report, it should be interpreted in the context of the specific Tribal community it denotes. Each Tribal community operates as a sovereign nation with its own unique governance structures. The intent of this report is to bolster these Tribal governments, which hold the authority to represent their citizens.

barrier to accessing NRCS. The Commission recommends that USDA take into consideration non-traditional methods of agriculture (i.e., subsistence farming, aquaculture/fishing) for disaster relief purposes and other assistance programs offered by the Agency.

c. Prioritize research that helps small-scale, diversified farmers implement climate-smart conservation practices and measure their climate mitigation impacts through methods with a proven track record of success, which should include traditional or historical agricultural practices.
d. Increase funding for technical assistance to be linguistically and culturally appropriate and invest in local experts and communities through cooperative agreements with tribes, acequias, and other experts.
e. Support climate justice solutions that target resources to women and BIPOC farmers and protect farmworkers from hazardous working conditions due to climate change.
f. Require an analysis of the voluntary producer demographic data on an annual basis to identify any trends in the utilization of conservation programs by young, new and beginning, women, and BIPOC producers.
g. Develop science-based climate-smart agriculture definitions that include Tribal Ecological Knowledge and further prioritize practices that afford the greatest climate benefit, such as incorporating cover crops, perennial crops, managed grazing of perennial pasture, and other investments in soil health.
h. Codify the new Micro Farm program through the Risk Management Agency to improve access to crop insurance for operations that are diversified, organic, and/or selling in local, regional, and specialty markets.
i. Expand direct marketing prices within the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) or allow all farmers to use their own yields and historic pricing data to more equitably serve farmers who sell direct-to-consumer or receive a premium on their crops.
j. Administer NAP as an on-ramp to more holistic risk management programs such as the Whole Farm Revenue Protection program and the Micro Farm program.
k. Increase the maximum allowable farm revenue for historically underserved applicants to the Micro Farm program.
l. Mandate NRCS provides the public with an impact report on how EQIP funding has been used, and the impact those dollars have had on the environment.

Recommendation 16: Technical Assistance and Outreach

The Equity Commission has heard from multiple stakeholders that navigating USDA programs and services can be an impediment and, in some instances, impossible for certain stakeholders. By allocating funding for third-party organizations to provide technical assistance, mediation services, and/or legal services, USDA can ultimately help applicants get the tools and resources they need to submit competitive applications for programs.

Furthermore, the existing outreach and engagement structures in USDA across mission areas, offices, and programs need to have a centralized hub to better identify, reach, and align USDA programs and services with those stakeholders requiring technical assistance. In doing so, USDA will be better equipped to respond, cross-coordinate, and plan for ongoing stakeholder needs across mission areas, offices, and programs and provide stakeholders and customers a more seamless experience across USDA's technical assistance portfolio of support.

16. **Establish and/or ensure USDA's external engagement office has the necessary capacity, resources, and skillsets to operate in a robust and centralized manner that will enhance the Department's role and financial investment in organizations (nonprofit, non-governmental, community-based) to provide technical assistance.**
    a. Increase the Department's institutional bandwidth, both technically and financially, to increase support for young, new and beginning, small-scale, underserved, and specialty crop farmers.
    b. Invest in early mediation and technical services for farmers transitioning and accessing land, in particular Heirship and Trust or Restricted property.
    c. Develop and implement innovative, culturally responsive communication platforms and outreach strategies, including mobile technologies to engage young, new and beginning, small-scale, underserved, and specialty crop farmers on starting and maintaining a successful agricultural enterprise while facilitating strong, consistent connections with USDA personnel.
    d. Provide cooperative agreements to organizations offering effective agricultural business management tools, such as the Center for Farm Financial Management, to strategically engage in expanded, targeted outreach and offer technical assistance tools to young, new and beginning, small-scale, underserved, and specialty crop farmers.
    e. Develop a dashboard of nonprofit organizations and institutions of higher education that provide technical assistance to young, new and beginning, small-scale, underserved, and specialty crop farmers so USDA can provide information and updates to these entities as well as request for feedback on programs and potential opportunities to partner with USDA.
    f. Provide targeted technical assistance trainings and coaching to nonprofit organizations that serve underserved producer communities by focusing on understanding USDA grant programs, funding technical assistance efforts, and enhancing capacity to submit quality, competitive grant proposals.
    g. Provide technical assistance to USDA-funded, nonprofit organizations serving young, new and beginning, small-scale, underserved, and specialty crop farmers to increase their internal capacity for effective nonprofit organizational management.

Recommendation 17: Subsistence Farmers

The Equity Commission is concerned that the Census of Agriculture does not fully account for subsistence farmers who rely on trading and/or sharing resources. The current farmers/ranchers included in the census–whether rural or urban–count if $1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year. The Native farming community believes that the Census of Agriculture data on Native farmers is incomplete, making policymakers and USDA staff believe the community is smaller than it is and therefore ineligible to receive program benefits.

17. **Direct the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to include the varying types of farmers and ranchers in the next Census of Agriculture to account for the nature of many traditional forms of how agriculture products are produced, sold, or exchanged. In addition, NASS should evaluate the threshold used to quantify a qualifying farmer and provide education on alternative forms of documentation that can be used for eligibility. The Secretary should also direct NASS to research and consider changing the definition of a farm.[11]**

Recommendation 18: Farm Service Agency Loan Programs

Existing Farm Service Agency (FSA) loan programs and processes challenge the ability of underserved individuals to access credit. Because FSA is seen as an entry point for those seeking assistance from USDA, the Equity Commission believes that transforming FSA's culture to a customer service centered approach will lead to increased access to capital for programs and services in a more equitable way. Responding to the borrowing needs of underserved individuals with clarity of eligibility, simplicity of process, flexibility in administration—all delivered in a timely manner—will further equitable engagement more than any other effort.

18. **Transform FSA into a customer service organization that provides equitable treatment for all.**
    a. Examine FSA loan processes and use plain language and clearly describe eligibility criteria regarding loan programs and processes to improve equitable access to underserved populations of both new and experienced farmers and ranchers.
    b. Provide additional flexibility regarding the timing and processing of loans, including the ability to offer an initial statement of eligibility or accept preliminary paperwork before an application is submitted. Additional flexibility regarding loan terms and conditions should be available when structuring financial packages for underserved farmers and ranchers.
    c. Identify gaps between FSA loans and USDA grant programs intended for underserved populations to assure that Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and USDA initiatives can be effectively combined to meet the needs of underserved individuals.

[11] The Council for Native American Farming and Ranching made this recommendation to the Secretary in February of 2013. "Recommendations from the USDA Council for Native American Farmers and Ranchers." *U.S. Department of Agriculture*, updated June 2018, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cnafr-recommendations.pdf.

d. Define "distressed borrower" to include those that have not yet entered delinquency yet are under financial stress that may prevent them from continuing farm operations.
e. Develop cooperative agreements with community-based organizations who work as agents of and advocates for individual borrowers with their permission to allow examination of individual borrower applications and loan decisions.

Recommendation 19: Base Acres Modernization

Through the course of its work the Equity Commission was made aware of instances where the implementation of agricultural programs was not done in a fair and careful manner to avoid discriminatory outcomes. For example, the Commission devoted significant energy to understanding how payments for "crop acreage bases" (CABs) or base acres has locked in historical inequities and discrimination, in ways that cause significant lasting economic harm to underserved producers. It is important to modernize base acres policies in ways that address disparities.

Starting with the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 (New Deal), USDA has deployed various strategies to subsidize farmers producing covered commodities. From the 1930s to the early 1990s, these payments were closely tied to the farmer's production, a process which was largely monitored and regulated by the Farm Service Agency through county committees. In the 1996 Farm Bill (the Food, Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act), farm program payments were decoupled from actual plantings, instead based on the historical production. This system of paying farmers via crop acreage bases (CABs), which is the established acreage and yields of eligible commodities, has become an important part of an operation's cash flow, especially in times of low crop prices or challenging production environments. CABs are used to calculate annual subsidies paid to producers and landowners (with crop share leases).

The critical years for establishing these CAB components were 1981-1985, when farmers were allowed to report annual planted acreage and average yields, excluding the years with the highest and lowest yield. During this period, covered crops included wheat, corn, sorghum, barley, oats, upland cotton, and rice, and subsequent farm bills utilized these CABs as the foundation for making future payment modifications. The 2002 Farm Bill (Farm Security and Rural Investment Act) continued decoupled payments, but allowed soybeans, peanuts, and other oilseeds (sunflower, canola, rapeseed, mustard, flaxseed, Crambe, and sesame) to be added to uncommitted acreage. In nearly all cases, growers elected to add these oilseeds to eligible uncommitted acreage, a process which strengthened the safety net but did little to address disparities among producers. Subsequent opportunities to modify CABs provided some assistance, but still did not properly address large discrepancies, according to recent data.

USDA reports and congressional testimony have provided evidence of huge discrepancies in subsidies paid to underserved producers in comparison to their neighbors, with some reports showing them receiving only 20-25 percent of the per acre subsidies received by their neighbors. Admitted discrimination during the critical period (1981-1985) for establishing CABs likely played a role in certain farmers only being able to secure funding to produce lower yields of lower value crops. Farmers who were privy to loans were able to install irrigation, improve drainage, adopt technology, and make other infrastructure improvements that allowed them to increase yields, diversify crops, and expand acreage. Contrarily, many underserved farmers still operate acres that need improvements as they can only produce lower yields of lower value crops (e.g., winter wheat or oats and non-irrigated summer crops). The disparate annual subsidies, currently Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage (ARC/PLC) payments, distributed annually only exacerbate these longstanding problems.

19. **Modernize base acre policies to address the concern of producers' inability to receive necessary program payments that help stabilize on-farm revenue during economic downturns with commodity markets.**
    a. Review base acre farm program payment calculations and consider redistribution of base acreage to address disparities among farmers. Determine commodity specific base acres on lands historically not included in the initial base acre establishment.
    b. Allow cost-shared improvements such as land leveling, installing irrigation systems, and providing resources to improve overall acre production to inferior base acres based on their base calculation and acreage discrepancies in comparison to neighboring farms to significantly inferior base acres in a prioritized format.
    c. Allow re-establishment of crop acreage bases (CABs) after improvements are completed. As an alternative, allow significantly inferior base acres to qualify for an annual revenue adjustment based on county or regional discrepancies.

Recommendation 20: County Committees

The Equity Commission heard powerful testimony that County Committees in many states have not fairly represented their minority farmers and ranchers. In addition, the Commission heard that the powers afforded to County Committees have in some cases resulted in decisions that have crippled the economic livelihood of minority farmers and ranchers. While County Committees have less authority than in the past, as an extension of the FSA, County Committees continue to advise and make policy decisions regarding income safety-net loans and deficiency payments, conservation payments, emergency programs, and incentive, indemnity, and disaster payments for certain commodities. The County Committee's purpose, impact, and general efficacy has continued to be a point of research and reflection since its enactment via the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and throughout the series of congressional and legal adjustments made to their scope and operations via the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 and subsequent Farm Bills (2002 and 2008). Continued study and recommendations for reform have been documented in reports such as the 1996 D.J. Miller Report, the 1997 Civil Rights Action Team Report, and the 2011 Jackson Lewis Report.

Despite the many past recommendations and attempts to alleviate the documented inequities associated with the County Committee's election process and power, addressing County Committees continues to be a critical step in advancing equity in USDA's programs and services.

By elevating the voice of minority advisors, bolstering the training of new County Committee members, and improving the appeals process, the Equity Commission aims to strengthen the accountability and transparency of County Committees. More broadly, the role of County Committees in today's agricultural system should be reassessed and, if required, redesigned to ensure more equitable outcomes.

20. **Address historical and present-day inequitable services by making County Committees more equitable.**

Training:

a. Require diversity training related to African American, Asian, Hispanic, American Indian, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander issues where a high number of diverse communities exist.
b. Include the appeals process and role of the minority advisor in training for new committee members.
c. Train County Committees to exercise their voting powers and use the tools at their disposal to ensure members can vote without retribution or sense of retribution for voting actions.

Representation:

a. Give current minority advisors the same voting rights and terms as elected members; where a minority advisor does not currently exist, the Secretary should appoint a minority VOTING member.
b. Consider a minimum percentage of representation required that is reflective of population for County Committee member vote. For example, if 10 percent of the county population consists of minority farmers and ranchers, approximately at a minimum, 10 percent of the County Committee representation should consist of voting minority farmers and ranchers reflective of that population.
c. Ensure equitable opportunities for individuals interested in serving on County Committees are available by reducing the complexities of the nomination and election process and increasing awareness about opportunities to serve on County Committees through multiple mechanisms, including but not limited to online outlets. Use the NASS Census outreach process as a way to notify all farmers of County Committee election and voting process and eligibility.
d. Given the nature of Tribal Governments and their membership/citizenship, specific outreach should be created and implemented to provide awareness of the opportunity to serve through focused outreach.
e. The Secretary should explore the feasibility to change the eligibility of County Committee elections to expand efforts and allow nominations from the following categories:

i. Community-Based Organizations with relevant expertise
ii. 1890 and 1994 Land Grant Institutions
iii. Hispanic Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities

Accountability:

a. Establish a USDA County Committee Liaison responsible for identifying and instituting diverse representation on County Committees.
b. Increase transparency and accountability for County Committee staff by establishing performance metrics with controls and mechanisms to ensure they adhere to equitable standards and have access to USDA resources. The County Executive Director (CED) and County Committee staff should be subject to oversight and evaluation by FSA with civil rights, equity, and demographic indicators included as metrics.
c. Immediately implement a process to ensure that County Committee minority advisors have access to the FSA Administrator to bring in real time issues or concerns within the county and an annual report or accounting to the Administrator on how that committee is operating.
d. Provide more transparency on FSA elections by making reports and contact information available to the public in a timelier manner. Reports should include demographic information of the members.
e. Conduct a biannual assessment on performance measures that indicate equitable outcomes for County Committees. Should the above recommendations not yield the desired equitable outcomes, conduct an external analysis and study on the equity disparities of the County Committees and a potential reform of the County Committee system to a more equitable alternative for ALL farmers. The analysis should include the current role of the County Committee creating disparities for women and BIPOC farmers, both the historical role of the County Committee system and the current displacement of women and BIPOC farmers.
f. The Secretary shall establish at the federal level an advisory or support group composed of internal and external individuals to serve as advocates for producers to understand their complaint and appeals options. The group should establish standard operating procedures (SOPs) for County Committees including the preclusion of access to customer financial and sensitive information. The SOPs shall be made publicly available and updated annually. Performance metrics should be established and reviewed during the quarterly strategic reviews held by the Deputy Secretary.
    i. In order to enhance accountability, the County Executive Director should be hired by and report directly to the District Director.
    ii. The County Executive Director shall be prohibited from providing customer financial and sensitive information to the Committee members.
    iii. The role of the County Committee must focus on advisory activities particularly communicating local needs. The County Committee shall serve as the representative body for all farmers and ranchers.

Recommendation 21: Office of Small Farms

Through the course of its work, the Equity Commission came to identify the disparity of USDA program benefits, research, conservation, and other support provided to small farms as a significant equity concern. By program design and implementation, large operations receive the vast majority of USDA resources. In January 1998, the USDA A TIME TO ACT: A Report to the USDA National Commission (1998 Commission) on Small Farms made eight recommendations to protect small farms. Yet there is little evidence that the 1998 Commission's recommendations have been implemented.

Small acreage farms are defined as those with fewer than 180 acres. The office would be tasked with: (1) Assessing the needs of small operations, evaluating the Department's current ability to serve them, and recommending improvements to USDA program policies, design, and delivery. (2) Providing, or coordinating through cooperative agreements, direct technical assistance and/or grants of up to $25,000 to small farms for equipment, uninsured losses, business planning assistance, conservation practice adoption, down payments for land, and more.

This focus would be a win-win-win: it would help the Department better accomplish its mission of serving farmers of all types and scales, ensure that small-scale farmers can benefit from the full suite of USDA programs, and help secure a more resilient food system for all Americans.

21. **Create an Office of Small Farms focused on small farms with gross sales under $250,000. The office would be located within the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Mission Area to include liaisons from other relevant Mission Areas/Agencies. The Office of Small Farms should help ensure that small farms, ranches, and forest operations have full access to USDA programs.**

X. Supporting Farmworkers and Their Families

The Commission and Subcommittees recognize that among the most vulnerable populations within the agricultural sector are farmworkers and their families. Farmworkers are often not directly served, protected, nor eligible for programs, services or benefits provided to the larger agricultural community. This is due to factors including immigration and labor laws, inequitable structural incentives and barriers, and lack of focus on improving inclusion. New vulnerabilities of agricultural jobs due to the increasing impacts of climate change are also a significant challenge for farmworkers and their families. Farmworkers are disproportionately people of color. The Commission commends USDA for their recent initiatives that provide support and financial relief to farmworkers such as the Farm and Food Workers Relief Grant Program. The Commission and Subcommittees propose the following recommendations to enhance support to farmworkers and their families.

Recommendation 22: Staffing Farmworkers' Work

The Equity Commission recognizes that USDA has not treated farmworkers consistently as a specific constituency over time. By funding and elevating roles for professional staff dedicated to farmworkers, USDA can drive coordination, compliance, and culture change at a systems level to protect farmworkers from inequities. Although there is currently a position for a Farmworker Coordinator, it has not been adequately funded and sustained.

22. **Institutionalize equity compliance and culture change across all of USDA by appointing a senior official with dedicated staff (career or political) with decision-making authority and access to senior level officials and the resources needed to serve farmworkers, their families, and the organizations that serve them. The senior official would serve as the USDA representative to interagency workgroups regarding farmworkers and associated issues.**

Recommendation 23: Interagency Farmworker Service Council

The Equity Commission recognizes the value and need for farmworkers to be consistently recognized as a specific constituency within intergovernmental processes, programs, services, and policies. Establishing an Interagency Farmworker Service Council will help USDA drive accountability, coordination, compliance, and culture change at a systems level to protect farmworkers from continued inequities.

23. **Issue a recommendation from the Secretary that the White House pursue the establishment of an Interagency Farmworker Service Council for infrastructure coordination on intergovernmental work processes. The Council should be convened by USDA and include the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, the Department of Education, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, the Department of Treasury, and private sector partners.**

Recommendation 24: Farmworker Nutrition

The Equity Commission recognizes that many farmworkers and their families have incomes under or near the federal poverty line and experience food insecurity. By improving language access, developing targeted outreach, and making distribution programs and application sites more accessible, USDA can ensure farmworkers and their families are able to access nutrition programs available to them.

24. **Ensure farmworkers and their families have access to all USDA food and nutrition programs.**
    a. Improve language access.
    b. Mandate creation and distribution of targeted outreach materials with a required annual cadence for updating and distributing.
    c. Develop inclusive and accessible distribution programs and application sites.
    d. Ensure farmworkers and their families are encouraged to apply for and receive nutritional supports by not requiring a social security number.

Recommendation 25: Farmworkers' Access to USDA Programs

The Equity Commission recognizes that farmworkers have been underrepresented and underserved by USDA. By requesting, supporting, and analyzing data and reports, USDA can better understand the needs of farmworkers to improve working conditions and create potential pathways for them to transition from farmworkers to farmers.

25. **Direct the USDA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) to conduct a report or a joint report from USDA and Department of Labor (DOL) on farmworker living and working conditions that are essential to understanding the needs of farmworker populations. The report shall also look at farmworker access to USDA programs. OIG and DOL should consult with farmworker organizations and farmworkers themselves, and they must use innovative research methods to ensure anonymity, accurate data, and protection against retaliation.**
    a. The report should be funded, conducted, and published bi-annually to ensure compliance and systems level changes for farmworkers, their families, and organizations.

Recommendation 26: Funding for Farmworkers

The Equity Commission recognizes farmworkers face widespread violations of the few rights they possess, high injury and fatality rates, and poverty, including food insecurity. By prioritizing farmworkers in USDA's programs, policies, and resources, USDA would help not only farmworkers but also provide broader societal benefits, including improved food safety, healthier and stronger rural communities, and a level playing field for law-abiding employers.

26. **Pursue legislation and utilize existing authority to ensure funding that benefits farmworkers and their families.**
    a. Support an initial minimum funding of $5 billion for farmworker organizations to improve farm labor working conditions, labor protections, healthcare, wages, access to justice, supply and stability, services, and safety and training.

b. Leverage existing and ongoing funding and resources to promote improved farmworker living and working conditions, workplace safety compliance and farmworker economic opportunities through funding opportunities, funding requirements, penalties, and incentives.
c. Ensure that spending for employer grants and procurement promotes improved farmworker living and working conditions by requiring that employers throughout the supply chain demonstrate labor law compliance and meet "high road" workplace standards, such as collective bargaining and other metrics for improved workplace protections, to qualify for such funding or procurement.
d. Take action to ensure that additional funding opportunities such as existing and ongoing grants or other programs include requirements and incentives regarding farmworker living and working conditions.
e. Take executive action to ensure funding for farmworker organizations to help ensure improved farmworker working and living conditions and to ensure farmworker access to economic opportunities.
f. Ensure that farmworkers, their families, and their organizations are equally included in any funding intended to address the impact of pandemics, natural disasters, and climate change, including extreme weather, wildfires, droughts, etc.
g. This recommendation is intended to support farmworkers and their organizations and not farm labor contractors.

XI. Strengthening Research and Extension Programs

Research and Extension USDA coordinates and conducts research, education, and extension with scientists and researchers across sectors including the Federal Government, universities, and private partners. The 1862 Morrill Act created the original land-grant colleges and universities with a mission to provide agricultural education for the working class. While this legislation did not explicitly discriminate by race, many of the institutions in practice were white only, and it is undeniable that the benefits of land-grant institutions excluded people of color for generations. In 1890, a second round of land grant institutions– Historically Black Colleges and Universities – were funded. Tribally controlled colleges did not receive land grant funding until 1994. However, historically, 1890 and 1994 minority-serving land-grant institutions have not received USDA funding comparable to 1862 land-grant colleges and universities. The Commission applauds the recent investment of over $21.8 million to build the capacity of 1890 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the land-grant network to deliver innovative solutions that address emerging agricultural challenges impacting diverse communities. The following recommendations aim to strengthen research, extension, and teaching in the food and agricultural sciences at all minority-serving institutions across the country.

Recommendation 27: The Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program

The Equity Commission understands that one of the most significant inequities faced by Tribal producers is a lack of access to technical assistance when compared to other producers. The land grant extension system, meant to serve all producers, has historically left Tribal producers behind. The Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP) was created to solve that issue; however, the program has not had an influx of funding since 1990, and although the 2018 Farm Bill did add 1994 Tribal Colleges and Universities as eligible sites for FRTEP, no new funding came with this. Currently, 38 FRTEP agents across the country are intended to serve as many as 2,000 producers per person, while their counterparts in the land grant extension system each serve approximately 200.[12] *This results in inequitable service to Tribal producers. The Commission recommends USDA allocate a set aside, using a similar formula method used in County Extension, for the FRTEP to bring equity between the extension programs.*

27. **Seek increased funding for the Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP) and remove the competitive nature of the current application process to allow for more collaboration across Tribal extensions.**
    a. Increase funding for the FRTEP program to $50 million. The current funding requires FRTEP agents to serve as many as 2,000 producers per person, while their counterparts in the land extension program only need to serve 200. The competitive funding is static for FRTEP and the 1994s. As new programs compete and are added, all existing programs in Tribal Nations suffer from further reduced funding. This type of competitive funding is not found in County

[12] Holden, Lexie. "Advocating for the Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program." National Hunger Clearinghouse, National Anti-Hunger & Opportunity Corps, 2021, www.hungercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Advocating-for-the-Federally-Recognized-Tribes-Extension-Program_Lexie-Holden_NAAF.pdf.

Extension programs. County Extension is based on a formula, and we recommend Tribal extension be based on this formula.

Recommendation 28: 1890s Institutions Matching Requirements

The Equity Commission recommends USDA address the historical inequities in funding provided by the 1862 and 1890 Morrill Acts to make agricultural research, outreach, and technical assistance more equitable. The Commission recognizes the need to make the matching requirements consistent across institutions and address the fact that the 1890 institutions never received their equitable allocation of land, the primary funding mechanism for the institutions. The Commission appreciates the letters sent from Secretary of Agriculture and Secretary of Education to 16 state governors that emphasized the disparity in funding between land-grant Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and their non-HBCU land-grant peers in their states.

28. **Address disparities and difficulties with 1:1 matching requirement for 1890s land grant universities.**
    a. The Governor of the State for the eligible institution must submit any request for a waiver for matching requirements.
    b. Allow for a variety of non-federal funding matches (i.e., private donations, endowments, etc.).

Recommendation 29: Cooperative Extension Service Programming

Given their experience serving small and specialty crop producers and non-traditional farmers, the Commission recognizes that 1890 Land Grant colleges, 2008 Hispanic Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities (HSACUs), and 1994 Tribal Land Grant College and Universities (TCUs) are the best equipped to conduct agricultural research, outreach, and provide technical assistance to the diversity of constituencies.

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

Recommendation 30: Cooperative Agreements and Competitive Grants

Given their experience and relationships with their constituencies, the Equity Commission recognizes that 1890 Land Grant colleges, 2008 Hispanic Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities (HSACUs), and 1994 Tribal Land Grant College and Universities (TCUs) are best positioned to reach marginalized communities.

30. **Increase financial support (in the form of cooperative agreements and competitive grants) and allocate equitable funding to federally designated minority serving institutions (including 1890 Land Grant colleges, 1994 TCUs, HSACUs, and community-based organizations).**
    a. Mandate program managers to be specific, intentional, and equitable in how funding is dispersed to research and extension by adding detailed language that

targets diverse clientele and encourages collaborations across types of institutions and community-based organizations.

b. Encourage collaboration and cooperation with minority serving institutions/organizations through evaluation criteria. The Request for Application (RFA) language should be transparently linked to proposal evaluation rubrics to promote service to marginalized communities.
c. Appropriate funding that equals an increase of at least 20 percent over the next five years.

Recommendation 31: Distinctions that Allow Access to Endowments and Appropriations

The Equity Commission recognizes there is a growing gap among different constituencies across the U.S. in degree attainment and access to research, education, and outreach related to food, agriculture, and natural resources. In an effort to reach a broader constituency of underserved publics and to build a workforce required to enhance and strengthen American agriculture, investments must be made in institutions recognized for this work.

31. **Recognize minority serving agricultural institutions who are making important contributions towards equitable access to information, education, and capacity to underserved (minority) students, farmers, ranchers, etc. The distinction should allow access to endowments and annual appropriations available to other land grant universities—resources intended to support and enhance regionally relevant research, access to education and other capacity building, and community engagement (extension).**
    a. Enhance the legislative authority given in The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (PL 110-246) that included a federal designation for Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) offering associate, bachelors, or other accredited degree programs in agriculture and related fields that became the Hispanic Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities (HSACUs). An enhanced distinction should name a select few HSACUs that are strategically and most effectively meeting the mission of USDA and that have a demonstrated record of contributing to research, education, and extension/community engagement related to food, agriculture, and natural resources related sciences. This distinction should allow for **appropriated funding** that allows investment in these institutions through access to appropriated funding or through collaborations with USDA Agencies (NRCS, ARS, APHIS, etc.) that allows for cooperative agreements or partnerships akin to those at land grant colleges.
    b. Create a new distinction for Minority-serving Agricultural College or Universities that meet specific, clear benchmarks for (a) access to education: offering underserved (minority) students associate, bachelors, or other accredited degree programs in agriculture and related fields (higher than existing 25 percent benchmark), (b) access to research: are conducting regionally relevant research supported by the USDA or other competitive funding mechanisms; (c) capacity building: have a clear and demonstrated track record of outreach, extension, or community engagement. These Minority Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities (MSACUs) will benefit investments in research, education, extensions through USDA competitive grants eligibilities, a MSACU Fund in U.S. Treasury with appropriated funding.

XII. Ensuring Equitable Nutrition Assistance for Those in Need

The Equity Commission recognizes the opportunity to not only address inequitable access to farm programs among underserved communities, but also access to nutrition programs and services that have historically left some in America unable to receive assistance. Addressing these barriers to access and inclusion directly impacts families and fosters healthier communities. Increasing participation in nutrition assistance programs also benefits producers through increased demand for their products. Producers in turn can better serve consumers and positively impact the food system by participating in nutrition assistance programs with greater reach and impact. The Commission is aware of and applauds the many initiatives USDA is already addressing related to systemic disparities in food security and nutrition assistance such as Summer Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) and investments and modernization in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). However, the Commission continues to recommend updates to several programs that would allow for even greater access for underserved individuals and families.

Recommendation 32: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Equity Commission has identified several policies that explicitly limit nutrition program access based on residency and immigration status as well as other policies that have a disparate impact on BIPOC access to nutrition programs because of the ways that BIPOC people have been marginalized through the labor market and other forces. Many of the restrictions have been in place since 1996. By supporting legislative actions to remove select eligibility restrictions on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), USDA can ensure all communities have access to healthy and nutritious foods.

32. **Support legislative action to remove eligibility restrictions on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that disproportionately limit access to nutrition supports by BIPOC, including:**
    a. The restrictions on receipt based on immigration status.
    b. The denial of standard SNAP benefits to residents of Puerto Rico and other insular territories (they receive limited nutritional support from the Nutrition Assistance Program).
    c. The prohibition on receiving SNAP benefits and food from the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) in the same month.[13]
    d. The time limit on benefit receipt for unemployed people who are not living with dependent children and the option to deny benefits for failure to participate in SNAP Employment and Training programs (mandatory SNAP E&T).
    e. The ban on SNAP assistance for people with previous drug felony convictions.

[13] United States. *Food & Nutrition Act of 2008*. Pub. L. 110-246, 7 USC § 2013(b)(c). 2008. Government Information Office, Jan. 2024, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-10331/pdf/COMPS-10331.pdf.

Recommendation 33: Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)

The Equity Commission notes that there have long been concerns that the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is unrealistic in its expectations and does not provide recipients with enough benefits to purchase an adequate and healthy food supply. The Commission acknowledges the significant improvements made by the re-evaluated benefits that went into effect in 2021, as a result of the 2018 Farm Bill direction for USDA to reevaluate the TFP by 2022 and every five years thereafter. The Commission supports the continuing reevaluation of the TFP and urges that additional adjustments be made to the SNAP benefit levels and calculations to assist recipients in better meeting their nutritional needs. The Commission also urges Congress to continue funding these improvements to the TFP and to allow USDA the authority to make necessary revisions.

33. **Continue to review and update the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) to reflect the needs of today's consumers. Support research on whether SNAP enables participants to actually purchase a healthy diet and encourage Congress to consider options including boosting the minimum benefit, increasing benefits more than annually during periods of high inflation, and basing SNAP benefit levels on the Low-Cost Food Plan.**

Recommendation 34: Customer-Centered Service of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Equity Commission recognizes there is too often a lack of customer-centered service which fails to treat people seeking nutrition assistance with respect and results in reduced receipt of benefits. Barriers to access frequently have disproportionate impact on BIPOC and other socially marginalized populations. By removing barriers to access for applicants and participants, USDA can ensure eligible people have access to available nutrition programs.

34. **Continue to encourage state SNAP agencies to administer SNAP in a way that treats applicants and participants with dignity and respect and to consult with those with lived experience of poverty as they administer the programs and provide technical assistance on how to do so. USDA should seek legislative authority to hold states accountable for barriers to access and require states to develop processes for beneficiaries to be involved in program and systems design and evaluation. USDA should explore methodologies to report SNAP participation data among eligible individuals disaggregated by race and ethnicity**.

Recommendation 35: Review of Vendor Access in Nutrition Programs

The Equity Commission recognizes that vendor access to USDA nutrition programs has been restrictive and inequitable. By reviewing program access and procurement requirements, USDA can address policies that may create barriers to entry for small vendors and local farmers. Removing barriers would also make it easier for childcare providers to access and procure culturally specific and nutritious foods. The Commission recognizes that there may be additional opportunities throughout USDA programs to use procurement to promote equity.

35. **Review the nutrition programs at the federal, state, and local levels to identify barriers to vendor and procurement opportunities for disadvantaged and underrepresented communities; remove barriers within federal control and provide technical assistance to states and localities on best practices.**
    a. Conduct outreach and support small businesses, especially those owned by underrepresented communities in becoming approved SNAP vendors and maintaining eligibility. Support innovative approaches to improving access in food/SNAP access deserts and promoting local food systems.
    b. Review data-mining algorithms used to identify SNAP retailers as possible sites for fraud for bias and disproportionate impact. Provide remediation options to avoid creating SNAP access deserts.
    c. Review meal pattern requirements under Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP) to ensure inclusion of culturally appropriate foods, the ability of underrepresented community providers to participate as sites, and access by small home childcare providers (many of whom come from disadvantaged communities). Review and update meal pattern and nutrition standards for school meals to reflect the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and in consideration of cultural and traditional foods preferred by program participants.
    d. Implement proposed changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food packages to better support access to culturally appropriate foods, in consideration of comments received; and continue supporting the participation of underrepresented community providers as WIC vendors. Remove barriers to WIC access, including by supporting Congressional full funding of WIC and extending waivers of physical presence requirements.

XIII. Recognizing Immigrants and Their Families

Throughout America's agricultural history, immigration has been vital to turning this nation into a global agricultural leader. Since the mid-1800's, immigrants have had a major role in developing America's agricultural landscape as succeeding waves of immigrants were imported to work in the fields. California and other major farm states saw the Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos, African Americans, the Depression-era Oakies and Arkies, Mexicans again, and later Arab and Punjabi workers. These highly skilled laborers worked hard under mostly harsh conditions to make U.S. farms productive and profitable, including building irrigation systems, harvesting production, and tilling fields for maximum yields primarily benefiting farm owners. Immigrant workforces blasted mountain ridges and built the transcontinental railroad, which transformed the movement of American-grown goods. By 1880, Asian immigrant farmers and workers were responsible for 70 percent of California's agricultural production. Today, immigrants continue to contribute to agricultural advancements and food diversity. For example, Hmong farmers and workers have become major players in California's strawberry industry.

Historically, during periods of economic downturn, immigrants were no longer welcome. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first U.S. immigration law specifically targeting a racial group. Subsequent laws expanded restrictions to keep people from most Asian countries out while immigrants from European countries remained welcome.

By the early 1900s, "alien land laws" were enacted specifically to ban non-U.S. citizens from owning property including farmland. Many Japanese farmers had arrived as laborers and eventually bought their own farms. They were forced to sell their businesses at huge losses or transfer the titles to their U.S. born children. Additional restrictions would pass later to prohibit American born children of Japanese and other Asian races from holding property. Some tried to make private arrangements with business partners or neighbors to manage their farms. During World War II, 110,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were unconstitutionally forced into internment camps. When they returned, they found that their homes, farms, and businesses were no longer theirs.

Growers imported more than 100,000 young Filipino immigrants to toil in the fields across the western states during the 1920s and '30s. Called Manongs, meant as an endearing term of respect, they were nevertheless prevented from marrying outside their race by California's anti-miscegenation law and were scapegoated and subjected to racist attacks. Denied the right to have families, many men were lifelong bachelors.

While some progress is being achieved, institutional discrimination has effectively created an enduring underclass of Americans in the food and agriculture industry based on their ethnicity, language, immigration status and country of origin. Only white immigrants could become naturalized citizens until 1954. Without the full rights bestowed on U.S. citizens, non-white immigrants who remained in the U.S. had limited rights and opportunities. They could not vote or testify against whites, effectively rendering them perpetual foreigners subject to legal discrimination and exclusions.

To address alleged labor shortages during World War II, the U.S. and Mexico governments created the "Bracero" Program where Mexican workers were contracted to work in U.S. fields. The laborers were exploited with meager wages and substandard working and living conditions. Meantime, domestic U.S. workers suffered depressed pay and conditions as their jobs were illegally handed over to the more compliant and easy-to-exploit braceros. Nonetheless, the program lasted until 1964, when it was ended by Congress. Furthermore, Mexican nationals as well as Mexican Americans endure constant intimidation and threats from racist and anti-immigrant groups telling them to "go back to Mexico." Like their Asian immigrant counterparts, they are treated as perpetual foreigners.

Systemic racism and discrimination have created a two-tier system of farmers and workers. Perpetual exclusion and restrictive policies and practices have forced many immigrants of color to work and live in substandard, unsafe conditions with low wages. They have also lacked access to more profitable management and ownership opportunities. Yet, while most other American workers avoid the hard work of farming, immigrants continue to do the backbreaking labor in hopes of better futures for their families. Some have succeeded. For example, in California's world-renowned wine industry, a new generation of Latinos, many of them children of migrant workers, now own or manage award-winning vineyards and wineries. Yet despite their hard work and perseverance, there are too few examples of inspirational successes for the immigrants.

As immigration and immigrants remain critical to America's innovative agricultural leadership, the USDA Equity Commission calls for necessary immigration reforms to remove unjust inequalities and advance equity for all immigrants regardless of their status or country of origin.

Recommendation 36: A Pathway to Citizenship

Throughout America's agricultural history, immigration has been vital to turning this nation into a global agricultural leader. As immigrants have been and remain critical to America's global leadership in the agriculture sector, the USDA Equity Commission recommends a clear and accessible pathway to citizenship for those so essential to American agriculture. Recognizing the significant impact of immigration policies on individuals and families, the Equity Commission also strongly supports initiatives such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) and Promise Act, and Family Reunification. By supporting policies that clearly articulate an accessible pathway to citizenship, the USDA can help immigrants integrate more effectively across various aspects of society, including education, housing, health, and community engagement, so that they can more immediately add to the resilience and prosperity of American agriculture.

A person's immigration status determines their path to equitable education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities. The existence of artificial and formal barriers perpetuates a system where immigrants often lack equitable access to opportunities essential for building generational wealth. By supporting a clear and accessible pathway to citizenship, USDA can break down these barriers and increase stability for undocumented immigrants and their families.

36. **USDA should support policies that lead to pathways to access citizenship and family reunification.**

Recommendation 37: Right to Access Agricultural Land

Historical racism and discrimination have led to exclusionary laws that restrict immigrants from owning U.S. properties. The 1879 Oregon constitution specified that "no Chinaman may own property." In 1913, in response to anti-immigrant forces, California passed the Alien Land Law to ban Asian immigrants from purchasing properties including farmlands. Subsequent laws extended the ban to include U.S. born children of immigrants and restrict land leases. Fifteen more states followed with similar alien land laws. It wasn't until after World War II that the U.S. Supreme Court struck down these laws as unconstitutional.

Today, fueled by anti-immigration sentiments, several states are considering alien land legislation to prohibit foreign nationals from certain Asian, Central American, and Middle Eastern countries from purchasing agricultural lands, under the guise of national security protection. Thirteen states have already passed legislations to prohibit Chinese foreign nationals from owning agricultural land or lands within certain distance of a U.S. military instillation. Since their arrival, immigrants of color have been perceived as perpetual foreigners. These state proposals would put specifically some communities, specifically Chinese, under unfair, discriminatory scrutiny and suspicion again.

According to USDA data as of 2021, Chinese entities and individuals owned about 384,000 acres of U.S. agricultural land, less than 1 percent of all U.S. agricultural land held by foreign persons. Thus, the attention and reaction to Chinese ownership of agricultural land is not a reaction to a real problem but can be better viewed as actions based on Xenophobic stereotypes.

The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), an interagency committee chaired by the Secretary of Treasury, has the authority to review, approve, or deny any proposed foreign transactions that might raise national concerns, including in the food and agricultural sector. Currently, USDA is not a CFIUS member, however, the U.S. Treasury may designate USDA as a co-lead in a CFIUS investigation on a case-by-case basis. The Equity Commission recommends that USDA serve as a permanent member of the committee and request the necessary Congressional appropriations to carry out this role.

37. **The USDA Secretary should serve as a permanent member of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS).**
    a. If the proposed transaction is specifically related to agriculture, the USDA shall convene an interagency task force with its federal partners in Treasury, Homeland Security, and Defense to ensure that governmental reviews would not cause harm to certain Americans because of national origin.

Recommendation 38: Equitable Compensation and Protection for Agricultural and Food System Workers

Data from investigations show that agricultural and food system workers are frequently subjected to exploitative labor practices. Many endure conditions where employers violate minimum wage laws, employ child labor, engage in wage theft, subject them to unsafe working conditions, and/or force them to live in grossly substandard housing. As immigrants remain critical to America's innovative agricultural leadership, the Equity Commission calls for necessary immigration reforms as well as policies and practices to ensure agricultural and food system workers receive equitable compensation and critical protections.

38. **USDA should support a pathway to citizenship, equitable compensation, and adequate protections and rights for all agricultural and food system workers.**

Recommendation 39: Equitable Access to Rural Housing Service (RHS) Programs

Housing is foundational to health and well-being. There are certain statutory limits on accessing housing subsidies based on immigration status. This is damaging to both immigrants themselves and their families, and to communities, given that nearly ¾ of farmworkers in the U.S. are immigrants.

39. **Ensure equitable access to Rural Housing Service programs regardless of household immigration status.**
    a. USDA should support Congressional action to remove legislative restrictions that limit access to rural housing based on immigration status.
    b. RHS should review its regulations and sub-regulatory guidance to ensure that they are not imposing any restrictions on access to rural housing based on immigration status that exceed statutory requirements.
    c. RHS should conduct an education campaign to ensure equitable access to rural housing programs, including outreach to immigrant communities and informing landlords of their responsibilities under fair housing laws.

XIV. Revitalizing Rural America: A Path to Equitable Growth

Rural communities stand as pillars of the U.S. economy and culture. Yet despite substantial contributions, rural families have too often been denied the tools for economic mobility and prosperity. As the Equity Commission concludes its transformational work, the Rural Community Economic Development (RCED) Subcommittee highlights how facts clearly demonstrate the need for a transformed federal approach to rural policy centered on inclusion. Robust investments guided by rural people themselves can unlock abundant potential in America's countryside.

The Value of Rural America

The diverse communities in rural America contribute intrinsic value as stewards of cherished virtues, often stretching back generations. Their importance also stems from tangible, indispensable contributions fueling the broader economy. When rural communities thrive, America thrives as a result. Rural communities are home to 46 million Americans – 14 percent of the U.S. population – with increasing diversity. By income, culture, age and other measures, rural America encapsulates the nation's plurality. Rural communities drive the agriculture sector, providing food, fiber and other agricultural products critical for national security. And they also have an important role in emerging sectors like clean energy production, with about 11 percent of clean energy jobs in rural areas in 2021. While agriculture and energy are key to many rural economies (accounting for 7 percent of nonmetro employment in 2019), other sectors employ more people across rural parts of the country: government services (16 percent of nonmetro employment in 2019), manufacturing (11 percent), health care and social assistance (10 percent), and retail (10 percent). Transporting commodities and products depend upon maintenance of rural transportation systems. Effective communications infrastructure is dependent upon rural companies and landscapes. Meanwhile, rural landscapes promote environmental conservation while protecting essential water, forest, and mineral resources benefiting communities nationwide. As the country seeks solutions to the multiple crises caused by climate change, it must first look to rural areas where renewable energy can be produced, and carbon can be sequestered. Additionally, unparalleled natural assets support vibrant outdoor recreation that generates economic activity.

Systemic Inequality Restricting Potential
Rural communities in the United States are terrifically diverse, with the 2020 Census indicating that 24 percent of people in the rural U.S. are people of color; and that number is growing, with the median rural county seeing its population of color increase by 3.5 percent between 2010 and 2020. But for too long, systemic inequality has stifled rural success. Barriers spanning generations have obstructed prosperity for marginalized groups while growth opportunities lifted other regions. Discrimination continues to yield this unacceptable reality. Persistent poverty plagues rural areas, with 85 percent of continually impoverished U.S. counties being rural, with concentrations in Black communities in the Southeast, Hispanic communities in the Southwest, Tribal communities throughout the country and white communities in Central Appalachia. Distress grips nearly 50 percent of rural Black residents and 45 percent of rural Native communities. Since 2005, rural communities have seen more than 190 hospitals close, with a concentration in counties with significant minority populations. Rural minorities face steeper hurdles accessing capital, technical assistance, and disaster relief programs despite being as deserving as any American. Housing insecurity in rural areas is a particular concern for American Indian and Hispanic households. Discrimination endures as an unacceptable reality. Infrastructure gaps create hardship for rural groups nationwide. Deficient broadband access restricts market opportunities. Crumbling main streets signal economic despair. Such factors fuel youth outward migration – a vicious cycle stripping rural communities of their greatest resource – its young people.

The Pursuit of Rural Equity
Facts clearly demonstrate how an antiquated federal approach has failed rural communities resulting in inequality across groups and regions – especially within minority populations such as black farmers, Tribal groups, Latinos, and people in territories. With challenges crystallized, the pursuit of rural equity surfaces as an economic and moral imperative.

Within the Equity Commission, the RCED Subcommittee provided a ground level view of the barriers holding back rural families. Personal testimonials from rural community leaders, farmers, and community economic development professionals exposed how policies fail to address the most critical challenges facing marginalized rural groups nationwide.

Black farmers highlighted discrimination severely restricting land ownership and credit access for generations. Rural Black leaders described how their marginalization in community institutions is exacerbated by federal policy. Tribal representatives shared how federal policies have chronically obstructed prosperity on Indigenous lands. Members from territories described lacking access to aid and insurance tools that mainland state residents readily obtain – despite all being U.S. citizens.

These voices spotlight nuances within systemic inequality that aggregate statistics alone fail to capture. They revealed how seemingly universal programs, when designed for the "average" marginal community, can perpetuate inequality by missing the mark for those facing the greatest structural barriers.

Our diversity drove more inclusive, tailored recommendations. We gained support for translation assistance, technical assistance, and other targeted interventions alongside broader efforts. Territory farmers secured an agreement for assessing expanded programming, with a focus on parity.

Centering Equity for a Thriving Rural America

The path forward is now clear: substantial investments guided by those living in rural realities. Coordinated efforts centered on equity will unleash the potential of rural communities. This will occur across sectors, from agriculture to clean energy to manufacturing and beyond. This must happen because national prosperity depends on rural success. The Commission's extensive engagement with people in rural communities produced four pillars for a transformed approach:

1. Locally Designed Solutions: Bottom-up strategies channeling grassroots insights will succeed where bureaucratic one-size-fits all directives falter. Rural Equity Advisory Councils can spur continued idea sharing. The solutions should focus on people in rural communities owning and controlling the drivers of the local economy that build on the foundation of farmer and utility cooperatives.
2. Inclusive Program Design: Barriers to eligibility must be removed to make existing programs genuinely accessible for minority, socially disadvantaged and persistently marginalized producers.
3. Assessing Effectiveness: Transparent tracking of outcomes across geographies and demographics will reveal where approaches succeed – and where transformation is still required. Continual reassessment is essential.
4. Recognizing and Tackling System Discrimination: Territory residents lack access to critical aid and programs compared to mainland states. The U.S. Government has reached agreement with the Territories to comprehensively assess and address some of these gaps.

Rural communities have been viewed too long as merely agrarian – instead of as diverse economic epicenters powering the economy. With purposeful investments guided by those living rural realities, the paths to prosperity through equity have been cleared. The diverse voices of the Commission have outlined the course. Action must now follow to secure rural America's future as a national asset.

XV. Enhancing Rural Development Operations

The number of staff at the Rural Development Mission Area (RD) has been in consistent decline for decades to the point that it is now deeply challenged in meeting its mission of serving rural people, and especially those people in historically underserved communities. In 1994, the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act transformed the way RD programs were delivered. This reorganization resulted in the closure of 1,200 USDA field offices, a significant portion of which were RD field offices, and the loss of about 13 percent of all field staff in just three years. The federal government needs to transform its approach to rural community economic development and invest in rural capacity building. This will require more federal staff, strategically located investments in rural intermediaries, and more strategic use of technology. USDA's programs should also be more transparent and continually assessed for effectiveness.

Recommendation 40: Staffing

Across all programs and services provided by Rural Development, direct connections with RD staff are necessary to ensure the equitable distribution of resources. Over time, RD's footprint in rural communities has significantly declined. The Equity Commission agrees with the comments received from the public in concluding that the location of RD regional or local offices strongly correlates with the distribution of RD investments as opposed to where there is greatest need. In turn, USDA must identify the capacity of local staff and re-align its resources to ensure underserved communities are receiving RD resources.

40. Ensure the communities with greatest need have access to critical staff resources. Specifically, USDA should:

a. Conduct a full assessment—to include a demographic analysis—of the current location of staff and resources available to them.
b. Following the assessment, quickly act to re-align staff and allocate new resources to socially and economically disadvantaged communities as defined by rural data and communities with environmental justice concerns as defined by Justice40.
c. When recruiting, ensure new staff are reflective of the local community they serve with an intentional focus on underserved populations within the demographics of the community.
d. Use technology and remote work strategies to improve staff interaction with communities.

Recommendation 41: Staff Skillset

As a result of USDA RD field staff cuts in regional offices across the nation and centralization of services within the DC offices, the field staff have increasingly assumed the role of compliance officers. They often lack capacity, skills, or time to engage and build trusted relationships as community developers who assist communities with design of a project/program or funding proposals. This approach leaves service gaps within rural communities at a time when additional technical assistance many times determines which communities successfully access and utilize USDA programs.

41. **Increase the skillset of staff (central and field) on community economic development, as opposed to only grant management, underwriting, and compliance driven tasks. There should be a core of community economic development specialists to assist other staff in providing rural communities more comprehensive solutions.**
    a. Staff work plans and performance metrics should include proactive outreach and engagement with underserved communities to build relationships and identify needs and opportunities. This will facilitate timely, quality, responses to new funding opportunities.
    b. Bolster the skillset of central and field staff to maximize opportunities for underserved communities.

Recommendation 42: Partnership Models

The reduction in RD staff has limited the capacity of RD to provide culturally sensitive and tailored assistance to rural communities. Partnerships with local organizations assist RD in understanding the needs of the communities they serve. The staff in these programs are skilled in building relationships, constructive collaboration, and identifying ways to achieve win-win for all involved. Due to systemic under-investment, however, often community partners in rural areas themselves also do not have the capacity that larger Community Based Organizations (CBO) have, which in turn makes it difficult to reach those in greatest need. These organizations need support and funding to advance their goals and targets, while building the capacity to sustain the value of the investment and the potential for durable improvement in program delivery over time. The following recommendation will bolster USDA's capacity to support community partners and raise cultural awareness of the needs of diverse rural communities.

42. **Significantly expand and fund partnerships for historically underserved, low-income, and remote, sparsely populated communities. In collaboration with community organizations and leaders, identify priorities, design solutions and secure funds for community priorities. Develop and fund partnerships/agreements with local organizations to ensure program readiness.**
    a. Cultivate better partnerships within the federal government - both within USDA agencies and with other federal departments such as the Department of Commerce, Small Business Administration (SBA), Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Department of Labor (DOL) to better understand the needs of the communities they serve.
    b. Leverage high-capacity community-based organizations, particularly local organizations serving historically underserved and economically disadvantaged communities, to extend USDA's reach into communities fostering measurable outcomes, including deeper connections, equitable distribution of resources, and capacity building to ensure more effective support. This should include:
    c. Investing in existing high-capacity CBO partnerships
    d. Establishing new partnerships to serve underserved regions/counties/communities.
    e. Fully fund, expand, and institutionalize the Rural Partners Network (navigators and implementation practitioners) with a focus on equitable strategic design to improve service delivery. To ensure underserved and sparsely populated

communities receive the support, expand the network to include at least one coordinator per state. Congress should authorize RPN in the next Farm Bill and ensure robust funding to support the program.

f. Engage new partners particularly local organizations serving economically disadvantaged households and communities for the equitable distribution of resources and to build capacity.
g. Develop a communication channel to serve as an avenue of shared learning between the CBO partnership model with the RPN for complementary, coordinated, and mutually reinforcing strategies.

Recommendation 43: RD State Advisory Committee

The reduction in RD field offices resulted in a lack of staff's capacity to build connections with and serve rural communities. This created the need for USDA to support State-led solutions. Congress and USDA, however, have not effectively enabled States to fill the gaps created by the 1994 Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act. This recommendation aims to address this gap by connecting State RD Directors directly to local stakeholders from underserved communities to ensure effective implementation of RD programs.

43. Strengthen or establish a state and Tribal advisory committee and to support and advise the State RD Director on equitable systems thinking in identifying priorities, building partnerships, and monitoring effectiveness.

a. Ensure strong representation of under-resourced communities by including diverse representation within each state. Model after the NRCS State Advisory Committees.
b. Provide the tools and as necessary training that will increase the capacity of committee members to provide advice and support to ensure all customers particularly those from historically underserved and economically disadvantaged communities have equitable access to all USDA RD services.
c. Delegate authority to USDA RD Directors to utilize these advisory committees in translating national program goals and targets into state-specific outcomes.

Recommendation 44: Demographics of Funding/Lending Recipients

The American Community Survey of the Census Bureau, a major data source for rural and Tribal development practitioners, has limited utility in measuring changes in rural places. The "left out" rural areas, organizations, and businesses that do not compete successfully for funding, or that do not apply at all because of the complexity, often tend to be poorer, have a greater number of people of color, and are smaller and more remote. They can easily fall off the radar screen of program designers. Additionally, local philanthropic partners and States are not aware of direct correlation of USDA RD staffing deficiencies to underutilization of USDA programs and investments. USDA needs to address the inherent limitations of federal data for communities and Native nations across the rural United States so local partners and states can assist in providing outreach and assistance to the "left out" rural areas.

44. **Improve transparency of data gathering and analysis of the distribution of grants and investments currently managed by USDA RD. Regularly analyze and compare the economic, place, and race demographics of where USDA funding or lending is going – and not going. If there is an uneven distribution to some rural areas or populations, evaluate reasons why and identify ways USDA RD could better serve those communities.**
    a. Fund improvements to the Rural Data Gateway by drawing on lessons and usage of other National Data tools. At a bare minimum the Rural Data Gateway should layer ALL the following inputs on one user friendly map:
        i. Socially vulnerable counties – per the Rural Data Gateway inputs.
        ii. USDA investments made - Ten-year history of USDA investments – either by quantity/number or dollar amount of investments in geographic area.
        iii. Type of USDA investments - grants or loans and whether or not the investments were for capacity building (planning) or implementation.
        iv. USDA RD Staff - # of USDA RD staff overlayed by those who report to DC and those that report to a State Director.
        v. Disaggregation of data by demographics.
    b. As these assessments uncover disparities in the distribution of programs, USDA should take immediate actions to prioritize investments to areas of high-need and low utilization of RD resources, including reassessment of the application process for programs that are not equitably benefiting communities.

Recommendation 45: Measures of Success

For decades, rural community and economic practitioners have maintained that many indicators or measures of "success" that government, philanthropic, and private programs and investors ask them to report are not well-suited or relevant to rural places. In some cases, investors are looking for raw aggregate numbers to show scale of impact, which always places rural places at a disadvantage to urban places; in others, investors focus too narrowly on immediate job creation, dollars leveraged, or financial return-on-investment rather than the critical human, organizational, civic, and environmental factors that are fundamental to producing jobs and financial return over a longer term. What is achievable in any effort is dependent to a great extent on conditions, resources, and capacity at the start of any initiative.

Communities should have the opportunity to define their own starting points across critical dimensions. A distorted view of people and place happens when expectations result in bias that recognizes only needs or deficiencies, while fully recognizing community assets leads to a more accurate picture of rural and Tribal conditions. This recognition is a precondition for establishing a respectful and productive partnership. This approach will allow for fairer comparisons with urban efforts. It will also help surface and learn from innovative rural efforts that are often overlooked or ignored because of low raw-number-results potential.

Effective planning to reduce inequity requires representation from not just the movers and shakers but also for the moved and shaken. A process that includes broad rural geography, class, race, and cultural representation in designing a funding or lending program is itself a key process indicator – and one that requires attention and commitment. Likewise, all rural initiatives should be asked to value and measure that same inclusion in the design of their efforts.

45. **Revise definitions and measures of success that build upon multiple forms of community-based assets including quality of life, social capital, and the characteristics of the people they are serving, not just the quantity. USDA should:**
    a. Ask for, accept, and learn from any (optional) supplemental community-driven metrics and encourage rural initiatives to report other measures or indicators that they think – or discover – are important.
    b. Conduct a joint analysis across the portfolio to spark new thinking about measuring progress and to add to the menu of potential progress indicators.
    c. Measure progress from community starting points, not predetermined program or agency ideals of success. Measure assets and opportunities *as well as* needs.
    d. Gauge rural progress as ratios in relation to the starting point to determine true impact. Ask for equity *process* indicators and measures[14].

Recommendation 46: Environmental Justice

The Federal Government, through Executive Order 14096 defines environmental justice as "the just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of income, race, color, national origin, Tribal affiliation, or disability, in agency decision-making and other Federal activities that affect human health and the environment."

The Justice40 Initiative is highlighted as part of the Biden-Harris Administration's "whole-of-government approach to advancing Environmental Justice." Justice40 reflects the commitment by the Administration "to deliver 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain Federal investments [to] disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution." USDA has identified 65 programs from ten agencies and one USDA office as covered under the Justice40 Initiative: Agricultural Research Service, Climate Hubs, Farm Service Agency, Forest Service, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Risk Management Agency, Rural Business-Cooperative Service, Rural Housing Service, Rural Utilities Service. The White House description of Justice40 notes that "all Justice40 covered programs are required to engage in stakeholder consultation and ensure that community stakeholders are meaningfully involved in determining program benefits." This is consistent with the requirement for promotion of inclusive regulatory policy and public participation as outlined in the July 2023 Memorandum Broadening Public Participation and Community Engagement in the Regulatory Process.

[14] See Appendix C for Potential Measurement Questions

46. **USDA should ensure environmental justice considerations are woven into the project lifecycle of all USDA programs to ensure benefits and burdens associated with USDA-funded activities are equitably shared among communities.**
    a. When designing programs, USDA should include environmental justice considerations throughout the design process. USDA should support intermediaries such as community-based and direct service organizations, to work with communities with environmental justice concerns to promote access to USDA programs and services. To ensure USDA programs have a positive impact on local communities, USDA should identify and consider the potential impacts of the program on communities, inform communities about the program and make them aware of notice and comment opportunities, and support impacted communities in participating in decision making and funding processes.
    b. To ensure communities with environmental justice concerns are not disproportionately impacted by USDA-funded activities, programs that provide extra points for the citing of competitive grant funded activities should justify how projects would positively impact environmental conditions for local communities where the project is placed. For larger projects, more evidence of community support is needed.
    c. To ensure that environmental justice analysis is consistently and adequately performed during National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes, all NEPA practitioners should receive training on environmental justice analysis in NEPA.

Recommendation 47: Using Technology to Increase Access to Rural Development Programs

Rural communities, businesses, non-profits, cooperatives, and individuals often miss program and funding opportunities offered by USDA due to not receiving adequate information or technical assistance. Additionally, customers are not accessing federal programs intended to support Rural America due to the complexity of these programs. Customers may not know about the wide range of programs that extend beyond single agencies.

In turn, this recommendation calls on USDA to lead government-wide efforts to create online tools that reduce barriers and consolidate information for Rural America. Through Technical Modernization Funding authorized in the American Rescue Plan, the federal government can more effectively support rural communities.

47. **Rural Development should take full advantage of the Technology Modernization Fund to support the development of new Customer Experience tools for all federal rural programs.**
    a. Rural Development should coordinate with other rural-serving agencies across the federal government to submit a proposal for Technology Modernization Funds.
    b. These funds should be used to revamp Rural.gov to include a Customer Experience dashboard that allows customers to access details about programs based on the type of customer (Business, Cooperative, Community Development Financial Institution, Individual) and contact information for both relevant staff and technical assistance organizations in their regions.

c. Following the implementation of sub-recommendation's 'a' and 'b', all agencies with programs targeting rural communities should conduct outreach campaigns to increase awareness of this tool.
d. Continuously evaluate the effectiveness of new and existing Customer Experience tools to make improvements based on stakeholder feedback and data on program applications/site usage.

Recommendation 48: Office of Coordinated Community Response

Smaller, lower-income, and underserved rural communities can experience significant problems that emerge from a crisis, such as flooding or other natural disasters, or alternatively are the result of longer-term problems, such as sanitation issues due to the lack of a functioning water and sewer system. Some of these issues and concerns are properly regarded as issues of environmental justice. Executive Order 14008 calls attention to the needs of disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution. Regardless of how one categorizes the issue, these communities need help, and the USDA often has programs or ways to assist once the problem is identified and can work its way through the Department. Unfortunately, many times these problems are not identified promptly, and no single agency has the resources or programs to provide a comprehensive solution. Larger, more affluent towns and communities can either deal with a problem directly on their own, or they have the skills and resources to approach local, state, or federal agencies to ask for assistance.

Too often at USDA a single agency does not have the comprehensive programs or authority to provide solutions for complex problems. Other federal agencies may also have programs that would be of assistance. On occasion, such issues rise to the highest levels of the Department, even to the Secretary, where an ad hoc Departmental group can be convened to coordinate a response. The Commission believes that there is a better way. All Americans, regardless of income or status, have a right to fairly access the programs and benefits of citizenship and the federal government.

48. Establish an Office of Coordinated Rural Community Response for improved coordination of USDA and other Federal resources for timely and comprehensive outreach and response to the urgent needs of underserved rural communities.

a. The Secretary should establish an office, reporting to the Chief of Staff, that will be responsible for providing immediate and integrated solutions to selected high priority problems of underserved rural communities. This Office of Coordinated Rural Community Response would maintain a small but critical mass of trained program professionals familiar with and access to programs across the Department that would be available to conduct analysis and recommend a coordinated, integrated relief and long-term investment. The Office would also interface, in coordination with the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, at a program level with other Federal Departments and Agencies that have programs or assistance that should or could be part of the solution. Finally, this Office should conduct analysis of data across the Department and the Federal government to identify areas that USDA could conduct proactive work to find communities with high levels of need that lack the resources to ask for help.

b. Consideration should be given to providing the office, if necessary, by legislation, with the authority to utilize, through transfer authority, some small percentage of program funding such that immediate, on-the-ground, solutions could be implemented quickly and efficiently.

XVI. Supporting Rural Communities

USDA must transform its approach to supporting rural community development by adopting a "whole-of-household" approach. Households require access to affordable and safe living conditions, basic needs like electricity, broadband and water, and robust community facilities, including healthcare, emergency services, education, and food systems. Through reprioritizing the development of a community's needs through the "whole-of-household" perspective, USDA can improve the quality of life for all Americans, with a focus on historically underserved communities.

Rural Housing

Recommendation 49: Housing as Infrastructure

It is crucial to acknowledge that the right to housing is a human right. The right to housing is the economic, social, and cultural right to adequate housing and shelter. Housing is not merely a subcategory of focus but an essential aspect of rural and Tribal infrastructure. Failure to recognize this critical distinction perpetuates the systemic neglect of housing in these communities and undermines USDA's goal of improving the quality of life. To effectively implement the inclusion and adaptation of housing as infrastructure, USDA must take a holistic and comprehensive approach that recognizes the significance of safe, affordable, and adequate housing for rural and Tribal communities and invest and prioritize accordingly.

49. Amend USDA policies, programs, and funding mechanisms to prioritize investment in housing. To do this, USDA should:

a. Align Strategic Goal 5 of its 2022-2026 Strategic Plan and further permanently amend all agency priorities, programs, and funding priorities to include rural housing as a priority of USDA infrastructure programs, particularly in historically underserved and economically disadvantaged communities.
b. Prioritize development and repair of rural single family and multifamily housing among USDA funded activities and programs, particularly for economically disadvantaged households, intentionally raising and signaling the importance and necessity of housing as part of the ecosystem of infrastructure.
c. Holistically amend all language to reflect housing as infrastructure and not subdivide it out into a subcategory of focus.
d. Support legislation to redefine housing as infrastructure following the precedent of the *Housing as Infrastructure Act of 2021* that authorized the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide grants, programs, and other support related to public housing, affordable housing preservation and construction, and mortgage access.

Recommendation 50: Program Standards for Single Family Housing

The Equity Commission has identified redundancies in requirements for Single Family Housing programs that most traditional banks do not request of borrowers and that create a barrier for underserved communities. Restrictive program qualification standards restrict the access of smaller capacity grantees. If program applications are not adjusted to support the most marginalized, they will inherently present a barrier to equity in rural housing. For more experienced or higher capacity grantees, complex applications and requirements are usually not an issue. The Commission believes the single-family housing model needs to be responsive to the communities they were created to assist. These communities will also benefit from a "whole of government" approach. For example, the Department of Defense has developed innovative housing solutions through 3D printed barracks for National Guard soldiers in Texas. Rural Housing programs should be more flexible to allow for similar, innovative solutions.

50. Simplify the application process for single family housing. Specifically, USDA should:

a. Provide *States*[15] with the authority to convert or provide waivers on housing program qualifications when responding to natural disasters or allow States to allocate funding for rural housing as a set-aside for disaster mitigation.
b. Amend Rural Housing program policies to be more open to alternative and innovative forms of housing construction (for example, 3D printed, modular).
c. In order to target consistently poor households, whether or not within a persistent poverty area, provide a waiver for housing programs to ensure receipt of specific access and support.
d. Revise the Self-Help Model to remove stipulation that requires new 523 grantees to have buyers in the pipeline. This requirement results in fewer resources directed to communities most in need.

Recommendation 51: Equitable and High-Quality Affordable Multi-Family Housing

Affordable housing is critical to the prosperity of rural communities. Rising housing costs and changes to the rural economy have contributed to a need for affordable housing that is not currently being met. USDA should prioritize developing new multi-family housing units in the rural communities most in need. The Equity Commission commends current rural housing staff for their dedication in overseeing USDA's current multi-family housing portfolio. Yet additional resources, capacity, and staff are required to ensure multi-family housing projects are developed and managed properly. Through stakeholder engagement, the Commission has concluded that affordable multi-family housing units in rural communities often fall short of acceptable quality standards.

Through improved physical site inspections, increased accountability and capacity, and further investment in maintenance and preservation, the quality of affordable housing in rural communities can be improved. Underserved communities are most in need of mechanisms to ensure high-quality housing. USDA must prioritize addressing the quality of subsidized multifamily housing units to preserve the health of vulnerable communities.

[15] For purposes of this recommendation, the term "States" refers to USDA Rural Development State Offices

51. **Invest in and ensure equitable and high-quality standards for new construction and existing affordable multi-family housing in rural communities particularly in historically underserved and economically disadvantaged communities.**
    a. USDA should provide adequate incentives to rural developers and ensure outreach to and opportunity for historically underrepresented developers to successfully participate in new construction projects, including set asides as appropriate.
    b. USDA should ensure all new applications for housing projects include requirements to maintain quality housing throughout the operations and existence of that housing project, not just until mortgages are paid off.
    c. USDA should use existing annual financial audits to assess whether requirements for reinvestment into maintaining the quality of housing are being met. This expansion should include physical site visits and interviews with tenants.
    d. Invest in existing and new pilot programs to ensure all subsidized units are physically inspected once every three years.
    e. USDA should ensure landlords and property managers are held accountable to maintain high-quality housing standards by adding financial punishments for not complying with quality standards.
    f. Property managers of multi-family housing units receive market rate rents for their properties through subsidies from USDA. A portion of these funds should be required to be reinvested into maintenance.
    g. Prioritize appropriating funds to ensure the Rural Housing Service's multi-family preservation programs effectively incentivize property managers to maintain quality housing.[16]
    h. Increase and invest in building the capacity of multi-family housing staff to support adequate oversight and management including equitable access to services by all residents and relevant community members.
    i. Establish a working group between HUD and USDA that meets regularly to share best practices for affordable multi-family housing programs and maintaining quality standards.

Recommendation 52: 502 Loan Product

USDA's investments in the Tribal Communities through the 502 Single Family Housing Relending Program have successfully brought additional safe and quality affordable housing to Tribal Communities. The extension of the 502 Relending Program to Tribes, however, is not permanent. The Equity Commission recommends USDA pursue the authority to permanently allow Native Community Development Financial Institutions to access funds from the 502 Relending Program.

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

[16] https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/1490/text

a. Continue to administer and evaluate the 502-relending demonstration in South Dakota and other locations in preparation for developing program guidance for a permanent national program.[17]
b. Provide training and technical assistance opportunities for Native CDFIs to learn about the 502-relending program.
c. Create an administrative or operating grant program to support Native CDFI intermediary lenders operating the relending program.
d. Institute best practices based on lessons learned from the CDFIs.

Recommendation 53: 504 Grant Program

USDA's 504 grant program is currently only available to those in areas with populations of 20,000 or less. Although this program is necessary for smaller rural communities, the current population restrictions result in many underserved rural communities being unable to access this program. To address this problem, the program's requirements should be expanded to serve all low-income, rural communities (as defined by the Census of Agriculture).

53. Expand the 504 Grant Program. Specifically, USDA should:

a. Remove the age restriction and expand beyond those that are 62+ and those that are "very" low-income.
b. Align the grant limit with the Congressional limit of 10 percent of the national median home price.
c. Revise the population requirements to be available to populations of greater than 20,000 but less than 50,000. Priority should still be given to smaller, underserved communities; however, all rural communities should be able to access the 504 Grant Program.
d. Reconsider (or allow for waiver of) lifetime limits to address situations that are responsive to natural disasters.
e. To ensure sufficient funding, allocate annually a minimum of $50,000,000.

Rural Utilities

Recommendation 54: Broadband

To effectively address the needs of underserved areas, it is essential to examine and refine the methodology and rules used to determine the availability of broadband services. Currently, the "one-and-done" funding stipulation prohibits some previously funded areas to receive additional USDA support for evolving needs. By supporting efforts to improve the accuracy of broadband mapping, USDA can identify and serve areas with unmet ***evolving and ongoing*** *needs more equitably and effectively.*

54. Enhance broadband mapping and funding to address rural economically distressed and underserved census tracts.

a. Reassess the broadband census tract methodology and rules that determine where USDA's programs believe broadband currently exists to understand if it is effectively capturing the needs of underserved areas.

[17] "USDA Expands Local Partnerships to Increase Homeownership Opportunities for Native Americans." *U.S. Department of Agriculture Press Release*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 16 Oct. 2023, www.rd.usda.gov/newsroom/news-release/usda-expands-local-partnerships-increase-homeownership-opportunities-native-americans.

b. Eliminate the current "one-and-done" funding stipulation that disqualifies rural economically distressed and underserved communities from receiving access to more inclusive grants and low interest loans to support broadband. Allow additional USDA funding for communities where broadband does not currently meet the federally established standard.

Recommendation 55: Improve Support for Underserved Communities Through Rural Utilities

In the context of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and other grant and loan programs administered by USDA, the Department must incentivize utilities and eligible entities to invest a portion of their funding to support underserved communities. Costs related to energy and other utilities more heavily burden low income and underserved communities while exacerbating already existing inequities. Energy and utility programs must consider the specific communities benefiting from loans and grants to ensure resources are equitably distributed. To promote this goal, the application process should award bonus points to applicants who demonstrate a commitment to community benefit plans and efforts to ensure that funds will benefit underserved communities.

Additionally, USDA should insist on consistent accountability and the transparent reporting of program investments and outcomes, including information on the communities and individuals benefiting from the initiatives. USDA should incorporate implementation guidelines of the Justice40 Initiative to enhance the focus on equity in new sustainability programs. Mechanisms to enforce transparency and accountability must be in place for all rural utility programs, especially water and electric programs.

Furthermore, USDA should consider replicating requirements from other federal agencies, such as the Department of Energy (DOE), to ensure that USDA's efforts are in line with the best practices across the Federal Government for promoting equitable resource distribution and support for underserved communities across various sectors.

Finally, for cooperatives to work most effectively and to serve the interests of their members, they should be democratically controlled - that is, the board is elected in fair and transparent elections by the members of the cooperative. Over the years, observers have indicated that certain utility cooperatives, especially in geographic areas with a large minority population, have not conducted fair and transparent elections, which has resulted in boards that are not reflective of the members.

55. Incentivize utility cooperatives and companies to support rural economically distressed and underserved communities through USDA-administered grants and loans, increase the transparency of the utility programs, and encourage fair and transparent election of utility boards.

a. Contractually require utilities and other eligible entities applying for Rural Utility Grants and Loans to demonstrate a commitment to use a portion of these funds to support rural economically distressed and underserved communities.
b. Award bonus points in the application process for community benefit plans that ensure funds support underserved communities, consistent accountability, and

transparent reporting of the location of the investments and the results of a program with a focus on historically underserved communities. The distribution of funds should be contingent on the implementation of community benefit plans.

c. Incorporate Justice40 Initiative implementation guidelines.
d. Monitor and evaluate how rural utilities spend funds allocated to them through USDA programs, with a specific focus on assessing the impact on underserved communities.
e. Take steps to amplify the voices of underrepresented groups within rural water associations, electric cooperative boards, and other utility managing entities. This effort should focus on fostering a more inclusive decision-making process that better reflects the needs and priorities of the entire community.
f. USDA should support communities in ensuring fair and transparent board elections for rural utility cooperatives by collecting data and proactively providing information to historically underserved communities on how to conduct and participate in fair and transparent elections including by working with community-based organizations such as Minority Serving Institutions (colleges and universities) and other organizations rooted in historically underserved communities.

Recommendation 56: Edge-of-Grid Lending

To transform the electric production in America to clean energy, edge-of-grid[18] power generation will play a critical role. USDA must adapt rural electric programs to incentivize edge-of-grid projects and ensure that this funding is distributed equally. Investing in the edge-of-grid will encourage utilities to pursue energy efficiency, solar power, battery storage, microgrids, and smart energy devices. This recommendation aims to guarantee that underserved communities receive a fair share of the benefits from these investments and contribute to a more equitable distribution of resources.

56. Expand Edge-of-Grid lending and investments for rural economically disadvantaged and underserved communities.

a. Reassess the criteria for qualifying for loans to ensure rural economically disadvantaged and underserved communities have access to edge-of-grid technology and promote the growth of edge-of-grid programs, such as the Energy Efficiency Conservation Loan Program (EECLP).
b. Offer incentives for broadband deployment in remote rural areas to support electric cooperatives' efforts in implementing edge-of-grid technologies for all member-consumers.
c. Ensure that the implementation of the Justice40 Initiative is integrated into edge-of-grid lending and investment programs.

[18] Edge-of-grid lending refers to a new power-generation phenomenon where individual consumers not only produce electricity at home, but also contribute energy to the broader power grid. Solar, wind, and other renewable power generation technologies allow for individual consumers to produce the energy they consume. For more information, visit https://www.greentechmedia.com/articles/read/what-is-the-grid-edge.

Recommendation 57: Prevent Displacement through Equitable Land Zoning and Community Participation

Infrastructure projects in rural communities can drive economic development and create opportunities for residents. However, these projects may also displace underserved and minority members of the community as rent and property values rise. The Equity Commission has identified the need to tie equitable land zoning policies and affordable housing to infrastructure and utility projects. Additionally, the Equity Commission believes engaging communities in the decision-making processes will ensure that future development aligns with local needs and values and is critical to ensuring equitable outcomes of infrastructure and utility projects.

57. **Ensure future infrastructure projects account for impacts to local communities particularly rural economically distressed and historically underserved communities. Specifically, USDA should:**
    a. Assess the impacts of potential infrastructure projects on the displacement of local communities by developing criteria to evaluate the potential community displacement based on factors like number of households displaced, loss of cultural sites, disruption of local economies, etc. Review impact assessments to quantify predicted effects.
    b. As part of the decision-making process in infrastructure projects, increase funding for further engagements with local stakeholders through public consultations to ensure the project aligns with the community's interests. This engagement should include inter-agency collaboration through programs like the Rural Partners Network. Measure stakeholder satisfaction through surveys and impact on decision-making through analysis of how feedback was incorporated.
    c. Strengthen its collaboration with local and regional governments to better understand the needs of rural communities by encouraging and incentivizing local policies and plans through qualitative review.

Community Facilities

Recommendation 58: Expanded Financing Options for Community Facilities Projects

The Equity Commission finds that the funding for investments in community facilities falls far short of the need for new and improved community facilities across rural America. We also find that community facilities are underfunded relative to other programs made available to rural communities by USDA RD. The community facilities program, if funded adequately, has the potential to solve the most basic needs of rural communities. With its significant rural footprint, strong capital position, and commitment to farmers and rural communities, the Farm Credit System (FCS) is well positioned to do more in rural communities. At present, FCS financing for community facilities for healthcare, food systems, and community support is limited and involves an inefficient and cumbersome investment process. Nevertheless, over the past decade the FCS has demonstrated its ability and interest in financing a number of successful community facilities projects. Allowing rural municipalities and community-based organizations greater access to financing for community facilities through the FCS would greatly improve rural healthcare, emergency services, and food systems in rural communities. Community facilities and infrastructure services must be considered as important as other RD programs to ensure the health and prosperity of rural communities. Healthcare, emergency services, and even housing could be addressed by just allowing communities to determine what is the most essential piece of infrastructure their community needs.

58. Partner with the Farm Credit System to ensure that the Community Facilities Direct and Guaranteed Loan and Grant Programs are eligible for additional financing through the Farm Credit System. Specifically, USDA should:

a. Pursue changes to the current authorities and practices and partner with FCS to allow rural municipalities and community-based organizations to access financing through the FCS to fund community facilities projects.
b. Continue to assess and prioritize removing barriers to accessing financing for community facilities.
c. Allow rural communities to determine which facilities projects are most needed for their communities.

Recommendation 59: Community Facilities Direct and Guaranteed Loan and Grant Program

The Equity Commission has recognized the need to expand and invest in USDA Community Facilities Programs to create a prosperous Rural America. Other RD programs, such as Broadband and Rural Electric programs, are less restrictive and better funded relative to Community Facilities programs. The Commission believes that the Community Facilities Direct Loans and Grants programs should be made more accessible to smaller, rural communities [populations with less than 5,500][19]. A significant portion of Community Facility funding is currently directed to communities in higher population counties; 75 percent of project funding went to communities with populations over 20,000. Priority points should be awarded to lower population counties.

[19] Small counties can be defined as counties less than 5,500 as distinguished from census tracts that fall below 5,500.

Note, socially disadvantaged individuals are those who have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice or cultural bias within American society because of their identities as members of groups and without regard to their individual qualities. The social disadvantage must stem from circumstances beyond their control[20].

59. **Expand access to USDA's Rural Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Programs.**
    a. Increase participation and funding for Socially Disadvantaged and underserved communities, specifically, USDA should focus on communities in counties with smaller populations (under 5,500).
    b. USDA should clearly differentiate between counties below 5,500 and communities in census tracts below 5,500 and how priority points are awarded for Community Facilities Programs. USDA should emphasize funding for counties below 5,500.
    c. Appropriate funds for counties with a population below 5,500 to automatically receive funding and increase their access to the Community Facilities Programs.

Recommendation 60: Removing Barriers for Community Facilities Direct and Guaranteed Loan and Grant Programs

The Equity Commission has recognized the need to expand and invest in USDA Community Facilities Programs to create a prosperous rural America. Previously, these programs have not been funded or accessible to many rural communities. A significant portion of Community Facility funding is currently directed to communities in higher population counties. Although Community Facility funding has increased, participation by small counties under 5,500 people has not increased. USDA should ensure that the current structure is not disenfranchising counties below 5,500 and underweighting towards the county population.

60. **Remove barriers to participation in Community Facility Loan and Grant Programs for small and underserved communities in counties with less than 5,500 people.**
    a. Conduct an annual assessment on the distribution of Community Facility Loan and Grant funds to determine socially disadvantaged and underserved communities in counties with less than 5,500 people are fully accessing the program. This assessment should aim to increase participation and expand levels of sustained funding for such communities in more sparsely populated counties. Review the assessment quarterly.
    b. Based on the results of the assessment outlined in sub recommendation 'a', refine program requirements, application processes, priority points, and outreach efforts targeted towards socially disadvantaged and underserved communities in counties with less than 5,500 people.
    c. Seek additional appropriations to increase funding for the Community Facility Grant Programs. For socially disadvantaged and underserved communities in

[20] *United States, Small Business Administration. "§124.103 Who is socially disadvantaged?" Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (eCFR), Title 13, Part 124, 27 Apr. 2023, https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-13/chapter-I/part-124/subpart-A/subject-group-ECFR4ef1291a4a984ab/section-124.103.*

counties with less than 5,500 people, adjust the maximum percentage of cost of projects that grants can cover:
    i. From 75 percent to 100 percent for communities with a population of 5,000 or less;
    ii. 55 percent to 75 percent for communities under 12,000;
    iii. 35 percent to 55 percent for communities under 20,000, without changing other eligibility requirements.

d. Prioritize increasing funding for community facilities that bolster healthcare, food system, and community support (i.e., education, EMS/Fire first responders, housing, and childcare).

Additional opportunities USDA should consider:

a. Grant Approval:
    i. Applicant must be eligible for grant assistance, which is provided on a graduated scale with smaller communities with the lowest median household income being eligible for projects with a higher proportion of grant funds. Grant assistance is limited to the following percentages of eligible project costs:
        a. Maximum of 75 to 100 percent when the proposed project is:
            i. Located in a rural community having a population of 5,000 or fewer; and
            ii. The median household income of the proposed service area is below the higher of the poverty line or 60 percent of the State nonmetropolitan median household income.
        b. Maximum of 55 to 75 percent when the proposed project is:
            i. Located in a rural community having a population of 12,000 or fewer; and
            ii. The median household income of the proposed service area is below the higher of the poverty line or 70 percent of the State nonmetropolitan median household income.
        c. Maximum of 35 to 50 percent when the proposed project is:
            i. Located in a rural community having a population of 20,000 or fewer; and
            ii. The median household income of the proposed service area is below the higher of the poverty line or 80 percent of the State nonmetropolitan median household income.
        d. Maximum of 15 percent when the proposed project is:
            i. Located in a rural community having a population of 20,000 or fewer; and
            ii. The median household income of the proposed service area is below the higher of the poverty line or 90 percent of the State nonmetropolitan median household income. The proposed project must meet both percentage criteria. Grants are further limited.

iii. Grant funds must be available.

XVII. Strengthening Rural Economies

USDA's investments in rural economies are crucial to the prosperity of rural communities. USDA's rural business loans, grants, and other programs play an important role in the economic development of rural communities. USDA's support for rural cooperatives provides critical services to rural communities so rural citizens can participate in the local, regional and national economy. To advance equity and opportunity in rural communities, USDA must evolve its programs to support access and expand its investments in underserved communities.

Recommendation 61: Matching Waivers for RD Programs and Grants

Many of USDA's RD Programs and Grants require a matching contribution from a private or state entity. This requirement results in a barrier for small and underserved service providers that may not have access to capital. By following the precedent set by other federal agencies that have permanently waived match requirements as an equitable strategy, USDA can foster a more inclusive funding environment. While some matching waivers currently exist, many stakeholders are unaware of the process for requesting a waiver. Building on encouraging progress under the current Administration, this will ensure that more organizations can benefit from available resources.

61. **Develop eligibility requirements and waivers of matching requirements that prioritize rural economically distressed communities and historically underserved communities, including Federally Recognized Tribes, and enhance access to USDA programs and services. Specifically, USDA should:**
    a. Remove match requirements from the scoring rubric.
    b. Provide priority points for rural economically distressed communities and historically underserved communities.
    c. Clearly communicate the process to request waivers for matching funds to all service providers.
    d. While working to implement sub-recommendation 'a', establish a universal application to waive matching requirements for all programs.

Recommendation 62: Rural Business Loans - Financing for Native Agricultural Producers by Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDOs)

According to the Intertribal Agriculture Council as well as Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative surveys[21] of community organizations working on food systems and health issues in Indian Country, lack of funding, be it access to credit or other financial support, is the biggest barrier for Native producers. Additionally, farmers and ranchers from disadvantaged communities still face barriers in accessing affordable capital through USDA's existing programs. USDA should open new forms of credit for producers by removing restrictions to the intermediary relending program that prevent IRP's low interest loans from benefiting agricultural producers. Agriculture is one of the primary arenas of entrepreneurship in Indian Country with the three primary categories of agricultural loans being made for equipment, land purchases, and herd development. RD/USDA should be leading and supporting the growth of agriculture on the individual level, not prohibiting it.

[21] Akiptan. "2022 Market Study." *Akiptan*, 2023, www.akiptan.org/2022-market-study. Accessed 18, February 2024.

62. **Allow all loans and grants administered by Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDOs) to serve agricultural operations and provide agricultural credit as defined in the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act, Con Act. Specifically, USDA should:**
    a. Remove Agricultural production as an ineligible loan purpose S 4274.319 (f) in RD Instruction 4274-D for the Intermediary Relending Program.
    b. Remove agriculture producer as an ineligible ultimate recipient from Rural Business Development Grant Program.
    c. Pilot the program with 2-3 strong partner MDO's and provide $5 million in direct financing for the MDO to provide agricultural credit to their target market, similar to the 502 Relending pilot done in South Dakota.

Recommendation 63: Loan Loss Reserve Requirement

Each USDA loan product requires a 6 percent cash reserve for loan loss regardless of the portfolio health of the intermediary. Each lending entity submits a relending plan to USDA in the application process and describes its strategy for defaulting loans. A required cash loan loss reserve locks up capital for 30 years that could be flowing to the community and ultimate recipients.

63. **Permanently remove the loan loss reserve (LLR) requirement for intermediary lenders that submit an acceptable strategy for handling defaulting loans.**
    a. Require and include in the scoring that the Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDO) submit an acceptable strategy and track record for handling defaulting loans within their Revolving Loan Funds (RLF) Plan, with proof of a loan loss reserve contra-asset account established.

Recommendation 64: Equitable Lending Frameworks

Rural and underserved communities do not have ready access to philanthropy, corporate or individual partners. Therefore, they lack operational funding to implement the intermediary responsibilities which are required by RD's lending programs. RD has a model program called Rural Microentrepreneur Program (RMAP) that offers administrative dollars alongside the loan, based off a formula. USDA could replicate this model across all its loan offerings to offer a more equitable lending framework.

64. **Create and include administrative grants with every loan product to intermediary lenders.**
    a. The 2018 Farm Bill amended Section 379E of the Con Act (Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act) to require that grant amounts to Microenterprise Development Organizations (MDO) be in an amount equal to not less than 20 percent and not more than 25 percent of the total outstanding balance of microloans made by MDOs.

Recommendation 65: Investing in Cooperatives

People in rural communities, and especially those in historically underserved communities, have sometimes lacked the ability to own and control the businesses that most directly impact their livelihood and families. One strategy that people have used in rural communities is the establishment of cooperative businesses where the people who use the businesses are the ones who own, control, and benefit from the business. Rural people have used cooperatives at scale to access agricultural markets and to ensure that rural people have affordable and reliable electricity, water, and telecommunications services. While the model has been used in many different sectors, it is especially prominent in both agriculture and utilities. More than 50 percent of all farmers in the U.S., including farmers from historically underserved communities, are members of farmer cooperatives. More than 40 million people in the U.S. are members of rural electric cooperatives. This strategy could be used in emerging sectors such as grocery, care economy, and converting small businesses to worker or consumer-owned cooperatives.

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

a. Double the current investments in the Cooperative Services staff so that it can acquire, analyze, and share information about all types of cooperatives in rural areas—including emerging cooperative sectors such as those in the care economy and conversion of rural small businesses to worker or consumer owned cooperatives.
b. Use the discretion provided in the Rural Cooperative Development Grant program to provide much larger, multi-year grants to cooperative development organizations, particularly in rural economically distressed and historically underserved communities. Congress and USDA should provide much greater financial resources for these grants, appropriating $20 million in funds.
c. Allocate new resources and provide $300,000-$500,000 to utilize the voluminous new data provided by the Census Bureau Business Census, which in recent years has collected statistically significant data on cooperatives from different sectors to help inform policy makers and other stakeholders on how people are and can use cooperatives to grow their local economies.

Recommendation 66: Rural Energy for America Program

The Rural Energy for American Program (REAP), established under the OneRD Guaranteed Loan Program in October 2020, provides financing and grants to agricultural producers and rural small businesses for renewable energy systems and for energy efficiency improvements. Producers can also apply for new energy efficient equipment and new system loans for Ag production and processing.

REAP helps increase American energy independence by increasing the private sector supply of renewable energy and decreasing the demand for energy through efficiency improvements. Over time, these investments can also help lower the cost of energy for small businesses and producers.

This program could significantly enhance underserved areas with less expensive and alternative sources of energy. The Equity Commission has not been able to identify whether underserved areas are taking advantage of the program. USDA should identify any barriers to accessing REAP in underserved communities and adjust program requirements to further increase equity.

66. **Expand opportunities for rural economically distressed and underserved communities to benefit from REAP through assessing where funding is going and refining program requirements to allow for greater access.**
    a. Remove requirement for UEI (Unique Entity Identify) number for applications under $200,000. USDA has removed this requirement for Ag producers for the Farm Service Agency programs. The elimination of this requirement for smaller applications would encourage more applications and expedite the process.
    b. For smaller projects remove the requirements for a civil engineering report at time of application. Make the civil engineering report a condition of commitment for receiving the grant or loan. For rural areas and underserved communities, it is an access issue to entice and fund certain professional services during the application process. There are other USDA programs where certain professional services are a condition of funding.
    c. Provide grant/loan assistance in areas where it is expensive or difficult to access, whether through USDA State or National offices. This support will help bolster rural communities' capacity to participate in the REAP program and access critical funding for energy projects.

XVIII. Conclusion

The Equity Commission's investigation and recommendations provide a comprehensive approach to addressing historical inequities within the USDA's programs and services. The report highlights the need for targeted reforms that promote inclusivity and equal opportunity for all Americans, including those from historically marginalized communities. By considering the Commission's guidance, the USDA can implement effective measures to eliminate systemic barriers and enhance fairness in agricultural support, rural development, and access to resources.

The Commission's recommendations urge a transformative shift towards a "whole – of - household" approach, including the reinvestment in USDA staffing, the expansion of loan programs, the integration of housing as a critical infrastructure component, and the reevaluation of program criteria to support underserved communities better. Moreover, embracing technology to improve service delivery, forming partnerships that amplify local voices, and acknowledging the value of cooperatives are paramount for revitalizing rural economies and addressing the "left out" rural areas.

In conclusion, the Commission suggests that substantial investments, informed by rural and minority stakeholders, can bridge the gap between rural potential and achievement. A realignment of priorities, coupled with persistent evaluation, training, and policy adjustments, can fortify USDA's role in facilitating equitable growth and affirm the right to fair access across its spectrum of influence. This commitment to equity can ensure that the USDA not only supports but also dignifies the diverse fabric of America's agricultural legacy and rural communities, that acknowledges historical injustice while also transforming challenges into a testament of national prosperity and resilience.

Appendix A

The Equity Commission members received briefings from the following USDA staff:

- Dr. Gbenga Ajilore, Senior Advisor, Rural Development
- Andrew Berke, Administrator, Rural Utility Service
- Steffanie Bezruki, Chief of Staff, Rural Development
- Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary, Farm Production and Conservation
- Dr. Penny Brown Reynolds, Acting Assistant Secretary, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
- L'Tonya Davis, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Office of the Secretary
- Zach Ducheneaux, Administrator, Farm Service Agency
- Katharine Ferguson, Chief of Staff, Office of the Secretary
- Claudette Fernandez, (Former) Senior Advisor Program Equity and Opportunity Strategy, Office of the Secretary
- Rick Gibson, Senior Counsel, Office of the General Counsel
- Dr. Dewayne Goldmon, Senior Advisor for Racial Equity, Office of the Secretary
- Gloria Montaño Greene, Deputy Under Secretary, Farm Production and Conservation
- Scott Marlow, Deputy Administrator, Farm Service Agency
- Chris Nelson, Associate Director, Office of Budget and Program Analysis
- Jennifer Nicholson, Deputy Director, National Appeals Division
- Carlos Ortiz, National Program Leader, National Institute of Food and Agriculture
- Kimberly Peyser, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Administration
- Monica Rainge, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
- Margo Schlanger, Senior Advisor, Office of the Secretary
- Heather Dawn Thompson, Director, Office of Tribal Relations
- Xochitl Torres Small, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture
- Leslie Weldon, Former Acting Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Office of the Secretary
- Homer Wilkes, Under Secretary, Natural Resources and Environment
- Frank M. Wood, Director, National Appeals Division

Appendix B

The following list of resources was provided to Equity Commission. They are also available on the Equity Commission website https://www.usda.gov/equity-commission/resources

Executive Orders
Executive Order 13985 On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (Published January 20, 2021)
Memo to Agencies: Advancing Equity in Procurement (Published December 2, 2021)
Executive Order 13988 Preventing and Combating Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation (Published January 20, 2021)
Memo to Agencies on Modernizing Regulatory Review (Published January 20, 2021)
Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government (Published December 13, 2021)
Strategic Plan to Advance Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce (Published November 2021)
Executive Order on Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (Published February 16, 2023)
American Rescue Plan
American Rescue Plan Website and Fact Sheet
American Rescue Plan of 2021 (Published February 22, 2021)
Advancing Equity through The American Rescue Plan Report (Published May 2022)
Federal Government Resources
Agricultural Credit Needs and Barriers to Lending on Tribal Lands (Published May 2019)
IT Modernization: USDA Needs to Improve Oversight of Farm Production and Conservation Mission Area (Published September 23, 2021)
USDA Market Facilitation Program: Oversight of Future Supplemental Assistance to Farmers Could Be Improved (Published January 4, 2022)
GAO-12-976R, U.S. Department of Agriculture: Progress toward Implementing GAO's Civil Rights Recommendations (Published August 29, 2012)

GAO-09-62 U.S. Department of Agriculture: Recommendations and Options to Address Management Deficiencies in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (Published October 2008)
Information on Credit and Outreach to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Is Limited (Published July 11, 2019)
Are Rights a Reality? Evaluating Federal Civil Rights Enforcement (Published November 2019)
Engaging People with Lived Experience to Improve Federal Research, Policy, and Practice | U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (Visited April 2023)
A Whole-Family Approach to Serving Families in Rural America | White House Domestic Policy Council (Published November 2016)
FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Measures to Promote Equitable Community Development (Published June 27, 2023)
FACT SHEET: President Biden Announces Actions to Promote Educational Opportunity and Diversity in Colleges and Universities (Published June 29, 2023)
Biden-Harris Administration Makes Historic, $11 Billion Investment to Advance Clean Energy Across Rural America Through Investing in America Agenda (Published May 16, 2023)
Office of the Inspector General Assessments / Analyses
The Pigford Cases: USDA Settlement of Discrimination Suites by Black Farmers (Published May 29, 2013)
Garcia v. Vilsack: A Policy and Legal Analysis of a USDA Discrimination Case (Published February 22, 2013)
USDA Oversight of Civil Rights Complaints | USDA (Published October 22, 2021)
Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (2501 Program) in Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019 | USDA (Published November 10, 2021)
Hispanic and Women Farmers and Ranchers Claim Resolution Process | USDA (Published March 31, 2016)
Market Facilitation Program—Interim Report | USDA (Published September 30, 2020)
Black Farmers Discrimination Litigation (BFDL) Audit Report (Published December 2013)
USDA Reports, Resources, and Tools
Heirs' Property and Land Fractionation: Fostering Stable Ownership to Prevent Land Loss and Abandonment (Published September 2019)
Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture (Published February 1997)

USDA Oversight of Civil Rights Complaints (Published September 2021)
Implementation of the Civil Rights Action Team Report at USDA: An Interim Progress Report (Published September 1997)
Independent Assessment of the Delivery of Technical and Financial Assistance: Civil Rights Assessment, Executive Summary (Published March 31, 2011)
Independent Assessment of the Delivery of Technical and Financial Assistance: Civil Rights Assessment, Final Report (Also known as the "Jackson Lewis Report") (Published March 31, 2011)
Jackson Lewis Equity Recommendations • USDA Exit Memo 2017 • The People's Department – A New Era for Civil Rights
Equity at USDA Fact Sheet
2017 USDA Agriculture Census Map Tool on the Census Website
USDA Direct Farm Loans Journey by GSA and FSA (Published July 10, 2018)
USDA FY 2023 Budget Summary and 2023 USDA Budget Explanatory Notes
Tribal Consultations Website and Framing Papers (Published April 2022) • Framing Paper: Economic Development • Framing Paper: Food, Safety, and Trade • Framing Paper: Farming, Ranching, and Conservation • Framing Paper: Forests & Public Lands • Framing Paper: Education & Research
Your FSA Farm Loan Compass (Revised March 2021)
Office of the Ombudsperson at USDA • Fact Sheet • Introduction to the Office of the Ombudsperson Presentation • Frequently Asked Questions
Farm Service Agency Committees: In Brief (Updated January 29, 2021)
Racial and Ethnic Equity in U.S. Agriculture: Selected Current Issues (Published April 11, 2022)
FSA County Committee Resources • County Committee Federal Register Notice-33063, Page 8 (Published June 5, 2022) • 2019 Farm Service Agency County Committee Election Report (Published 2019) • County Committee Eligibility to Vote Factsheet (Published June 2022) • Code of Federal Regulations, Selection and Functions of Farm Service Agency State and County Committees (Published June 2012) • County Committee Frequently Asked Questions (Published June 2022)

Rural Data Gateway Website (Viewed April 2023)
USDA Procurement Forecast Tool (Viewed June 2023)
Discrimination Financial Assistance Program (Section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act) • Program Press Release (Published July 7, 2023) • Program Website (Viewed July 7, 2023) • Program Fact Sheet (Published April 2023)
USDA Language Access Plan • Plan Press Release (Published November 15, 2023) • Language Access Website (Viewed November 15, 2023)
USDA Advisory Committee Reports
Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers Website (ACMF) • ACMF Recommendations (Published 2012) • Letter to Secretary Vilsack (Published October 2015) • ACMF Recommendations (Published February 2021)
Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Website (ACBFR)
Council for Native American Farming and Ranching Website (CNAFR) • CNAFR Recommendations (Updated June 2018)
A Time to Act: A Report of the USDA National Commission on Small Farms (Published December 31, 1997)
Indian Country Extension Commission Report (Published April 2022)
USDA Strategic Plan & Equity Action Plans
USDA Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2022-2026 (Published March 2022)
USDA Equity Action Plan (Published April 14, 2022)
Equity Action Plans for all Agencies (Published April 14, 2022)
White House Convening on Equity (Recording of meeting hosted on April 14, 2022)
Executive Order 13985 RFI Summary Findings (Published April 14, 2022)
Blog Post: USDA Mission Areas, Agencies, and Offices' Equity Action Plans Are Making Progress (Published August 1, 2023)
USDA Equity Action Plans (Viewed August 2023)
Other
Redefining Rural Towards a Better Understanding of Geography, Demography, and Economy in America's Rural Places | Economic Innovation Group (Published March 2021)
Countering the Geography of Discontent: Strategies for Left-Behind Places | Brookings Institution (Published November 2018)
Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure | Aspen Institute (Published June 2020)

Measure Up: Principles for Measuring Rural and Native Nation Development Progress | Aspen Institute (Published June 2022)
Targeted Universalism Policy and Practice | Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley (Published May 2019)
Advocating for Family Success – A 2-Gen Approach in Rural Settings | Highland County Community Action Partnership (Viewed April 2023)
Improving Business Processes for Delivering Work Supports for Low-Income Families | Urban Institute (Published March 2016)
Why Government Technologists Love the Domino's Pizza Tracker | Statescoop (Published September 2021)
Place-sensitive Distributed Development – A Strategy to Lift Up Rural Areas with Technology | Blandin Foundation (Published November 2018)
Thrive Rural Framework Overview | Aspen Institute (Viewed May 30, 2023)
CFPB Finalizes Rule to Create a New Data Set on Small Business Lending in America | Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (Published March 30, 2023)
What Is Frontier? | National Center for Frontier Communities (Viewed June 2023)
Rural Energy Program Draws Scrutiny over Biden Equity Plan | Politico (Published July 27, 2023)

Appendix C

Transformational Capacity Building - Measure of Success

Suggested measures:

- The stock of year-round, locally owned housing
- Change in school enrollments
- The number/ratio of disconnected youth
- Increases in post-secondary educational attainment
- Labor market participation rates per industry based on race, gender and disability status.
- Changes from an accurate baseline in the number and growth of locally owned enterprises and cooperative structure. Changes in race, ethnicity, and gender wage gaps.
- Affordable childcare slots compared to demand
- Community college alignment with local economy
- Aligned continuum of family services
- Entrepreneurial growth as voluntary or involuntary (Is self-employment only an *emergency* response?)
- Dollar leakage in or out of the community
- Change in air, water, housing quality
- Economic and social impact of job retention
- Living wage requirements – and living wage job availability – in a region
- Change in household savings rates
- Broadband coverage to homes rather than broadband "coverage" only on Main Street
- Benefactors of investments.
- Locally generated wages.
- Systems and policy changes that create equitable economic growth
- Require all measures create no environmental damage/degrade.

Built
Have there been improvements in infrastructure?

Financial
Has there been increased investment in the region?

- Amount of Leveraged funding for projects and programs
- Adequate Technical Assistance funded.
- Growth in operations

Individual
Have people acquired or improved skills, or improved their health and well- being?

- # locations of retail food businesses received TA
- # of people receive TA
- Improved working conditions.
- # of referrals made to partner organizations
- Amount of sales for affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods
- Improved access to markets.

Intellectual
Is there greater knowledge, creativity or innovation in the region?

- # of new programs offered from access points (example: RX-CSA's or culturally diverse art integration)

Natural
Has the work benefitted natural resources or the environment in the region?

- $$ of sales from local farmers/ranchers/producers allowing for farmland to stay in production
- # of effective agricultural or conservation practices.

Political
Has there been an increase in influence over decision-making and policies?

- # of and type policies revised to support food access, affordability, and availability

Social
Have new relationships and networks been built?

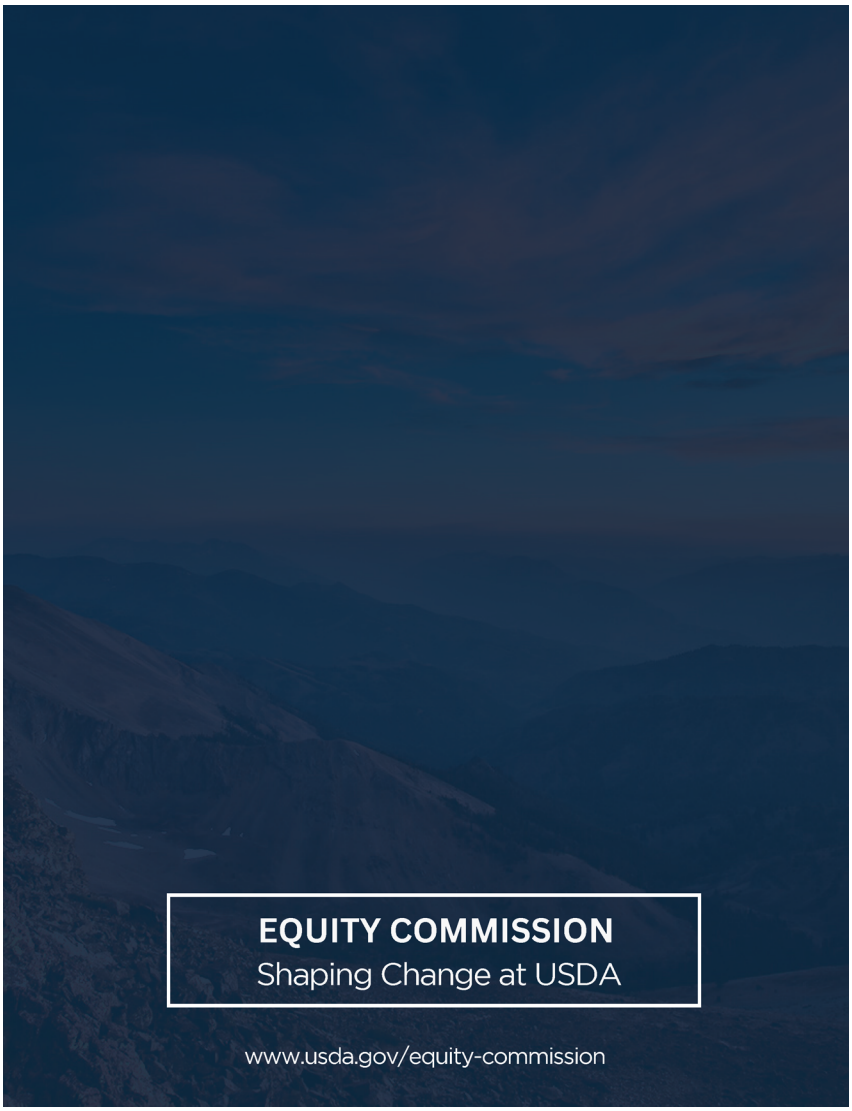
- # of minority-owned businesses that received technical assistance -
- # of new collaborations formed as result of TA and how they impacted leveraged resources
- Have low-income businesses or individuals, or minorities been involved in the design and implementation of strategies.

Cultural
Has the work supported/preserved valued assets-traditions or ways of doing things?

- # Jobs created or retained for local and regional residents from low-income and moderate- income areas that reflect area demographics, including communities of color.
- # Stories told that show impacts
- Changes in ownership of or decision-making power over local resources.

Press Inquiries: press@usda.gov | Public Inquiries: EquityCommission@usda.gov

Equity Commission Website: https://www.usda.gov/equity-commission


EQUITY COMMISSION
Shaping Change at USDA
www.usda.gov/equity-commission

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, & FORESTRY
Questions for Executive Nominees
119th Congress: Part I

1. Basic Biographical Information

Please provide the following information.

Position to Which You Have Been Nominated	
Name of Position	**Date of Nomination**
Secretary	November 23, 2024

Current Legal Name			
First Name	**Middle Name**	**Last Name**	**Suffix**
Brooke	Leslie	Rollins	

Addresses					
Residential Address (do not include street address)			**Office Address** (include street address)		
[redacted]			**Street:** 1635 Rogers Road		
City: Fort Worth	**State:** Texas	**Zip:** 76109	**City:** Fort Worth	**State:** Texas	**Zip:** 76107

Other Names Used						
First Name	**Middle Name**	**Last Name**	**Suffix**	Check if Maiden Name	**Name Used From** (Year) (Check box if estimate)	**Name Used To** (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
Brooke	Christine	Leslie		X	04/1972 **Est** ☐	06/1999 **Est** ☐
					Est ☐	**Est** ☐

Birth Year and Place	
Year of Birth (Do not include month and day.)	**Place of Birth**
1972	Dallas, Texas

Marital Status					
Check All That Describe Your Current Situation:					
Never Married	**Married**	**Separated**	**Annulled**	**Divorced**	**Widowed**
☐	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐

Spouse's Name (current spouse only)			
Spouse's First Name	**Spouse's Middle Name**	**Spouse's Last Name**	**Spouse's Suffix**
Mark	Martin	Rollins	

Spouse's Other Names Used (current spouse only)						
First Name	**Middle Name**	**Last Name**	**Suffix**	Check if Maiden Name	**Name Used From** (Year) (Check box if estimate)	**Name Used To** (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
					Est ☐	**Est** ☐
					Est ☐	**Est** ☐

Children's Names (if over 18)			
First Name	**Middle Name**	**Last Name**	**Suffix**
Luke	Williamson	Rollins	
Jacob	Lightner	Rollins	

2. Education

List all post-secondary schools attended.

Name of School	**Type of School** (vocational/technical/trade school, college/university/military college, correspondence/distance/extension/online school)	**Date Began School** (month/year) (check box if estimate)	**Date Ended School** (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still in school)	**Degree**	**Date Awarded**
University of Texas Law School	Law School	08/1995 Est ☐	05/1998 Est ☐ Present ☐	JD	05/1998
Texas A&M University	University	08/1990 Est ☐	05/1995 Est ☐ Present ☐	Bachelor's	05/1995
		Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐		
		Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐		

3. Employment

(A) In reverse chronological order, list all of your employment activities, including unemployment and self-employment. If the employment activity was military duty, list separate employment activity periods to show each change of military duty station. Do not list employment before your 18th birthday unless to provide a minimum of two years of employment history.

Type of Employment (Active Military Duty Station, National Guard/Reserve, USPHS Commissioned Corps, Other Federal employment, State Government (Non-Federal Employment), Self-employment, Unemployment, Federal Contractor, Non-Government Employment (excluding self-employment), Other	**Name of Your Employer/ Assigned Duty Station**	**Most Recent Position Title/Rank**	**Location** (City and State only)	**Date Employment Began** (month/year) (check box if estimate)	**Date Employment Ended** (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still employed)
Non-Governmental Employment (excluding self-employment)	America First Policy Institute	President	Washington, DC	02/2021 Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☒
Non-Governmental Employment (excluding self-employment)	BLR Ideas Corp	Owner	Glen Rose, TX	06/2021	Est ☐ Present ☒
Other Federal employment	Executive Office of the President	Director of the Domestic Policy Council	Washington, DC	07/2018 Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐ 01/2021
Self-employment	Self (clients included Mission City Management)	Self	Fort Worth, TX	01/2011	06/2018
Non-Governmental Employment (excluding self-employment)	Texas Public Policy Foundation	President and CEO	Austin, TX	01/2003 Est ☐	Est ☐ 07/2018 Present ☒
State Government (Non-Federal employment)	State of Texas Office of the Governor	Policy Director	Austin, TX	01/2001 Est ☐	Est ☐ 01/2003 Present ☐
Non-Governmental Employment (excluding self-employment)	Hughes and Luce, LLP	Associate Attorney	Dallas, TX	09/1998 Est ☒	Est ☐ 01/2001 Present ☒
Other Federal employment	United States District Court – Northern District of Texas	Law Clerk	Dallas, TX	11/1999 Est ☒	Est ☒ 08/2000 Present ☐
Non-Governmental Employment (excluding self-employment)	Latham & Watkins	Clerkship	Washington, DC	06/1997 Est ☒	Est 06/1997 ☒
Non-Governmental Employment (excluding self-employment)	Texas A&M University	Volunteer (unpaid)	College Station, TX	01/1994 ☒ Est	04/2003 ☒ Est
Non-Government Employment (excluding self-employment)	National FFA Organization	Made for Excellence speaker	All over the country	09/1991 Est ☒	Est ☒ 05/1995 Present ☐

(B) List any advisory, consultative, honorary or other part-time service or positions with federal, state, or local governments, not listed elsewhere.

Name of Government Entity	**Name of Position**	**Date Service Began** (month/year) (check box if estimate)	**Date Service Ended** (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still serving)
		Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐
		Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐
		Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐

4. Honors and Awards

List all scholarships, fellowships, honorary degrees, civilian service citations, military medals, academic or professional honors, honorary society memberships and any other special recognition for outstanding service or achievement.

Sam Houston Award – Texas Public Policy Foundation

Thomas A. Roe Award – State Policy Network

5. Memberships

List all memberships that you have held in professional, social, business, fraternal, scholarly, civic, or charitable organizations in the last 10 years.

Unless relevant to your nomination, you do NOT need to include memberships in charitable organizations available to the public as a result of a tax deductible donation of $1,000 or less, parent-teacher associations or other organizations connected to schools attended by your children, athletic clubs or teams, automobile support organizations (such as AAA), discounts clubs (such as Groupon or Sam's Club), or affinity memberships/consumer clubs (such as frequent flyer memberships).

Name of Organization	**Dates of Your Membership** (You may approximate.)	**Position(s) Held**

6. Political Activity

(A) Have you ever been a candidate for or been elected or appointed to a political office?

☐ **Yes** ☒ **No (If yes, please complete the chart below)**

Name of Office	Elected/Appointed/ Candidate Only	Year(s) Election Held or Appointment Made	Term of Service (if applicable)

(B) List any offices held in or services rendered, including volunteer services, to a political party or election committee during the last 10 years that you have not listed elsewhere.

Name of Party/Election Committee	Office/Services Rendered	Responsibilities	Dates of Service

Republican / Donald J. Trump for President	Volunteer	Give Speeches	2024
Republican / Helen Kerwin for Texas State Representative	Volunteer	Door-to-Door Canvasser	2023-2024

(C) Itemize all individual political contributions of $200 or more that you have made in the past five years to any individual, campaign organization, political party, political action committee, or similar entity. Please list each individual contribution and not the total amount contributed to the person or entity during the year.

Name of Recipient	Amount	Year of Contribution
Donald J. Trump	$285.00	2024
Donald J. Trump	$285.00	2024
Helen Kerwin (loan provided in 2024 and repaid in 2024)	$65,000	2024
Helen Kerwin	$6,874	2023
Donald J. Trump (Never Surrender, Inc.)	$3,300	2023
Save America PAC	$5,000	2023
Trump Save America Joint Fundraising Committee	$11,600	2023

7. Publications and Speeches

(A) List the titles, publishers and dates of books, articles, reports or other published materials that you have written, including articles published on the Internet. Please provide the Committee with all listed publications via email or other digital format and list all required publications even if no copy of the publication is available to provide.

Title	Publisher	Date(s) of Publication
Three Things We Must do to Keep America First or Our Nation Will Cease	Fox News	October 21, 2024
The View from America First: Writings from a Country in Crisis	America First Press	October 14, 2024
Oct 7 Marked a Civilizational Battle for Both Israel and the US	Daily Caller	October 7, 2024
Americans Must Realize There's Only One Path to Prosperity This November	Daily Caller	September 4, 2024
Don't Fall for the Fake Harris Hype. Conservatives Have a Clear Path to Victory.	Daily Caller	August 22, 2024
Harris's Actions Abandon Israel	Jewish New Syndicate	August 11, 2024
Biden and Harris' 'Bold Plan' Will Usher in Democrat Party Authoritarian Rule	Daily Caller	August 5, 2024
Biden Decision to Drop Out Shows There's a Looming Threat to Democracy – and it's not Trump	Fox News	July 21, 2024
Killing Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee's School Choice Bill Does Not Help Students Achieve	Tennessean	July 12, 2024
Our Foolishly Liberal Media Saw Biden's Decline. Now They've Been Exposed	Fox News	July 10, 2024
Reclaiming the Spirit of Independence Day	Washington Examiner	July 4, 2024
Joe Biden is Simply Not There	Daily Caller	July 2, 2024
Called to Patriotism: Reflecting on the 80th Anniversary of D-Day	Daily Caller	June 6, 2024
Here's Why Joe Biden is Risking a Debate with Donald Trump	Daily Caller	May 20, 2024

A Tale of Two Presidents	Daily Caller	May 13, 2024
Political Violence in America	American Mind	May 7, 2024
Alvin Bragg's Show Trial of Donald Trump is an Attack on the Rule of Law	Newsweek	April 26, 2024
The America First Approach Offers HOPE, Support for Women and Children	Townhall	April 13, 2024
Let the Voters Decide	Daily Caller	December 31, 2023
The Miricle of Christmas 2023	AFPI Commentary	December 25, 2023
Revisiting the Boston Tea Party 250 Years Later	Daily Caller	December 15, 2023
The House GOP Did the Right Thing in Electing Mike Johnson Speaker	Newsweek	October 30, 2023
As America Continues to Run on Oil, Foreign Dictators Have Biden Over a Barrell	The Washington Times	August 30, 2023
A Biden vs. Trump Rematch is What Voters Want	Newsweek	August 16, 2023
Never Forget What the Left is Capable of	Daily Caller	August 3, 2023
The Trials of Donald Trump	Washington Times	July 31, 2023
The Swamp's Process of Punishing Trump	Washington Times	June 20, 2023
Remember the Fallen – and Those They Left Behind	Real Clear Politics	May 29, 2023
Memorial Day Remembrance – 2023	AFPI Website	May 29, 2023
America is Being Ruled by a Regime of Elite Interests	Washington Times	April 17, 2023
America Needs Trump's Foreign Policy Wisdom Now More Than Ever	Daily Caller	April 15, 2023

This Super Bowl Sunday, the Race-Obsessed Press is Focused on the Least Important Thing	Daily Caller	February 12, 2023
Public Schools Go to War Against Merit	Daily Caller	February 10, 2023
The Future of America	Townhall	January 24, 2023
America's School Choice Moment Can't be Missed at Midterm Elections	Fox News	November 3, 2022
The FBI's Raid on Trump's Mar-a-Lago Home has Put America on a Very Dangerous Path	Daily Caller	August 9, 2022
What Does the End of Roe Mean	Townhall	June 30, 2022
What Does the End of Roe Mean (republish)	AFPI	June 20, 2022
The Pro-Life Movement is the Real Pro-Woman Movement	AFPI Website	March 29, 2022
Russia is Small Beans. When will J.P. Morgan and Corporate America Leave China?	Breitbart	March 29, 2022
The State of Joe Biden's United States	Washington Times	March 3, 2022
Canada's Trudeau, Allies' Reaction to Freedom Convoy Truckers Should Put Every American on Notice	Fox News	February 22, 2022
Promising to Nominate a Black Woman Would be Illegal in Any Other Setting	Washington Times	February 11, 2022
Evaluating Joe Biden's First Year as President	Newsweek	January 24, 2022
We Should All Be Able to Agree on Equality	Washington Times	January 21, 2022
Failing as Predicted: Joe Biden's Presidency is Shaping up to be a Historical Disaster	American Mind	January 14, 2022
Wasteful Spending, Carve-Outs for Special Interests, Tax-Breaks for the Wealthy	AFPI Commentary	November 19, 2021

The Importance of 1776 Today More Than Ever	Washington Times	November 2, 2021
Critical Race Theory is Already in Schools. It's Up to Parents to Fight It	Houston Chronicle	October 17, 2021
America Deserves Better Than What Congressional Democrats are Offering	Washington Times	August 23, 2021
Big Tech Censorship Threatens Americans' Constitutional Rights	Newsweek	July 14, 2021
What Blue Wave? A Close Look at Texas Today Tells of a Different Story	The Hill	June 21, 2021
A School Year Lost, and a Solution Found	The Hill	June 5, 2021
Courts: Our Last Line of Defense	Washington Times	May 19, 2021
Deregulation is Spurring Growth	Dispatch-Argus	October 30, 2020
Here Is How to Make Our Failing Prison System Work	Penn Live	February 15, 2018
Trump's Conservative Approach to Criminal Justice Reform	Daily Signal	January 31, 2018
Texas Needs Freedom in Education	Fort Worth Star-Telegram	May 11, 2015
School Choice Would Hike Texas Teacher Pay	Waco Tribune-Herald	September 28, 2014
Free Markets Helping Keep Texas Competitive	Texas Public Policy Foundation	February 3, 2011
Keeping Texas Competitive is the Correct Course	Waco Tribune-Herald	January 28, 2011
A Deal is a Deal—This Tax Should Die	Cannon	May 20, 2003
So You Want to be President . . . How to Get Elected on Your College Campus	Book chapter	1997

(B) List any formal speeches or presentations you have delivered during the last 10 years relevant to the position to which you have been nominated, and all speeches/presentations you have delivered related to <u>any</u> topic for the last five years. Include any testimony to

Congress or any other legislative or administrative body. Please provide the Committee with copies of all listed speeches/presentations via email or other digital format and list all known required speeches even if no copy is available to provide.

Title/Topic	Place/Audience	Date(s) of Speech
Welcome speech	Fourth Annual AFPI Gala	November 14, 2024
Welcome speech	America First BBQ, Musical Performance at Mar-a-Lago	November 13, 2024
Welcome speech	Welcome Reception, AFPI Gala	November 12, 2024
Welcome speech	Maddison Square Garden, Trump Rally	October 27, 2024
Introduction speech	Introduction for Helen Kerwin for Texas State House	March 5, 2024
*All speeches and presentations over the last five years have been welcoming in nature and have been consistent with topics related to the role as President of the America First Policy Institute.		

8. Lobbying

In the past 10 years, have you registered as a lobbyist? If so, please indicate the state, federal, or local bodies with which you have registered (e.g., House, Senate, California Secretary of State).

No.

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF
GOVERNMENT ETHICS

February 7, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In accordance with the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, I enclose a copy of the financial disclosure report filed by Brooke Rollins. President-Elect Trump has announced his intention to nominate Brooke Rollins for the position of Secretary, Department of Agriculture.

We have reviewed the report and have obtained advice from the agency concerning any possible conflict in light of its functions and the nominee's proposed duties. Also enclosed is an ethics agreement outlining the actions that the nominee will undertake to avoid conflicts of interest. Unless a date for compliance is indicated in the ethics agreement, the nominee must fully comply within three months of confirmation with any action specified in the ethics agreement.

Based thereon, we believe that this nominee is in compliance with applicable laws and regulations governing conflicts of interest.

Sincerely,

DAVID HUITEMA

Digitally signed by DAVID HUITEMA
Date: 2025.01.15 12:51:06 -05'00'

David Huitema
Director

Enclosures

January 14, 2025

Mr. Stuart Bender
Designated Agency Ethics Official
U.S. Department of Agriculture
J.L. Whitten Building
Room 347-W
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Bender:

The purpose of this letter is to describe the steps that I will take to avoid any actual or apparent conflict of interest in the event that I am confirmed for the position of Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is my responsibility to understand and comply with commitments outlined in this agreement.

SECTION 1 – GENERAL COMMITMENTS

As required by the criminal conflicts of interest law at 18 U.S.C. § 208(a), I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter in which I know that I have a financial interest directly and predictably affected by the matter, or in which I know that a person whose interests are imputed to me has a financial interest directly and predictably affected by the particular matter, unless I first obtain a written waiver, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1), or qualify for a regulatory exemption, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(2). I understand that the interests of the following persons are imputed to me:

- Any spouse or minor child of mine;
- Any general partner of a partnership in which I am a limited or general partner;
- Any organization in which I serve as an officer, director, trustee, general partner, or employee, even if uncompensated; and
- Any person or organization with which I am negotiating or have an arrangement concerning prospective employment.

In the event that an actual or potential conflict of interest arises during my appointment, I will consult with an agency ethics official and take the measures necessary to resolve the conflict, such as recusal from the particular matter or divestiture of an asset.

If I have a managed account or otherwise use the services of an investment professional during my appointment, I will ensure that the account manager or investment professional obtains my prior approval on a case-by-case basis for the purchase of any assets other than cash, cash equivalents, investment funds that qualify for the regulatory exemption for diversified mutual funds and unit investment trusts at 5 C.F.R. § 2640.201(a), obligations of the United States, or municipal bonds.

I will receive a live ethics briefing from a member of the ethics office after my confirmation but not later than 15 days after my appointment pursuant to the ethics program regulation at 5 C.F.R. § 2638.305. Within 90 days of my confirmation, I will submit my Certification of Ethics Agreement Compliance which documents my compliance with this ethics agreement.

I will not modify this ethics agreement without your approval and the approval of the U.S. Office of Government Ethics (OGE) pursuant to the ethics agreement requirements contained in the financial disclosure regulation at 5 C.F.R. § 2634.803(a)(4).

SECTION 2 – EMPLOYMENT RELATED INTERESTS

Upon confirmation, I will resign my positions with the following entities:

- America First Policy Institute
- America First Works
- Texas Public Policy Foundation

Further, pursuant to the impartiality regulation at 5 C.F.R. § 2635.502, for a period of one year after my resignation from each of these entities, I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter involving specific parties in which I know that entity is a party or represents a party, unless I am first authorized to participate, pursuant to 5 C.F.R. § 2635.502(d).

SECTION 3 – BLR IDEAS CORP

I am the sole proprietor of my consulting firm, which does business as BLR Ideas Corp. Upon confirmation, my consulting firm will cease engaging in any business, including the representation of clients. During my appointment to the position of Secretary of Agriculture, the firm will remain dormant and will not advertise. I will not perform any services for the firm, except that I will comply with any court orders or subpoenas and any requirements involving legal filings, taxes, and fees that are necessary to maintain the firm while it is in an inactive status. As Secretary of Agriculture, I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter that to my knowledge has a direct and predictable effect on the financial interests of BLR Ideas Corp. In addition, all amounts owed to me by any of my clients will be fixed before I assume the duties of the position of Secretary of Agriculture, and I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter that to my knowledge has a direct and predictable effect on the ability or willingness of any of these clients to pay these amounts. In addition, pursuant to the impartiality regulation at 5 C.F.R. § 2635.502, I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter involving specific parties in which I know a former client of mine is a party or represents a party for a period of one year after I last provided service to that client or until the client satisfies any outstanding bill, whichever is later, unless I am first authorized to participate, pursuant to 5 C.F.R. § 2635.502(d).

SECTION 4 – REVOCABLE FAMILY TRUST

I will retain my position as a trustee of the Revocable Family Trust #1. I will not receive any fees for the services that I provide as a trustee during my appointment to the position of Secretary. I

will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter that to my knowledge has a direct and predictable effect on the financial interests of the Revocable Family Trust #1, unless I first obtain a written waiver, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1), or qualify for a regulatory exemption, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(2).

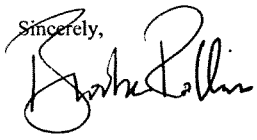
SECTION 5 – SPOUSAL EMPLOYMENT

My spouse is an employee of Hillwood Energy and HKN Energy and participates in the employee net profit plans of these companies. My spouse does not hold any stock, restricted stock, stock options, or any other equity interest in Hillwood Energy or HKN Energy. Through the net profit plan with Hillwood Energy and HKN Energy, my spouse invests in HKN Energy II, LP; Hillwood Energy New Ventures, LP; Hillwood Energy Partners, LP; Hillwood Oil & Gas Operating Co., LP; Hunter Gathering, LP; and Petrus Minerals Operating Co., LP. I will not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter that to my knowledge has a direct and predictable effect on the financial interests of Hillwood Energy, HKN Energy, any of these LPs, or any of their underlying holdings, unless I first obtain a written waiver, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 208(b)(1).

SECTION 6 – PUBLIC POSTING

I have been advised that this ethics agreement and the Certification of Ethics Agreement Compliance will be posted publicly, consistent with the public information law at 5 U.S.C. § 552, on the website of the U.S. Office of Government Ethics with ethics agreements of other presidential nominees who file public financial disclosure reports.

Sincerely,



Brooke Rollins

OGE Form 278e (Updated 08/2024) (Expires 08/31/2027)
U.S. Office of Government Ethics; 5 C.F.R. part 2634 | Form Approved: OMB No. (3209-0001)

Report Type: Nominee Report
Year (Annual Report only):
Date of Appointment:
Date of Termination:

Executive Branch Personnel
Public Financial Disclosure Report (OGE Form 278e)

Filer's Information

Rollins, Brooke

Secretary, Department of Agriculture

Other Federal Government Positions Held During the Preceding 12 Months:
None

Names of Congressional Committees Considering Nomination:

- Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Electronic Signature - I certify that the statements I have made in this form are true, complete and correct to the best of my knowledge.

/s/ Rollins, Brooke [electronically signed on 01/08/2025 by Rollins, Brooke in Integrity.gov]

Agency Ethics Official's Opinion - On the basis of information contained in this report, I conclude that the filer is in compliance with applicable laws and regulations (subject to any comments below).

/s/ Bender, Stuart, Certifying Official [electronically signed on 01/15/2025 by Bender, Stuart in Integrity.gov]

Other review conducted by

U.S. Office of Government Ethics Certification
/s/ Huitema, David, Certifying Official [electronically signed on 01/15/2025 by Huitema, David in Integrity.gov]

1. Filer's Positions Held Outside United States Government

#	ORGANIZATION NAME		CITY, STATE	ORGANIZATION TYPE	POSITION HELD	FROM	TO
1	America First Policy Institute		Washington, District of Columbia	Non-Profit	President / CEO, Board Member	2/2021	Present
2	BLR Ideas Corp		Glen Rose, Texas	Corporation	President and Director	6/2021	Present
3	America First Works		Washington, District of Columbia	Non-Profit	Board Member	11/2021	Present
4	Texas Public Policy Foundation		Austin, Texas	Non-Profit	Senior Advisor to the Board	1/2021	Present
5	Revocable Family Trust #1	See Endnote	Fort Worth, Texas	Trust	Trustee	1/2025	Present

2. Filer's Employment Assets & Income and Retirement Accounts

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
1	America First Policy Institute	N/A		Salary and Bonus	$1,050,000
2	IRA	No			
2.1	DFAR - Dimensional US Real Estate ETF	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
2.2	DFAT - Dimensional US Targeted Value ETF	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
2.3	DFIC - Dimensional International Core Equity 2 ETF	Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
2.4	DFUS - Dimensional US Equity Market ETF	Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
2.5	IUSG - Ishares Core S&P US Growth ETF	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
2.6	JCPB - JPMorgan Core Plus Bond ETF	Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
2.7	JPST - JPMorgan Ultra Short Income ETF	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
2.8	QUAL - Ishares MSCI USA QLTY Fact ETF	Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
2.9	VWO - Vanguard FTSE Emerging Market ETV IV	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
2.10	BIMBX - Blackrock Systematic Multi-Strat Instl	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
2.11	BSIIX - Blackrock Strategic Income Opps Instl	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
2.12	SWVXX - Schwabb Value Advantage Money Investor Share	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
3	403B Plan From AFPI	No			
3.1	Voya Intermediate Bond Fund; R6	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
3.2	VFIAX - Vanguard 500 Index Fund; Admiral	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
3.3	VIMAX - Vanguard Mid-Cap Index Fund; Admiral	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
3.4	VSMAX - Vanguard Small-Cap Index Fund; Admiral	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
4	BLR Ideas Corp (public policy consulting)	N/A	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
5	Health Savings Account	No			
5.1	MetLife Guaranteed Account	N/A	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)

3. Filer's Employment Agreements and Arrangements

#	EMPLOYER OR PARTY	CITY, STATE	STATUS AND TERMS	DATE
1	BLR Ideas Corp	Glen Rose, Texas	My consulting business will be inactive during my appointment.	1/2025
2	America First Policy Institute (AFPI)	Washington, District of Columbia	I will continue to participate in the health savings account established by AFPI. The account sponsor will not make further contributions after my separation	2/2021
3	America First Policy Institute (AFPI)	Washington, District of Columbia	I will roll out of AFPI's 403B plan after my confirmation and AFPI will make no further contributions upon my resignation.	1/2025

4. Filer's Sources of Compensation Exceeding $5,000 in a Year

#	SOURCE NAME	CITY, STATE	BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DUTIES
1	America First Policy Institute	Washington, District of Columbia	Services as President / CEO, Board Member
2	Texas Public Policy Foundation	Austin, Texas	Consulting services (client of BLR Ideas Corp)
3	Mouradian Foundation	New York, New York	Consulting services (client of BLR Ideas Corp)
4	James Dobson Institute	Colorado Springs, Colorado	Consulting services (client of BLR Ideas Corp)

5. Spouse's Employment Assets & Income and Retirement Accounts

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
1	Hillwood Energy / HKN Energy (Oil and Gas Exploration and Production)	N/A		Salary, Bonus, and Net Profit Payments	
2	Hillwood 401K	No			
2.1	VBTIX - Vanguard Total Bond Market Index Fund	Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
2.2	VTSAX - Vanguard Total Stock Market Index Fund	Yes	$250,001 - $500,000		None (or less than $201)
2.3	VTSNX - Vanguard Total International Stock Index Fund Institutional	Yes	$250,001 - $500,000		None (or less than $201)
2.4	VEMAX - Vanguard Emerging Markets Stock Index Fund Admiral Shares	Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
2.5	VWUAX - Vanguard US Growth Fund Admiral Shares	Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
2.6	VSMAX - Vanguard Small Cap Index Fund Admiral Shares	Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
2.7	VMVAX - Vanguard Mid-Cap Value Index Fund Admiral Shares	Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
3	IRA	No			
3.1	DFAR - Dimensional US Real Estaate ETF	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
3.2	DFAT - Dimensional US Targeted Value ETF	Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
3.3	DFIC - Dimensional International Core Equity 2 ETF	Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)

#	DESCRIPTION		EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
3.4	DFUS - Dimensional US Equity Market ETF		Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
3.5	iShares Core S&P US Growth ETF (IUSG)		Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
3.6	JCPB - JPM Core Plus Bond ETF		Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
3.7	JPST - JPMorgan Ultra Short Income ETF		Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
3.8	QUAL - Ishares MSCI USA Qlty Fact ETF		Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
3.9	VWO - Vanguard FTSE Emerging Market ETF IV		Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
3.10	BlackRock Systematic Multi-Strategy Fund Institutional Class Shares (BIMBX)		Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
3.11	BlackRock Strategic Income Opportunities Portfolio Institutional Shares (BSIIX)		Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
4	HKN Energy II, LP (limited partnership interest in a private oil and gas business operating in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq)		N/A	Over $1,000,000	Dividends	Over $1,000,000
5	Hillwood Energy New Ventures, LP (limited partnership interest in private oil and gas business operating in Texas)		N/A	Over $1,000,000		None (or less than $201)
6	Hillwood Energy Partners, L.P. (limited partnership interest in private operating oil and gas business in the United States)	See Endnote	N/A	None (or less than $1,001)		None (or less than $201)
7	Hillwood Oil & Gas Operating Co., L.P. (limited partnership interest in private oil and gas operating company in Texas)	See Endnote	N/A	None (or less than $1,001)		None (or less than $201)
8	Hunter Gathering, L.P. (limited partnership interest in private pipeline business operating in Texas)	See Endnote	N/A	None (or less than $1,001)		None (or less than $201)

#	DESCRIPTION		EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
9	Petrus Minerals Operating Co, L.P. (limited partnership interest in private oil and gas business operating in Texas)	See Endnote	N/A	None (or less than $1,001)		None (or less than $201)

6. Other Assets and Income

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
1	U.S. bank #1 (cash)	N/A	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
2	U.S. bank #1 - Child 2 (cash)	N/A	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
3	U.S. bank #2 - Child 1 (cash)	N/A	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
4	U.S. bank #2 - Child 2 (cash)	N/A	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
5	U.S. bank #2 - Child 3 (cash)	N/A	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
6	U.S. bank #2 - Child 4 (cash)	N/A	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
7	U.S. bank #3 (cash)	N/A	$500,001 - $1,000,000	Interest	$15,001 - $50,000
8	VCSP/College America 529 Plan FBO Child 3	No			
8.1	CAPITAL INCOME BUILDER Class 529-F-2 (FBCIX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
8.2	CAPITAL WORLD BOND FUND Class 529-F-2 (FCWBX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
8.3	CAPITAL WORLD GROWTH & INCOME FUND Class 529-F-2 (FCWGX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
8.4	BOND FUND OF AMERICA Class 529-F-2 (FFBOX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
8.5	U.S. Government Securities Fund Class 529-F-2 (FSUGX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
9	VCSP/College America 529 Plan FBO Child 2	No			
9.1	CAPITAL INCOME BUILDER Class 529-F-2 (FBCIX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
9.2	CAPITAL WORLD GROWTH & INCOME FUND Class 529-F-2 (FCWGX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
9.3	BOND FUND OF AMERICA Class 529-F-2 (FFBOX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
10	VCSP/College America 529 Plan FBO Child 4	No			
10.1	CAPITAL INCOME BUILDER Class 529-F-2 (FBCIX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
10.2	CAPITAL WORLD GROWTH & INCOME FUND Class 529-F-2 (FCWGX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
10.3	BOND FUND OF AMERICA Class 529-F-2 (FFBOX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
11	VCSP/College America 529 Plan FBO Child 1	No			
11.1	CAPITAL INCOME BUILDER Class 529-F-2 (FBCIX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
11.2	CAPITAL WORLD GROWTH & INCOME FUND Class 529-F-2 (FCWGX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
11.3	BOND FUND OF AMERICA Class 529-F-2 (FFBOX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
11.4	U.S. Government Securities Fund Class 529-F-2 (FSUGX)	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
12	Cigna Health Savings Account	No			

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
12.1	SCHA - Schwab US Small-Cap ETF	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
12.2	SCHB - Schwab US Broad Market Schwab	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
12.3	SCHD - Schwab US Dividend Equity ETF Schwab	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
12.4	SCHG - Schwab US Large-Cap Growth ETF	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
12.5	SCHJ - Schwab 1-5 Year Corporate Bond ETF	Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
12.6	U.S. brokerage (cash)	N/A	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
13	JP Morgan 2011 Vintage Private Fund	Yes	$15,001 - $50,000		$5,001 - $15,000
14	U.S. brokerage account	No			
14.1	BDNX - Vanguard Total International Bond ETF	Yes	$50,001 - $100,000		None (or less than $201)
14.2	DFAC - Dimensional US Core Equity 2 ETF	Yes	$500,001 - $1,000,000		None (or less than $201)
14.3	DFAR - Dimensional US Real Estate ETF	Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.4	DFAS - Dimensional US Small Cap ETF	Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.5	DFIC - Dimensional International Core Equity 2 ETF	Yes	$250,001 - $500,000		None (or less than $201)
14.6	iShares High Yield Muni Income Active ETF	Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.7	IUSG - Ishares Core S&P US Growth ETF	Yes	$250,001 - $500,000		None (or less than $201)

#	DESCRIPTION		EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
14.8	JMST - JPMorgan Ultra Short Municipal Income ETF		Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.9	QUAL - Ishares MSCI USA Qlty Fact ETF		Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.10	VIG - Vanguard Dividend Appreciation ETF		Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.11	VWO - Vanguard FTSE Emerging Mark ETF IV		Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.12	BIMBX - Blackrock SystemMatic Multi-Strat Instl		Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.13	BSIIX - Blackrock Strategic Income Opps Instl		Yes	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
14.14	U.S. brokerage account (Cash)		N/A	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)
15	Joint Tenant Account		No			
15.1	DFAC - Dimensional US Core Equity 2 ETF		Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
15.2	DFGP - Dimensional Gbl CRE Pls Fxd ETF		Yes	None (or less than $1,001)		None (or less than $201)
15.3	DFIC - Dimensional International Core Equity 2 ETF		Yes	$1,001 - $15,000		None (or less than $201)
16	GovPlus Fund AI, L.P.	See Endnote	Yes	None (or less than $1,001)		$50,001 - $100,000
17	Phillips Ray Capital Management	See Endnote	Yes	None (or less than $1,001)		$50,001 - $100,000
18	Atlas Energy Solutions (AESI)	See Endnote	N/A	None (or less than $1,001)	Capital Gains	$5,001 - $15,000
19	Show Cattle		N/A	$1,001 - $15,000	Capital Gains	$15,001 - $50,000

#	DESCRIPTION	EIF	VALUE	INCOME TYPE	INCOME AMOUNT
20	MBR Asset Holdings, LLC	No			None (or less than $201)
20.1	4.97% interest in HE RF Coinvest I, LLC (operating company that owns oil and gas assets in East Texas)	N/A	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
20.2	4.97% interest in HE NV II Coinvest, LLC (operating company that owns oil and gas assets in East Texas)	N/A	$100,001 - $250,000		None (or less than $201)
20.3	6.90% interest in HE Coinvest II, LLC (operating company that owns oil and gas assets in South Texas)	N/A	$15,001 - $50,000		None (or less than $201)

7. Transactions

(N/A) - Not required for this type of report

8. Liabilities

#	CREDITOR NAME		TYPE	AMOUNT	YEAR INCURRED	RATE	TERM
1	First United Bank		Mortgage on Personal Residence	$1,000,001 - $5,000,000	2021	2.9%	30 Years
2	First United Bank	See Endnote	Mortgage on Personal Residence	$100,001 - $250,000	2016	3.625%	30 Years

9. Gifts and Travel Reimbursements

(N/A) - Not required for this type of report

Endnotes

PART	#	ENDNOTE
1.	5	No underlying assets.
5.	6	The valuation reflects projects that have failed.
5.	7	The valuation reflects projects that have failed.
5.	8	The valuation reflects projects that have failed.
5.	9	The valuation reflects projects that have failed.
6.	16	This asset was completely sold in August 2024 and the income amount reflects income generated from the asset during the reporting period.
6.	17	This asset was completely sold during the 3Q of 2024. The income amount reflects income generated during the reporting period.
6.	18	Sold in September 2023
8.	2	Lakehouse in Texas

Summary of Contents

1. Filer's Positions Held Outside United States Government

Part 1 discloses positions that the filer held at any time during the reporting period (excluding positions with the United States Government). Positions are reportable even if the filer did not receive compensation.

This section does not include the following: (1) positions with religious, social, fraternal, or political organizations; (2) positions solely of an honorary nature; (3) positions held as part of the filer's official duties with the United States Government; (4) mere membership in an organization; and (5) passive investment interests as a limited partner or non-managing member of a limited liability company.

2. Filer's Employment Assets & Income and Retirement Accounts

Part 2 discloses the following:

- Sources of earned and other non-investment income of the filer totaling more than $200 during the reporting period (e.g., salary, fees, partnership share, honoraria, scholarships, and prizes)
- Assets related to the filer's business, employment, or other income-generating activities (1) that ended the reporting period with a value greater than $1,000 or (2) from which more than $200 in income was received during the reporting period (e.g., equity in business or partnership, stock options, retirement plans/accounts and their underlying holdings as appropriate, deferred compensation, and intellectual property, such as book deals and patents)

This section does not include assets or income from United States Government employment or assets that were acquired separately from the filer's business, employment, or other income-generating activities (e.g., assets purchased through a brokerage account). Note: The type of income is not required if the amount of income is $0 - $200 or if the asset qualifies as an excepted investment fund (EIF).

3. Filer's Employment Agreements and Arrangements

Part 3 discloses agreements or arrangements that the filer had during the reporting period with an employer or former employer (except the United States Government), such as the following:

- Future employment
- Leave of absence
- Continuing payments from an employer, including severance and payments not yet received for previous work (excluding ordinary salary from a current employer)
- Continuing participation in an employee welfare, retirement, or other benefit plan, such as pensions or a deferred compensation plan
- Retention or disposition of employer-awarded equity, sharing in profits or carried interests (e.g., vested and unvested stock options, restricted stock, future share of a company's profits, etc.)

4. Filer's Sources of Compensation Exceeding $5,000 in a Year

Part 4 discloses sources (except the United States Government) that paid more than $5,000 in a calendar year for the filer's services during any year of the reporting period.

The filer discloses payments both from employers and from any clients to whom the filer personally provided services. The filer discloses a source even if the source made its payment to the filer's employer and not to the filer. The filer does not disclose a client's payment to the filer's employer if the filer did not provide the services for which the client is paying.

5. Spouse's Employment Assets & Income and Retirement Accounts

Part 5 discloses the following:

- Sources of earned income (excluding honoraria) for the filer's spouse totaling more than $1,000 during the reporting period (e.g., salary, consulting fees, and partnership share)
- Sources of honoraria for the filer's spouse greater than $200 during the reporting period
- Assets related to the filer's spouse's employment, business activities, other income-generating activities (1) that ended the reporting period with a value greater than $1,000 or (2) from which more than $200 in income was received during the reporting period (e.g., equity in business or partnership, stock options, retirement plans/accounts and their underlying holdings as appropriate, deferred compensation, and intellectual property, such as book deals and patents)

This section does not include assets or income from United States Government employment or assets that were acquired separately from the filer's spouse's business, employment, or other income-generating activities (e.g., assets purchased through a brokerage account). Note: The type of income is not required if the amount of income is $0 - $200 or if the asset qualifies as an excepted investment fund (EIF). Amounts of income are not required for a spouse's earned income (excluding honoraria).

6. Other Assets and Income

Part 6 discloses each asset, not already reported, (1) that ended the reporting period with a value greater than $1,000 or (2) from which more than $200 in investment income was received during the reporting period. For purposes of the value and income thresholds, the filer aggregates the filer's interests with those of the filer's spouse and dependent children.

This section does not include the following types of assets: (1) a personal residence (unless it was rented out during the reporting period); (2) income or retirement benefits associated with United States Government employment (e.g., Thrift Savings Plan); and (3) cash accounts (e.g., checking, savings, money market accounts) at a single financial institution with a value of $5,000 or less (unless more than $200 in income was received). Additional exceptions apply. Note: The type of income is not required if the amount of income is $0 - $200 or if the asset qualifies as an excepted investment fund (EIF).

7. Transactions

Part 7 discloses purchases, sales, or exchanges of real property or securities in excess of $1,000 made on behalf of the filer, the filer's spouse or dependent child during the reporting period.

This section does not include transactions that concern the following: (1) a personal residence, unless rented out; (2) cash accounts (e.g., checking, savings, CDs, money market accounts) and money market mutual funds; (3) Treasury bills, bonds, and notes; and (4) holdings within a federal Thrift Savings Plan account. Additional exceptions apply.

8. Liabilities

Part 8 discloses liabilities over $10,000 that the filer, the filer's spouse or dependent child owed at any time during the reporting period.

This section does not include the following types of liabilities: (1) mortgages on a personal residence, unless rented out (note: certain PAS nominees and appointees are required to report all mortgages); (2) loans secured by a personal motor vehicle, household furniture, or appliances, unless the loan exceeds the item's purchase price; and (3) revolving charge accounts, such as credit card balances, if the outstanding liability did not exceed $10,000 at the end of the reporting period. Additional exceptions apply.

9. Gifts and Travel Reimbursements

This section discloses:

- Gifts totaling more than $480 that the filer, the filer's spouse, and dependent children received from any one source during the reporting period.
- Travel reimbursements totaling more than $480 that the filer, the filer's spouse, and dependent children received from any one source during the reporting period.

For purposes of this section, the filer need not aggregate any gift or travel reimbursement with a value of $192 or less. Regardless of the value, this section does not include the following items: (1) anything received from relatives; (2) anything received from the United States Government or from the District of Columbia, state, or local governments; (3) bequests and other forms of inheritance; (4) gifts and travel reimbursements given to the filer's agency in connection with the filer's official travel; (5) gifts of hospitality (food, lodging, entertainment) at the donor's residence or personal premises; and (6) anything received by the filer's spouse or dependent children totally independent of their relationship to the filer. Additional exceptions apply.

Privacy Act Statement

5 U.S.C.§ 13101 et seq., and 5 C.F.R. Part 2634 of the U. S. Office of Government Ethics regulations require the reporting of this information. Failure to provide the requested information may result in separation, disciplinary action, or civil action. The primary use of the information on this report is for review by Government officials to determine compliance with applicable Federal laws and regulations. This report may also be disclosed upon request to any requesting person in accordance with 5 U.S.C. §§ 13107 and § 13122(b)(1) or as otherwise authorized by law. You may inspect applications for public access of your own form upon request. Additional disclosures of the information on this report may be made: (1) to any requesting person, subject to the limitation contained in section 208(d)(1) of title 18, any determination granting an exemption pursuant to sections 208(b)(1) and 208(b)(3) of title 18; (2) to a Federal, State, or local law enforcement agency if the disclosing agency becomes aware of violations or potential violations of law or regulation; (3) to a source when necessary to obtain information relevant to a conflict of interest investigation or determination; (4) to the National Archives and Records Administration or the General Services Administration in records management inspections; (5) to the Office of Management and Budget during legislative coordination on private relief legislation; (6) when the disclosing agency determines that the records are arguably relevant to a proceeding before a court, grand jury, or administrative or adjudicative body, or in a proceeding before an administrative or adjudicative body when the adjudicator determines the records to be relevant to the proceeding; (7) to reviewing officials in a new office, department or agency when an employee transfers or is detailed from one covered position to another, a public financial disclosure report and any accompanying documents, including statements notifying an employee's supervising ethics office of the commencement of negotiations for future employment or compensation or of an agreement for future employment or compensation; (8) to a Member of Congress or a congressional office in response to an inquiry made on behalf of and at the request of an individual who is the subject of the record; (9) to contractors and other non-Government employees working on a contract, service or assignment for the Federal Government when necessary to accomplish a function related to this system of records; (10) on the OGE Website and to any person, department or agency, any written ethics agreement, including certifications of ethics agreement compliance, filed with OGE by an individual nominated by the President to a position requiring Senate confirmation; (11) on the OGE Website and to any person, department or agency, any certificate of divestiture issued by OGE; (12) on the OGE Website and to any person, department or agency, any waiver of the restrictions contained in Executive Order 13989 or any superseding executive order; (13) to appropriate agencies, entities and persons when there has been a suspected or confirmed breach of the system of records, the agency maintaining the records has determined that there is a risk of harm to individuals, the agency, the Federal Government, or national security, and the disclosure is reasonably necessary to assist in connection with the agency's efforts to respond to the suspected or confirmed breach or to prevent, minimize, or remedy such harm; and (14) to another Federal agency or Federal entity, when the agency maintaining the record determines that information from this system of records is reasonably necessary to assist the recipient agency or entity in responding to a suspected or confirmed breach or in preventing, minimizing, or remedying the risk of harm to individuals, the recipient agency or entity, the Federal Government, or national security. See also the OGE/GOVT-1 executive branch-wide Privacy Act system of records.

Public Burden Information

This collection of information is estimated to take an average of ten hours per response, including time for reviewing the instructions, gathering the data needed, and completing the form. Send comments regarding the burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to the Program Counsel, U.S. Office of Government Ethics (OGE) 250 E Street, S.W., Suite 750, Washington, DC 20024-3249.

Pursuant to the Paperwork Reduction Act, as amended, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and no person is required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB (that control number 3209-0001, is displayed here and at the top of the first page of this OGE Form 278e).

January 21, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman, Chairman Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

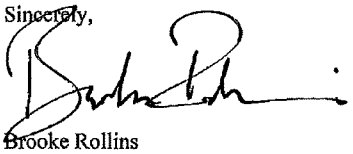
The Honorable Amy Klobuchar, Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

The Ethics in Government Act of 1978 (the Act), as amended, provides that Presidential nominees for a position requiring the advice and consent of the Senate shall provide any necessary updates to their public financial disclosure report with respect to any outside earned income and honoraria received through the period ending no more than five days prior to the commencement of the Senate hearing of their nomination. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 13103(b)(1) and 5 C.F.R. § 2634.606(a).

Please be advised that I have informed the appropriate ethics officials that the information required by section 102(a)(1)(A) of the Act with respect to income and honoraria contained in OGE Form 278e (Executive Branch Public Financial Disclosure Report) executed by me on January 8, 2025, is current as of January 21, 2025. This date is within five days prior to the date of the hearing scheduled to consider my nomination.

Sincerely,



Brooke Rollins

cc: David P. Huitema, Director, OGE

Stuart Bender, Designated Agency Ethics Official and Director, USDA Office of Ethics

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

JANUARY 23, 2025

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Nomination Hearing: January 23, 2025
Ms. Brooke Rollins, of Texas, to be Secretary of Agriculture
Questions for the Record

Chairman John Boozman

1. **Line Speeds** - Since the 1990s, successive administrations have worked to modernize USDA's food safety inspection system by improving meat and poultry processing efficiency while maintaining food safety. This has included allowing pork and poultry plants who opt-in to the New Swine Inspection System (NSIS) and New Poultry Inspection System (NPIS) to operate at higher line speeds. In 2021, a Minnesota district court blocked a Trump administration rule that allowed pork plants to operate at higher line speeds, claiming USDA failed to properly take into account the impacts on worker safety. The Biden administration attempted to find a path forward by initiating trials that allowed certain plants to receive short-term waivers to operate at higher line speeds in exchange for participating in worker safety studies. Unfortunately, USDA continued to expand its demands of plants participating in these studies, while offering no long-term certainty. The ongoing pork and poultry trials have now been extended until May 15. As Secretary, will you make it an immediate priority to provide certainty to these processors and work with the Committee to develop a long-term path forward on this issue?

   I have been made aware of a study released in January of 2025 that examines the impacts of increased line speeds on worker safety at processing plants. I will work with my team to review this study, as well as other relevant studies, and take such information into account regarding any future rulemaking, if confirmed.

2. **Packers and Stockyards Act** - Dating back to 2010, the previous three administrations have considered a series of rules under the Packers and Stockyards Act, which have been incredibly divisive amongst the agriculture sector. The Obama administration grossly overstepped its authority under the Packers and Stockyards Act implementing what was known as the GIPSA rule, which resulted in Congress preventing the finalization of the rulemaking for three years, although it was finalized in the final weeks of the Obama administration. President Trump's administration rescinded the interim final rule in 2017. The Biden Administration divided the Obama era rule into four separate rulemakings, of which three were finalized. The finalization of these rules led directly to higher regulatory compliance costs for meat and poultry companies, which in turn led to food inflation for consumers. As Secretary, will you make it a priority to roll back the regulatory overreach of the Biden administration and to ensure USDA's regulatory framework follows the intent of Congress laid out under the Packers and Stockyards Act?

   I cannot commit to altering rules that I have not yet had the opportunity to review, but I will commit to engaging with Congress as appropriate.

3. **Accelerating Broadband Deployment to Rural Communities –** According to the Federal Communications Commission, roughly 24 million Americans, many of whom live in rural communities, still lack access to a basic broadband connection. While USDA has programs to make significant progress in eliminating the digital divide, the outgoing administration has focused its efforts on a one size fits all approach to communications infrastructure deployment. While fiber optic infrastructure may be the gold standard for some communities, it is often far too expensive and cumbersome to deploy in rural and remote areas that have low population density, challenging topography, geology or all of the above. USDA also currently prioritizes applications from Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that commit to net neutrality principles and union workforce standards that often drive up the cost of deployment and which are not required in statute. What are your thoughts on ways to accelerate the pace of broadband deployment and will you commit to allowing ISPs the flexibility to deploy communications infrastructure that best fits the needs of the communities?

   If confirmed, exploring improvements to USDA's Rural Development programs will be chief among my priorities, including ensuring rural broadband programs satisfy the needs of every rural community. Gaps in rural broadband negatively impact schools, businesses, and rural Americans just trying to complete life's daily tasks.

   If confirmed, I look forward to gaining a fuller understanding of the programmatic debates described above, and I will work to expand rural broadband deployment.

4. **USDA Office of Pest Management Policy** – USDA's Office of Pest Management Policy (OPMP) develops and coordinates the Department's policy on pesticides and integrated pest management. OPMP also provides vital scientific analysis and agronomic data to EPA's Office of Pesticide Programs to help inform EPA's risk-assessments and economic benefits on the registration and re-registration of crop protection tools. EPA's timely, predictable, transparent, and science-based review of these products is critical to ensuring the availability of these tools to protect against pests and diseases. OPMP also plays a significant role in coordinating agricultural biotechnology regulations with USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, EPA, and FDA. As USDA Secretary, will you continue to strengthen OPMP to ensure EPA appropriately incorporates OPMP's analysis into EPA's registration decisions and will you ensure robust collaboration between USDA, EPA, and FDA to maintain a risk-based, science-based approach to pesticide regulation that accounts for the critical role these tools play in American agriculture?

   If confirmed, I will ensure USDA's Office of Pest Management Policy (OPMP) is well-positioned to assist Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with scientific and agronomic data, as well as the views

of farmers, with respect to crop protection tools. I will personally encourage robust collaboration between USDA, EPA, and FDA on these matters.

Eliminating Environmental Review for RD Loan Guarantee Projects - The Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA), which was signed into law in 2023, amended the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to mitigate the regulatory burdens brought about by environmental reviews for certain actions not considered "major federal actions". Specifically, the FRA clarified that NEPA review is not required for certain loans or loan guarantees, where agencies lack control over the project, such as USDA's One RD loan guarantee programs. By complying with the FRA, USDA can streamline a cumbersome process that often results in delays for projects located in rural communities and in dire need of economic development. Will you commit to working with staff at USDA and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to quickly finalize a regulation to ensure that USDA is compliant with the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023?

I will work with staff at USDA and at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to streamline processes at USDA, including in the Rural Development mission area, thereby leading to more timely economic development and overall advancement of rural prosperity.

Ranking Member Amy Klobuchar

1. **Responsiveness to Congress:** If you are confirmed, I look forward to working with you. If confirmed, do you agree, without reservation, to:
   a. Promptly reply to any request for information from me or any duly constituted committee of Congress and provide the requested information?

      I will respond promptly and appropriately.

   b. Respond to my requests for data and technical assistance in informing or drafting legislation or implementation of the law?

      I will respond promptly and appropriately.

   c. Notify me or my staff in advance of any public announcement of any major changes made by you or within the Department of Agriculture during your tenure?

      I will make every reasonable attempt to appropriately notify Congress of impending action by the Department.

d. Provide to this Committee any reports provided by USDA to the Senate Appropriations Committee or the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee?

I will respond promptly and appropriately.

2. **Oversight:** Congress, along with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Inspectors General, play a critical role in providing oversight of the executive branch, regardless of Administration.
   a. In your previous role in the executive branch, did you work on responding to any oversight requests from Congress, GAO, or an Inspector General, and if so, how would you describe your approach to those oversight requests?

      I intend to work with Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and/or the Inspector General as appropriate.

   b. If confirmed, will you commit to responding promptly and thoroughly to Members of Congress (regardless of party), GAO, and the Inspector General on all oversight requests?

      Yes.

3. **Department Operations/Staffing:** President Trump recently signed a series of executive orders that have started to impact USDA programs, operations, and staffing at the same time that USDA has been provided over $30 billion in resources that need to reach farmers in a timely manner. An overly broad or lengthy hiring freeze could interfere with delivery of this assistance. If confirmed, will you commit to providing complete, timely, and accurate data to both majority and minority staff of this Committee, on a monthly basis regarding:
   a. The number of vacancies, status of the hiring freeze, and exemptions sought and granted within each USDA agency and office?

      I will do so when appropriate and when information is available. I look forward to remaining in touch with your office on these requests.

   b. Retirements and terminations by USDA agency, position, grade, and schedule (if the position is in the excepted service)?

      I will do so when appropriate and when information is available. I look forward to remaining in touch with your office on these requests.

c. The number, grade, schedule (if the position is in the excepted service), and agency of each employee put on leave, terminated, transferred, or retired as a result of actions taken under any of the executive orders that affect USDA staffing or operations?

I will do so when appropriate and when information is available. I look forward to remaining in touch with your office on these requests.

4. **Disbursement of Funds:** This week, President Trump signed an executive order that directed agencies to pause the disbursement of funds appropriated under the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.
   a. Has USDA paused the disbursement of funds pursuant to this executive order?

   As I am not confirmed, I do not have access to this information at this time.

   b. If so, which programs have had disbursements paused and what is the legal basis for the pause?

   Again, as I am not confirmed, I do not have access to this level of information at this time.

   c. If confirmed, will you commit to promptly providing to my staff a detailed explanation of the legal basis on which USDA has paused the disbursement of funds, a complete list of programs with paused disbursements, and an estimate of when USDA expects to resume disbursements for each affected program?

   If confirmed, and to the extent appropriate, I will work to provide information to your office on the referenced activities.

   d. If confirmed, will you commit to implementing all programs and administering all funds as appropriated by Congress within your purview at USDA?

   If confirmed, I will follow the law.

   e. If confirmed, will you commit to notifying my staff prior to any future pauses on any funds appropriated by Congress within your purview at USDA?

   I will make every reasonable attempt to notify Congress of impending action by the Department as appropriate.

5. **Rural America:** The Secretary of Agriculture is often seen as the leading advocate for rural America.
    a. How will you navigate policy proposals from the Trump Administration that will likely have a disproportionate impact on rural communities, from proposals to privatize the U.S. Postal Service to eliminating the Department of Education?

       If confirmed, my priority will be the communities impacted by programs under USDA's jurisdiction, and I will collaborate with other agencies where appropriate.

    b. How do you plan to use your position to ensure federal programs are more accessible to rural communities that need them most?

       When farmers prosper, rural America prospers. If confirmed, I will do everything within my ability to ensure rural communities thrive. As I implement the President's agenda, I will prioritize first-rate customer service throughout USDA's programs.

6. **Scientific Integrity:**
    a. Do you believe that climate change presents a threat to American farmers and ranchers? If so, how?

       We all know the climate changes throughout the year, but the cause and solutions are not widely understood or defined.

    b. What role do you believe USDA's research agencies play in making sure American farmers and ranchers have the tools they need to succeed in the face of a changing climate?

       I am aware that, for decades, USDA's research agencies have conducted or otherwise supported research that helps farmers and ranchers adapt to the risks they face, and if confirmed, I will continue to support the tools and programs that reduce risks for farmers.

    c. If confirmed, will you commit to not interfering with scientific research, either conducted by USDA scientists or through external grantees, that relates to climate change?

I will work to make certain the Department utilizes sound data and adheres to the law.

d. If confirmed, will you commit that no career USDA personnel will be dismissed in the future because they participated in research or USDA programs that dealt with climate change issues under the last Administration?

If confirmed, I will work to better understand the foundation for this question.

e. How will you support the scientific integrity and independence of USDA researchers?

I will work to make certain the Department utilizes sound data and adheres to the law.

7. **Nutrition:** The Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service was established at USDA almost 60 years ago and oversees the nation's domestic nutrition programs that provide food assistance to one in four Americans, many of whom are children, seniors, or veterans, who struggle to access adequate food for themselves and their families. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the National School Breakfast, School Lunch, and Summer Nutrition programs; the Child and Adult Care Food Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP); the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations; the Commodity Supplemental Food Program; and the Farmer Market programs each play an important role in improving the health and well-being of families and the economy.
   a. If confirmed, will you commit to keeping these nutrition programs at USDA?

   Yes, and if confirmed, I also commit to partnering with other agencies who help low-income communities and families thrive.

   b. If confirmed, will you commit to support funding for all of the nutrition programs at USDA and work with me to protect access to these programs for all individuals in need and prevent changes that would reduce the effectiveness of these critical programs?

   I do not want to get ahead of the President as he works to formulate a budget. However, if confirmed, I do commit to hearing from all interests of the Department as that budget is crafted.

8. **Nutrition:** The most recent Household Food Security Report from USDA revealed that 18 million households were food insecure in 2023. Current SNAP benefits average at $6.20 per person per day. If confirmed, how do you plan to address food insecurity in this country?

   As I mentioned in my confirmation hearing, I will undertake a comprehensive review of all nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to better understand their reach, administration, and effectiveness. SNAP is a supplemental, temporary program, meant to help families navigate challenging times. We absolutely must ensure that approximately $100 billion in taxpayer funded benefits are working well to help sustain and support families as they work to get back on the path to independence. If confirmed, I look forward to working with my fellow cabinet members across the board, in health, housing, education and other departments, to address the needs of families on the program and help lift them to success and self-sufficiency.

9. **Nutrition:** The 2018 Farm Bill required a reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan – which is the basis for SNAP benefits – every 5 years, based on current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance. In 2021, USDA reevaluated the Thrifty Food Plan using updated food price data that better reflected food prices paid by households, including SNAP recipients, following a healthier consumption pattern. This was the first meaningful update to the Thrifty Food Plan in nearly 50 years and resulted in a modest increase of $1.35 per day for SNAP benefits. Do you believe SNAP benefits should be calculated based on current food prices for a healthy diet, as required by the 2018 Farm Bill?

   Per press and other public reports I have read, the 2021 update appears to have had its share of controversy, including shortcomings in the process and its violation of the Congressional Review Act, as also referenced in two GAO reports. Not to mention it added more than $250 billion to the program over the ten-year budget window, which again according to public releases, had both limited public input and Congressional oversight. If confirmed, I intend to prioritize not only a review of the 2021 process and outcome, but also any work on the 2026 update initiated under the Biden-Harris Administration.

10. **Nutrition:** The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutritious foods, breastfeeding support, nutrition education, and health care referrals to low-income pregnant and post-partum women, infants, and young children at nutritional risk. As Secretary of Agriculture, you would oversee WIC administration.
    a. Since the 1990s, every presidential administration has supported fully funding the program to meet the needs of all eligible families who seek services. If confirmed,

will you commit to supporting full funding for WIC to continue serving all eligible families who seek services?

I do not want to get ahead of the President as he works to formulate a budget. However, if confirmed, I do commit to hearing from all interests of the Department as that budget is crafted.

b. Currently, state WIC programs are implementing an updated food package for the first time in over a decade to better align WIC foods with the latest nutrition science and give WIC participants more choices at the grocery store. Changes to the food packages at this time would create confusion for participants and administrative burden for states. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting states in continuing to implement the food package updates without delay?

If confirmed, I will commit to reviewing this State action and am happy to continue the conversation with your office.

11. **Nutrition:** The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) provides school districts the option of serving meals at no charge during the school day in high-need schools and school districts. Eligible schools consider not only CEP's link to increased school meal participation and fewer behavioral issues and visits to the school nurse during the school day, but also the potential administrative savings, paperwork reduction, and cost-effectiveness prior to making a determination of whether to participate. Nearly 20 million children across the country attend schools that have adopted CEP. In my state of Minnesota, which has adopted no-charge meals across the state, school food service providers have cited seeing many families, including moderate income families and middle-class families, grappling with their food budgets going up.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to opposing changes to CEP that would increase the burden on children and families in need?

    First, we need to address the issues creating challenges for all families, which will require a collaborative effort with other agencies. If confirmed, I will work to better understand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), including its growth in recent years.

    b. If you do support changes to the program, how will you work to ensure that all eligible students continue to receive school meals without disruption, particularly in communities that rely on the program the most and are disproportionately adversely impacted by high grocery processes?

    Until l have a better understanding of CEP, it is difficult to answer this question. If confirmed, I commit to a thorough review of CEP, along with the

programs impacted by it, and am happy to continue the conversation with your office.

12. **Economic and Disaster Assistance Implementation:** In recent years, USDA has taken important actions to simplify administration of ad hoc disaster programs by calculating and pre-filling applications for certain phases of programs like the Emergency Relief Program (ERP) and on the recent specialty crop assistance (MASC).
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to implementation of economic and disaster assistance under the American Relief Act in a manner that is expeditious and simple for producers?

    I am absolutely committed to implementing the American Relief Act in an expeditious manner and to making it as streamlined as possible for recipient producers.

    b. And if confirmed, will you commit to working with me to prioritize quick action to address the losses brought on by disaster conditions in Minnesota?

    As stated during the hearing, deploying the more than $30 billion in economic and natural disaster assistance recently authorized by Congress as quickly and effectively as possible (including by the 90-day deadline for economic assistance) is a top priority. I'm hopeful the Senate will quickly consider and confirm the President's nominees for Deputy Secretary and for Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation program activities, so as to ensure smooth and timely deployment of the assistance. I look forward to working with you on implementation.

13. **Financial Disclosure:** According to your financial disclosure and as reported on in the press, you received $1,050,000 in income in 2024 from America First Policy Institute, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. How was your salary calculated?

    The America First Policy Institute Board of Directors, at its discretion, sets my compensation. From my limited understanding, the Board took a four-year holistic approach in its assessment.

14. **Ethics/Conflicts of Interest:** According to your financial disclosures and Office of Government Ethics paperwork, your family has significant financial interests in the oil and gas industry, raising potential conflicts in connection with USDA's biofuel programs and responsibilities.

a. Please describe the actions you will take, following your agreement with the Office of Government Ethics, to remove any conflicts of interest between your family's oil and gas financial interests and any potential work on biofuels.

If confirmed, I will consult with the USDA Office of Ethics career officials on conflicts of interest.

b. If confirmed, will you commit to following the advice and guidance of USDA's Designated Agency Ethics Official to avoid any conflicts of interest?

If confirmed, I will consult with the USDA Office of Ethics career officials on conflicts of interest.

15. **Forest Service:** Last year was another challenging year for wildfire with almost 9 million acres burned – an amount above the 10-year average of acres burned. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law brought federal wildland firefighter pay closer to industry standards, but a permanent reform remained elusive last Congress despite strong support from the USDA and many in Congress.
    a. Under your leadership, will the USDA continue to support permanent pay reform for federal wildland firefighters?

    If confirmed, I stand ready to work with Congress.

    b. Will you be a voice within the Administration for supporting federal wildland firefighters and other Forest Service employees as they face pay and housing challenges?

    America faces great challenges ahead from the wildfire crisis to housing affordability. If confirmed, I will work to ensure we have the best and most qualified workforce in USDA's history. The wildland firefighters put their lives on the line to keep our communities safe, and I look forward to understanding the challenges they face.

16. **Forest Service:** The Forest Service has adopted – and is implementing – a Wildfire Crisis Strategy to reduce wildfire risks faced by communities, critical infrastructure, and natural resources. The Forest Service is using annual appropriations and supplemental funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act to target forest treatments in 21 landscape-scale areas with the greatest risk.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing the work of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy and utilizing all available resources –including IRA funds – to implement forest treatments in the most at-risk areas?

If confirmed, I will work with our state and local government partners to continue addressing the threat of catastrophic wildfires. The wildfires in Southern California are a devastating reminder of the threats we face and the need to protect our communities year-round. I will work to understand how we can reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health across the 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands.

17. **Research:** USDA's Research, Education, and Economics mission area is home to accomplished scientists, researchers, statisticians, and economists.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting a strong budget that includes investments in USDA's research agencies?

    I do not want to get ahead of the President as he works to formulate a budget. However, if confirmed, I do commit to hearing from all interests of the Department as that budget is crafted.

    b. If confirmed, will you commit to not interfere with publications from the REE mission area, including reports from the National Agricultural Statistics Service and publications from the Economic Research Service?

    If confirmed, I will work both to review past reports and make certain the Department utilizes strong data and adheres to the law.

18. **Research:** The Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR) was established by Congress with bipartisan support in the 2014 Farm Bill. FFAR fosters public-private partnerships that support research initiatives aimed at tackling most pressing challenges facing our farmers.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting FFAR and working to identify additional opportunities for public-private partnerships through FFAR?

    If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR), including its establishment, funding, body of work, ability to self-sustain, and overall impact on the farmers it purports to benefit.

19. **Farm Bill:** I appreciate your stated commitment during the hearing to work closely with and provide technical assistance to the Committee on a new Farm Bill, if you are confirmed. The Farm Bill is a complex piece of legislation with a broad, bipartisan coalition of farm and nutrition groups, as well as conservation, rural development, energy, and research groups and historically, this coalition is the strongest when all the groups stick together. Some have called for splitting the farm and nutrition portions of the Farm Bill. When the House of Representatives tried to split the Farm Bill in 2014, over

500 farm, food, conservation, nutrition, energy, and rural groups opposed and the strategy to split the Farm Bill ultimately failed. If confirmed, will you oppose efforts to split the Farm Bill?

If confirmed, I will take direction from the President, work with the Congress and the executive agencies to ensure programs that support farmers continue.

20. **Farm Programs:** The Texas Public Policy Foundation published a paper while you were running the organization calling for the elimination of a state loan program for farmers. Does your view reflect the view of this paper, that farmers would be better off without direct financial assistance from the government?

I did not author the specific piece at issue; and it is nearly a decade old. Over the past several months, I have learned about the importance of a strong farm safety net for farmers and ranchers across the country. If confirmed as Secretary, I plan to make decisions with their views in mind.

21. **Civil Rights:** I was pleased to hear during the hearing that you had read the Equity Commission Final Report.
    a. If confirmed, what steps will you take to ensure that farmers of color have full and fair access to all existing and future farm lending programs?

    Americans deserve a government committed to serving every person with dignity and respect. As stated at my confirmation hearing, there is no room for racism at the Department, period.

    b. If confirmed, will you commit to protecting the civil rights of all USDA employees and program participants?

    Yes.

22. **1890 Land-Grant Universities:** The 1890 land-grant universities serve a critical role in educating the next generation of agriculture professionals, conducting vital research, and supporting underserved and rural communities through cooperative extension. These 19 institutions have historically received bipartisan support and will continue to be a priority for members of our committee on both sides of the aisle. I want to be clear – these institutions are not a DEI initiative, and therefore, should not be harmed by administrative actions regarding DEI programs.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting the existing programs that serve the needs of 1890 land-grant universities?

    I understand the importance of 1890 land-grant universities, including

Prairie View A&M University in Texas, and the longstanding impact each has on the next generation of agriculture professionals. I am also aware that USDA has long partnered with the 1890 land-grant institutions through the National Scholars Program, which is aimed at supporting educational and career opportunities for students from rural or underserved communities across the country. If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about our land-grant university systems and their contributions to American agriculture.

b. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing to support outreach efforts to 1890 land-grant institutions, including support for the current 1890 liaison positions?
    i. What about support for similar liaison positions, including those that serve Hispanic Serving Institutions?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about our land-grant university systems, interacting with the relevant stakeholders, and continuing this important conversation with Congress.

23. **Farm Programs:** Various federal budget proposals have included suggestions to cut farm programs or make crop insurance more expensive for farmers. Do you support proposals that would cut farm programs or crop insurance?

Over the last several months, I have learned about the importance of providing a strong farm safety net, including crop insurance, for farmers and ranchers across the country. If confirmed, I plan to work closely with budget officials to ensure a strong farm economy.

24. **Crop Insurance:** Farmers from across the country have regularly called the Federal crop insurance program the most important risk management tool and believe that it must be strengthened in the next Farm Bill. The Risk Management Agency and Federal Crop Insurance Corporation have undertaken critical work in recent years in expanding the available insurance options to more crops, producers, and regions of the country where options have been lacking, but holes and gaps still exist.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing this important work to expand insurance options and quality of coverage for producers for which options are lacking or insufficient?

While I have heard repeatedly about the importance of crop insurance, I have more to learn about where gaps may exist. If confirmed, I look forward to engaging with stakeholders across the country on ways that crop insurance could be strengthened.

b. And if confirmed, will you commit to working with this Committee in a bipartisan way to maintain and strengthen this critical public-private partnership?

Over the last several months, I have learned about the importance of providing a strong farm safety net for farmers and ranchers across the country, particularly crop insurance. If confirmed, and along with the incredible leadership President Trump has recruited to the Farm Production and Conservation mission area, we will remain committed to working with the Committee as they work to strengthen the farm safety net.

25. **Specialty Crops:** USDA has announced significant funding to support specialty crop growers through the Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crops (MASC) program. The enrollment period for this program resulted in over 50,000 growers applying, underscoring clear demand from the specialty crop industry. Initial payments have already been made, but USDA has not fully spent all of the previously announced investment. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring the entirety of the remaining MASC funds are sent to eligible specialty crop growers as soon as possible?

Over the last several months, I have learned a lot about the important role specialty crops play regionally and throughout the United States.
While I'm not yet at the Department, my understanding is that, in recent weeks, USDA announced an additional $650 million for the new Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crops (MASC) program, for a total of $2.65 billion. If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing this program and its effectiveness thus far.

26. **Farm Programs:** The previous Administration published online dashboards providing regular public updates on the total amount and distribution of payments by state, commodity, and phase under the Emergency Relief Program (ERP) for 2020/2021 and 2022 losses.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to maintaining public accessibility of those dashboards?

    I am completely supportive of transparency and keeping the public informed, so long as it is done in a way to maintain the confidentiality of producer information. If confirmed, I will be glad to consult with USDA experts in the Farm Production and Conservation mission area about this topic and prior transparency exercises undertaken alongside the implementation of major assistance programs.

    b. And if confirmed, will you commit to publishing similar dashboards for: (1) the distribution of funding for economic and natural disaster assistance provided under the American Relief Act, 2025; and (2) any payments made to farmers

using funding and discretionary authorities available through the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)?

Again, if confirmed, I will be glad to consult with USDA experts in the Farm Production and Conservation mission area about this topic and prior transparency exercises undertaken alongside the implementation of major assistance programs.

27. **Outreach:** You have underscored your support for helping small family farms and underserved rural communities. Small farmers and limited-resource communities do not have the capacity to hire grant writers to apply for USDA programs.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to consulting with Congress prior to any efforts to reduce the number of USDA staff focused on outreach?

    Like you, I want to ensure small and family farms receive the best possible customer service from the Department. And as appropriate, I will work to inform Congress of actions that will impact small farms.

28. **OPPE:** The 2018 Farm Bill reauthorized the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) to develop and maintain partnerships focused on the challenges facing rural and underserved communities like veteran and young farmers. OPPE's predecessor, the Office of Advocacy and Outreach was first established in 2008, showing the long-term interest of Congress in this mission. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting the work of OPPE, and its employees, as mandated and funded by Congress?

    Public engagement has been a long-time passion of mine, and I will follow the law with respect to the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE)-related activities.

29. **Climate-Smart Commodities:** On January 22, USDA sent out notices to Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities grantees notifying them that the Administration placed a temporary suspension on all actions related to grants, including Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities grants.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to promptly providing to my staff a detailed explanation as to why and under what basis USDA has temporarily suspended all actions related to grant programs (including for Partnership of Climate-Smart Commodities grants), a complete list of programs affected by the temporary suspension, and when USDA expects to resume actions for each affected program?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities and providing information to you as appropriate and practicable.

30. **Conservation Reserve Program:** The Conservation Reserve Program is a successful voluntary conservation program that farmers use across the country. I led bipartisan legislation to expand this program that was included in the 2018 Farm Bill. If confirmed, will you commit to not making reductions to incentives or other changes to the detriment of the program and inform the Committee of any changes before they are finalized?

It's my understanding USDA's voluntary conservation programs, including the popular Conservation Reserve Program, help our farmers, ranchers, and forest owners, who are among the original conservationists, contribute to soil health and support a variety of our natural resources. I look forward to working with you and the rest of Congress on this program of mutual interest.

31. **Farm and Food Workers:** Farm and food workers have extremely hard and often dangerous jobs. What responsibility does USDA have to support our nation's farm and food workers?

I will work alongside the Department of Labor (DOL) Secretary-designate Chavez-DeRemer to support worker safety standards grounded in data.

32. **Organics:** The Organic Transition Initiative is an investment from USDA to support existing and transitioning organic farmers through a variety of programs. USDA has invested in the organic supply chain through the Organic Market Development Grant Program (OMDG) and in cooperative agreements to provide technical assistance and support for transitioning and existing organic farmers through the Transitioning to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP).

    a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting existing grants and ongoing cooperative agreements?

    I look forward to learning more about the variety of programs across USDA agencies that support organic producers, including the Organic Market Development Program and the Transition to Organic Partnership Program. If confirmed, I will be committed to serving all of American agriculture, including organic producers.

    b. Will you commit to supporting additional opportunities for transitioning and existing organic farmers?

I look forward to learning more about the variety of programs across USDA agencies that support organic producers, including the Organic Market Development Program and the Transition to Organic Partnership Program. If confirmed, I will be committed to serving all of American agriculture, including organic producers.

33. **Organics:** The Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) supports organic farmers and handlers in securing or renewing their organic certification through USDA's National Organic Program. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring adequate resources are available to fully support organic growers and handlers through OCCSP?

It is my understanding that funding for the Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) may come from Congress. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress on OCCSP.

34. **Organics:** The integrity of the organic seal, overseen by the National Organic Program, relies on strong consumer confidence in the program's underlying organic standards. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring organic standards continue to be regularly updated through rulemaking in consultation with the National Organic Standards Board and industry partners?

The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) plays an important role in providing recommendations to the Department on organic standards. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the NOSB, industry partners, and Congress to maintain the integrity of the organic seal.

35. **International Food Aid**: The United States has long been a leader in the fight against global hunger. Minnesota farmers support critical programs like Food for Peace and McGovern-Dole Food for Education which for decades have helped American farmers feed hungry people and support fellow farmers around the world. These programs – and others at the USDA like Food for Progress and the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust – also serve to make our country safer by reducing hungry and improving literacy. Do you believe the USDA's global food security programs and the USAID's Food for Peace program are important to supporting American farmers?

For more than 70 years, commodities grown by America's hard working farmers have been the centerpiece of USDA and the Agency for International Development (USAID) global food security programs. If confirmed, I look forward to further conversations with USAID and the Department's Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs mission area.

a. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting these programs and being a voice within the U.S. government to make sure these programs have the resources and staff necessary for implementing their programming?

I will be a voice for all of American agriculture. I will commit to reviewing the jurisdiction the Department holds, and where appropriate, engaging with USAID about American grown commodities.

36. **Energy:** Biofuels and the bioeconomy are an essential component of our national energy infrastructure, providing critical markets for our farmers and helping to secure America's energy independence. USDA plays a vital role in supporting these markets, administering programs that provide economic assistance to build the bioenergy infrastructure, assisting in the implementation of the Renewable Fuel Standard, and promoting innovative technological applications through BioPreferred, among other initiatives. Right now, there are tremendous opportunities to expand these markets, but I am concerned that reports produced while you were leading the Texas Public Policy Foundation express a negative view of biofuels.
    a. How does your view of biofuels and the bioeconomy differ from the Texas Public Policy Foundation?

I did not author the piece at issue; and it is more than a decade old.

Over the last several months, I have learned about the importance of biofuels nationally to farmers and our fuel economy. Farmers deserve a strong advocate at the interagency table, especially when we have an opportunity to reduce our reliance on foreign fuels.

Therefore, if confirmed, I plan to be that representative and relay all farmers' views to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator-designate Lee Zeldin.

As a reminder, President Trump has long been a fighter for our corn and soybean growers and biofuel producers. His January 20, 2025, Executive Order *Declaring a National Energy Emergency* directed EPA to consider emergency waivers for year-round E-15. Additionally, in 2019, President Trump granted a year-round sale of E-15.

    b. If confirmed, how will you leverage USDA programs to ensure that the bioeconomy continues to grow? How will you expand opportunities for our farmers to participate in and profit from bioenergy markets?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about USDA programs promoting a biobased economy.

37. **Energy/Rural Development:** The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided a historic, one-time investment to improve and modernize rural America's energy infrastructure through programs like New ERA and PACE. These programs are focused on providing funds directly to our rural energy cooperatives in support of large-scale clean energy projects that will ultimately ensure the long-term sustainability of these cooperatives, and lower energy bills for rural Americans. Many of these projects are in the initial stages of securing USDA funding through New ERA and PACE, but recent guidance from the Administration suggests that obligations and disbursements for IRA projects may not move forward.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring that USDA fulfills the obligations that we have made to our rural cooperatives?

    I appreciate the role that rural electric cooperatives have long played in electrifying rural America. I look forward to working with our rural electric cooperatives and learning more about the needs that currently exist (along with any obligations that have been made).

    b. If confirmed, will you ensure that the funds made available through these programs reach the rural communities they were intended to serve?

    Again, before making any commitments to specific funding levels, I look forward to learning more about the programs. In general, I am supportive of and appreciate the role that rural electric cooperatives have long played in electrifying rural America.

38. **Rural Development:** The Rural Development (RD) mission area of USDA provides crucial support for healthcare, housing, utility infrastructure, economic development and many other essential projects in our rural communities. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring that the President's budget requests provide the necessary funding for the many RD grant and loan programs that our rural communities need?

    Exploring improvements to the Department's Rural Development programs remains a shared priority, and as I alluded to in my Senate confirmation hearing. If confirmed, I will work with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and relevant agencies to promote rural prosperity.

39. **Rural Development:** The Rural Partners Network and Rural.gov works to improve access to federal programs for rural county commissioners, mayors, and other rural

leaders. Will you commit to continued operation of the Rural Partners Network and Rural.gov?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the Rural Partners Network and Rural.gov as well as how it is serving rural communities.

40. **Food Safety:** Recent high-profile outbreaks of foodborne illnesses have strained consumer confidence in our food safety system. If confirmed, you will manage the Food Safety and Inspection Service, which oversees meat, poultry, and egg products. USDA shares federal responsibility for food safety regulations with the Food and Drug Administration.
    a. Will you commit to strong interagency coordination to support timely outbreak investigations and efforts to prevent foodborne illness outbreaks?

    Yes, if confirmed I will have oversight of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) which oversees meat, catfish, poultry and eggs. Strong interagency coordination across the White House Policy Councils, USDA FSIS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and our state counterparts is critical to preserving public trust and also preventing and managing foodborne illness outbreaks.

    b. Additionally, will you commit to conducting full and thorough investigations into any foodborne illness outbreaks that occur directly under USDA's jurisdiction and notifying Congress and the public of the outcome of these investigations in a timely manner?

    If confirmed, I will work closely with FSIS and Congress on identifying causes of future foodborne illness outbreaks.

41. **Animal Disease/Public Health and Transparency:** Since 2022, the ongoing outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has had devastating effects on U.S. poultry producers, spread among dairy operations, and caused more than 60 infections in humans that resulted in at least one death. As discussed during your hearing, USDA plays a critical role in helping producers respond to disease outbreaks and ensuring the safety of our food. If confirmed, you will oversee several agencies that play a critical role in protecting public health and our agricultural economy, from meat inspection to monitoring and addressing threats posed by plant and animal diseases. I am deeply troubled by reports we are seeing about a freeze on *all* external communications and the cancellation of public health meetings from the Department of Health and Human Services, including things like public health alerts about emerging threats.
    a. Will you commit to continuing USDA's strong record of transparency and communication with the public about avian influenza and any other threats posed to our health and the agricultural economy that you will be responsible for?

Yes. I will also work to ensure that USDA has a seat at the table with other federal agencies that engage on these issues.

42. **Animal Health/Vaccines:** In July 2024, USDA's Center for Veterinary Biologics (CVB) announced its intent to begin accepting vaccine applications for the development of vaccines to be used in livestock against Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza or H5N1. Since that time, USDA has accepted several applications and is currently undergoing field trials for potential H5N1 vaccine candidates.
    a. Do you commit to continuing these vaccine trials and/or any other further research needed to find a safe and effective H5N1 vaccine for livestock?

    If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about these efforts with my Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs—whom I hope can be considered and confirmed quickly—to utilize sound data in making any decisions about highly pathogenic avian influenza.

    b. If through CVB's process an H5N1 vaccine is found to be safe and effective, do you commit to issuing the appropriate licenses and permits for that vaccine to be released?

    If confirmed, and under those circumstances, I would look forward to reviewing the data, and then making decisions accordingly.

<u>Senator Joni Ernst</u>

1. Mrs. Rollins, U.S. biofuels play a central role in fulfilling President Trump's vision for energy dominance, revitalizing the farm economy, and supporting bio-manufacturing jobs that can't be moved overseas. If confirmed as the Secretary of Agriculture, you would be the leading voice in the Administration advocating for the interests of American farmers and working to fulfill the President's vision of restoring economic prosperity to the nation's heartland, growing key agriculture markets like corn and soybeans, while lowering gas prices across the country. How do you plan to advocate on behalf of the biofuel sector at the White House, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of the Treasury, and U.S. Department of Energy?

If confirmed, I would like for there to be a seat at the interagency table for farmers with the White House, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Treasury, and Department of Energy (DOE) to work through ways to reduce our reliance on foreign fuels. As a reminder, President Trump has long been a fighter for our corn and soybean growers and biofuel producers. His January 20, 2025, Executive Order *Declaring a National Energy Emergency* directed the EPA to

consider emergency waivers for year-round E-15. Also, in 2019, President Trump granted a year-round sale of E-15.

2. Mrs. Rollins, poultry producers in my state are being hit hard by the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI). I applaud your commitment to making this outbreak a priority upon stepping into the role of Secretary of Agriculture. While also battling HPAI, our turkey producers have also been combating the spread of a separate disease—avian metapneumovirus (aMPV). Each week, rural Iowa is losing over $422,000 in personal income and 2 million pounds of turkey products due to aMPV. USDA's Center for Veterinary Biologics (CVB) did approve the use of a killed vaccine; however, it does not eradicate the disease, meaning it has little benefit to the turkey farmer. Instead, USDA's CVB needs to approve the usage of a live vaccine and expedite the testing process to effectively combat aMPV. If confirmed, will you commit to working with me not only on enhancing mitigation efforts around HPAI, but also aMPV?

Yes. If confirmed, getting a handle on recent animal-disease outbreaks is among my top priorities. It is critical to protecting our domestic food security and reducing price volatility.

If confirmed, I look forward to requesting an immediate briefing on the Department's highly pathogenic avian influenza response efforts to date.

3. Mrs. Rollins, last year, USDA sent a letter to 47 different states and territories regarding their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) integrity and administrative issues. An alarming item in many of these letters is the growing payment error rate, as shown by the quality control reporting process. Using data the USDA released late last year, the national overpayment rate in SNAP was 10.03% for fiscal year 2023. In total, these overpayments represent nearly $1 billion per month in erroneous SNAP payments. At the current rate, an estimated $91 billion in SNAP overpayments would be spent over 10 years due to poor state administration of the program. Again, these costs fall directly on the backs of the American taxpayer. In order to maintain bipartisan support for this important food safety net program, it is critical we hold states accountable as they do the groundwork of distributing benefits to hungry families. If confirmed, a part of your authority as Secretary is the ability to enforce liability payments against states with high error rates and require them to pay back a portion of their overpayments. Do you intend to use this authority and hold individual states accountable for their use of taxpayer dollars?

It is unacceptable that every day, more than $30 million is lost due to erroneous overpayments. I commit to evaluating every tool in the Department's toolbox to address this avoidable and troubling trend.

Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith

1. In January 2024, the Department of Interior (DOI), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and U.S. Department of Agriculture announced the establishment of the U.S. One Health Coordination Unit (U.S. OHCU), and earlier this month the U.S. OHCU released the first-ever National One Health Framework to Address Zoonotic Diseases and Advance Public Health Preparedness in the United States, following congressional directives in the FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act and FY2021 House Appropriations Committee Report. This interagency collaboration is crucial for a robust, coordinated federal response to issues at the human-animal-environment interface—especially to high-consequence zoonotic diseases that originate in wildlife and can spread to people and livestock.

   If confirmed, will you commit to continue USDA's involvement with the U.S. OHCU, and keep me apprised of how Congress can best support that involvement?

   I look forward to learning more about the implementation of this Congressional directive. If confirmed, getting a handle on recent animal-disease outbreaks is among my top priorities.

2. America and China compete for global leadership in the emerging field of new breeding techniques for crops – a technological area that is key to America's future national and economic security. In addition to investing massively in its own research in this area, China also is actively working to steal American intellectual property through both illegal means, as well as utilizing its regulatory system for the approval of new ag-biotech products to force American developers to turn over highly proprietary information about these products in order to gain import approval. Indeed, China is making information demands that no other legitimate regulator in the world is demanding for these products, in an obvious attempt to gain access to information that will help its own domestic companies' competitive efforts in this space.

   What can your Department do to pressure China to stop what is essentially forced tech transfer of U.S. crop gene editing technology to China under the guise of regulatory requirements? Should the United States consider placing an export control on certain U.S. gene-edited seed information? What efforts will the Department undertake to caution U.S. gene-edited seed developers against such Chinese practices?

   Considerable progress was made on this front in the first Trump Administration, and I look forward to working with my colleagues across the federal government to make sure that those efforts are reinvigorated and that American intellectual property is protected (using all appropriate tools at our disposal).

3. The Coordinated Framework for regulation of ag-biotech products among USDA, EPA, and FDA is seriously broken and has defied efforts by multiple Administrations to fix it.

While these problems as they pertain to genetically modified (GM) crops may just be too entrenched to ever resolve, the technological landscape is quickly moving beyond GM to gene-editing techniques that don't involve the insertion of any foreign DNA material into these plants. In essence, gene editing is just using nature's own tools to do what conventional breeding has done, albeit very slowly and very imprecisely, for thousands of years, to help select for the most advantageous natural traits – such as yield enhancement and drought and disease resistance. Important markets around the world are moving towards this realization, yet the U.S. regulatory system has yet to clarify that such products should be treated no differently than conventionally-bred crops. This lack of clarity is allowing EPA and FDA to assert questionable authority to regulate these products and is providing leverage to competitors like China to complicate market access for American developers. We need to fix this before we end up in the same terrible situation that we have faced with GM crops for the past several decades.

What will you do to ensure that USDA addresses this matter quickly?

I absolutely share your concerns. It is my understanding that the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California recently vacated USDA's May 2020 final rule for plants and microorganisms developed using genetic engineering. If confirmed, I look forward to hearing more on the status of this case before deciding on a course of action for USDA.

4. USDA's country-of-origin labeling (COOL) requirements for seafood took effect twenty years ago. Because COOL provides consumers with the ability to distinguish between domestic and imported seafood, American shrimpers, including those in Mississippi's commercial shrimp industry, have increasingly turned to retail sales to mitigate the harm caused by ever-increasing volumes of cheap, foreign, farm-raised shrimp. For this reason, the Agricultural Marketing Service's (AMS) enforcement of COOL is of the utmost importance to our domestic seafood producers.

   However, AMS no longer appears to publish information regarding the agency's enforcement efforts regarding COOL. This lack of public data stands in marked contrast to the large amount of enforcement information published by AMS regarding compliance with organic standards.

   If confirmed, will you prioritize the enforcement of COOL requirements for seafood and provide me with information regarding the compliance efforts that have been undertaken by AMS over the last few years?

   If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the seafood industry and its history with the Agricultural Marketing Service on these issues.

5. When Secretary Vilsack appeared before the Agriculture Committee four years ago for his confirmation, I asked him about this issue. The United States simply cannot meet our

own demand for phosphate, an important ingredient in fertilizer, with domestic production. I agree with the President that tariffs are an important part of putting put America first, but no one can deny that the current duties on phosphate mean that our farmers have to purchase inputs at prices higher than other farmers around the world yet can only receive world market prices for their production.

How concerned are you about ensuring adequate supply of these fertilizers, and ensuring competitive, reliable markets for this critical ag input for farmers? Will you commit to ensuring that the Secretary of Commerce and the U.S. Trade Representative understand the long-term impacts on fertilizer supplies and their impact on U.S. agricultural competitiveness?

I am very concerned about our nation's ability to provide inputs to cultivate our food supply. I commit to better understanding this issue, including reviewing any programming the Biden-Harris Administration initiated, such as the utility of Fertilizer Production Expansion Program.

6. As you know, the Federal crop insurance program is a cornerstone of the farm safety net with 2.36 million policies sold covering over 540 million acres. This risk management tool not only enables farmers and ranchers to rebuild after weather and market adversity, but it also helps America's agricultural producers secure much needed capital for their operations.

   If confirmed, will you work to 1) ensure this program continues to be successful, 2) maintain and strengthen the critical partnership between the USDA and the private-sector that successfully delivers this popular program to our nation's farmers, and 3) work with industry and producers to find ways to improve the program without jeopardizing its actuarial soundness?

   Yes.

7. USDA plays a critical role in working across the federal government as a voice for farmers across America. This includes providing agronomic data and information to other agencies who may not have the opportunity to engage with rural communities on a regular basis.

   As USDA Secretary, how do you plan to collaborate with the EPA and other agencies to help ensure that the needs of farmers, such as the necessity and benefits of safe and effective pesticide products, are well recognized, and that USDA has an equal partnership in supporting science-based, risk-benefit decision making?

   Farmers want access to scientifically sound, affordable crop protection tools to keep our food supply abundant. Crop protection tool registrations fall under Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator-designate Zeldin's purview.

However, if confirmed, I will ensure EPA is aware of both USDA and farmers' views on these matters.

8. The Department of Labor calculates the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) for H-2A workers using the annual average hourly gross wage reported in the USDA Farm Labor Survey (FLS). However, the FLS includes all wages paid to farmworkers, including AEWR-based wages paid to H-2A workers, as well as bonuses, incentive pay, and overtime. This methodology results in a self-inflating minimum wage cycle based on the previous year's gross wage, causing volatile and unsustainable wage increases that threaten the viability of family farms.

   The USDA has the authority to adjust the FLS methodology to reduce artificial wage inflation by collecting data on the "base wage" only, excluding bonuses, incentive pay, piece rate pay, and overtime from the survey data. Since the AEWR was originally intended as a minimum wage for agricultural work, this adjustment would provide a more accurate reflection of baseline agricultural wages.

   As Secretary, will you direct the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to make the necessary adjustments to the FLS to prevent continued artificial increases in the AEWR? Additionally, will you commit to dedicating resources to the development and implementation of an alternative survey for the DOL to use in establishing the AEWR?

   It is my understanding there is historical context with respect to the first Trump Administration acting on the Adverse Effect Wage Rate. If confirmed, while I would like to review past actions, I am more broadly committed to working with Department of Labor (DOL) Secretary-designate Chavez-DeRemer to ensure our legal immigration programs better support agriculture.

9. Emerging technologies in agriculture, such as gene editing and precision agriculture, are reshaping the future of farming. However, other countries are increasingly influencing global regulatory standards and driving innovation at a pace that could put U.S. leadership at risk.

   What is your plan to ensure that U.S. farmers and companies can innovate and compete on a level playing field, free from undue restrictions or external pressures that could stifle progress domestically?

   I look forward to working with USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Biotechnology Regulatory Services to help approve and unleash safe, affordable, and modernized biotechnologies so that U.S. agriculture may thrive. This would be consistent with policies previously pursued by USDA under the first Trump Administration. I look forward to learning about ways the Department can advance precision agriculture as well, if confirmed.

10. Under the Biden Administration, USDA APHIS effectively ceded authority in a March 8, 2024, Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Animal Welfare Act (AWA) enforcement to the Department of Justice (DOJ). Under such a framework, lawyers who have not hidden their animal rights sympathies would be guiding policy instead of APHIS veterinarians and animal health experts. DOJ should have and always has had a role in supporting AWA enforcement activities, but by law that enforcement responsibility ultimately lies with the Secretary of Agriculture.

    If confirmed, will your USDA assert itself as the primary AWA enforcement authority?

    Thank you for flagging this recent MOU. If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about it from leadership within the Marketing and Regulatory Programs mission area.

11. Some have suggested that merging USDA and FDA food safety responsibilities into a single agency would improve public health in the U.S., and President Trump proposed such a merge in his last administration. For many reasons, including the fact that most of FDA's attention is focused on drugs rather than food, experts generally consider USDA's food safety processes and enforcement activities far superior to FDA's.

    Do you foresee the President issuing such a proposal again?

    I have not discussed this matter with the President.

12. The Phase One deal with China established a protocol for China to resume imports of U.S. poultry following a highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak. There are currently 42 states, including Mississippi, that should have been able to resume export to China following mutually agreed-upon decontamination measures to ensure to avoid any spread of HPAI. These states cannot because China is simply ignoring their commitment, so U.S. chicken is essentially locked out of the U.S. market. I brought this to the attention of the previous administration who seemed unwilling to engage with China on this. My state and so many others cannot afford to continue to lose income due to an inability to export chicken to China.

    Will you commit to working with the U.S. Trade Representative and other appropriate agencies to ensure that China is adhering to its commitments with respect to chicken under the Phase One deal?

    If confirmed, I will make certain all relevant agencies, including the office of the USTR, know just how important American agriculture is to every trade conversation, including those with China.

13. Stakeholders in Mississippi are concerned that FSIS' current *Salmonella* in poultry proposal is very likely to increase food costs and food waste without scientific justification for the assertion that it will improve food safety.

    If confirmed, would you be open to alternative approaches that would actually protect public health and could be immediately deployed by the agency?

    If confirmed, I will ensure the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) rulemakings pay appropriate attention to all relevant information—especially sound data.

14. Numerous policies have been enacted over the last two decades that have resulted in increased demand for renewable diesel and sustainable aviation fuel, including the renewable fuel standard and the 45Z Clean Fuel Production Credit. Advanced biofuels are produced from biomass feedstock, the main sources of which are soybean oil, used cooking oil, and animal fats. As demand for advanced biofuel increases, prices for some of the more finite feedstocks, like animal fats, are also increasing, creating higher costs in some food production supply chains, like in the pet food industry. However, there is no government subsidization of animal fats like there is for other feedstocks.

    While there are many clean energy sources available for transportation, there are limited options for feeding people and pets. Animal fats are not waste streams, as some have described. They are critical inputs for pet food. The Trump administration will have an opportunity to shape how these policies are implemented, deciding which feedstocks can sustainably supply this growing industry.

    Will you commit to working with the Department of the Treasury and the Environmental Protection Agency to ensure biofuel policies balance the growing demand with the need to maintain affordable prices for consumers?

    I absolutely commit to making sure that USDA has a seat at the table and will advocate on behalf of the agricultural community.

15. Former Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced the USDA's Interim Rule for Climate-Smart Agriculture Crops Used as Biofuel Feedstocks. My colleagues have already identified several changes that need to be made by the Trump administration and Congress to improve this. Particularly, we need to ensure the U.S. farmer is put at the front of the line instead of favoring imported feedstocks and that opportunities are created for other U.S. feedstocks besides the three commodities listed in the USDA's interim rule. In addition to addressing climate, we need to leverage the power of U.S. consumers and enhance national security through self-reliance for crops beyond the biofuels space, such as cotton.

Will you endeavor to be responsive to Congress and work within your authority to expand these opportunities so that we can create more structural demand for U.S. agriculture in a broad-based manner?

If confirmed, I am happy to discuss changes that you and your colleagues have identified, and I commit to conferring with Congress on this issue.

16. The cotton industry is critically important to the Mississippi economy. Since our domestic textile industry has largely moved away to avoid overreaching regulations, we are now forced to export almost ninety percent of the cotton grown in the United States. However, our ability to export is being frustrated because Brazil surpassed the U.S. in both cotton production and exports in the last year, and we are becoming less competitive every day in the global marketplace. Not only has Brazil developed production systems and technologies to increase yield, which far surpasses our yield levels, they move their products into the marketplace much more quickly than we can.

    Will you commit to do everything within your authority to help restore the global competitiveness of the U.S. cotton industry?

    Absolutely. And, as a native Texan, I understand the importance of the U.S. cotton industry and ensuring it is globally competitive.

17. Managing risks in agriculture is more difficult today than ever. USDA is responsible for managing and disseminating information that risk managers and market participants depend on. This is a responsibility that should be approached very seriously. In recent years, there have been numerous examples of reductions in data gathering to support the agency's analysis and changes made in reporting requirements that have failed to the point they had to be retracted, creating havoc in our markets.

    Will you do everything in your power to improve the dependability and integrity of data managed by USDA to support agricultural risk management and marketing?

    If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about this issue pertaining to data gathering and related reporting.

18. Last January, USDA proposed a rule (RIN 0570-AB05, Fed.Reg. 2024-00981, Docket No. RBS-22-BUSINESS-0004-0001) to merge the Guidelines for Designating Biobased Products for Federal Procurement and the Voluntary Labeling Program for Biobased Products into one regulation, the Biobased Markets (BioPreferred) Program. USDA should take this opportunity to follow the directives given by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill and incorporate language ensuring that international standards used by third parties based on the mass balance approach are recognized by USDA in determining qualification for the BioPreferred Program.

If confirmed, will you work with me to incorporate the use of mass balance accounting into the BioPreferred Program?

If confirmed, I will work with USDA Rural Development departmental experts, who administer the program, to gain a better understanding of the issue at hand.

Senator Jerry Moran

1. Although dairy is an export-reliant commodity, many U.S. dairy processors import finished goods, critical ingredients, inputs to manufacturing and equipment and would therefore be negatively impacted by tariffs. Of greater concern are the potential retaliatory tariffs placed on U.S. dairy exports, which reached almost $8 billion last year. And yet, tariffs may provide an avenue for jump-starting negotiations with key trading partners.

   How would you make sure agricultural stakeholders are not left behind or unnecessarily impacted by proposed tariff strategies? Will you take stakeholder input on any negotiations that result from tariff actions and how will you ensure agricultural stakeholders get a voice in those discussions?

   If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing all of the tools the Department has at its disposal to help American agriculture thrive in the face of complex trade dynamics. In doing so, I will remain open and accessible to stakeholder input and will also review their input regarding past programs. President Trump negotiated over 50 agreements during his first term. I look forward to working with him on more agreements and on eliminating the $45.5 B currently projected agricultural trade deficit.

Senator Michael F. Bennet

If confirmed, you will oversee the implementation of the Farm Bill? The Farm Bill authorizes and funds many conservation programs important to Western agriculture, including the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. A robust Conservation Title in the Farm Bill provides voluntary incentives and certainty to family farmers who face extreme weather, pathogens, and an increasingly volatile global marketplace.

1. Ms. Rollins, how will you work with this Congress to pass a Farm Bill with a strong Conservation Title that cuts red tape, improves access to these programs, and promotes the durability of Western agriculture?

A five-year farm bill, one that could provide certainty to rural communities, has been delayed by more than two years. As Congress works to reauthorize the bill, I pledge the whole of the Department to provide comprehensive technical assistance, including to Title II—Conservation. As for the tenets of the title, I trust both the House and the Senate to find consensus on the best ways to mitigate burdens for some of our original conservationists—farmers.

2. What USDA flexibilities and resources will you use to maximize conservation programs' effectiveness?

USDA has a wide range of conservation programs. If confirmed, I plan to work closely with departmental experts to learn more about what already works well and what can be improved across these conservation programs.

Some have suggested that important programs in the conservation title like the Conservation Reserve Program should be eliminated, or that USDA should be prohibited from working with farmers to create new permanent easements.

3. Ms. Rollins, do you agree with these proposals?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning from Departmental experts about USDA's many popular voluntary, locally-led, and incentive based conservation programs and how they are additive to farming practices.

4. Why or why not?

It's my preliminary understanding USDA's voluntary conservation programs help our farmers, ranchers, and forest owners, who are among the original conservationists, contribute to soil health, and support a variety of our natural resources.

As you know the American West is facing catastrophic long-term drought. Texas and Colorado are on the front lines. I've worked with my colleagues across the aisle on numerous policies to better address drought at USDA through voluntary conservation programs at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

5. What are your plans to address the nuanced drought concerns in the West?

It's my understanding over 40 million people across seven states and over 30 Tribes rely on water from the Colorado River. If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing

the effectiveness of dollars USDA spent in recent years and discussing those findings with you, to address drought in the West.

6. Will you commit to working with me to address some of these drought challenges ahead of the Farm Bill?

If confirmed, I will gladly commit to working with you and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry to provide technical assistance on these and related matters when it comes to the farm bill drafting process.

Texas, like Colorado, is a large state. One of my greatest concerns is the federal government turning its back on rural America. During the previous Trump administration, we saw local Farm Service Agency, NRCS, and Rural Development offices close their doors across Colorado and the country. Since then, many offices have re-opened but continue to face severe staffing shortages.

7. How will you support local USDA offices and keep them fully staffed so USDA continues working for the agricultural and rural communities that they support?

If confirmed, and especially within the local Farm Service Agency offices and Rural Development mission area, I will be dedicated to ensuring our farmers and rancher customers are receiving first-rate customer service.

Last fall, the Forest Service announced they would not hire any temporary, seasonal, non-firefighting staff to address the agency's budget shortfall. Colorado communities are concerned that without seasonal staff, the Forest Service will be unable to accomplish mission-critical work like wildfire prevention and mitigation and managing outdoor recreation. Most of Colorado's front range has been identified by the Forest Service as a high-priority fireshed that needs funding to help reduce fire risk. These services keep Colorado communities safe and their economies running.

8. How will you address the Forest Service budget shortfall?

If confirmed, I look forward to digging into the budget at the U.S. Forest Service. Fiscal solvency is a bedrock business principle, and I will work with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as the Administration approaches the FY 2026 budget. I will keep your office informed.

9. How will you rebuild the agency to prioritize this critical boots-on-the-ground work?

At the heart of the U.S. Forest Service's mission is serving people and caring for the land. I look forward to evaluating their workforce needs and ensuring we have a workforce equipped to execute and work at the ground level.

There are at least seven Congressionally-established definitions of rural for USDA Rural Development programs. In addition to creating confusion for potential applicants, some definitions do a huge disservice to highly rural areas. Colorado has many communities with populations far lower than established population thresholds for certain programs. For example, it's reasonable to assume that the resources to provide competitive applications are much different for a town of 500 than for a town of 50,000.

10. What specific ways can we work together to cut bureaucratic red tape for rural America and better serve our most highly rural areas?

If confirmed, Senator, I really look forward to working with you on these issues. Exploring improvements to the Department's Rural Development programs remains a top priority of mine.

Rural electric cooperatives across the country are uniquely positioned to drive economic opportunity for rural America. As non-profit entities, the co-op model is specifically designed to prioritize the needs of their members and the rural communities they serve. In Colorado, co-ops deliver power to over 70% of our state. They reach all four corners and serve nearly 1.5 million people. Our co-ops are leading the nation and setting a standard for the rest of the country and the world. Since the 1930s, USDA has assisted these co-ops, first through the Rural Electric Administration, and now through the Rural Utilities Service. This support continues to be a lifeline for rural communities, helping them strengthen and modernize their infrastructure and meet growing energy demand reliably and affordably.

11. How will USDA continue to support these rural electric cooperatives that are so important to meeting our growing energy demand and providing economic opportunities to rural America?

Thank you for the background. If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing further the history of rural electric cooperatives and their unique relationship with USDA Rural Development's Rural Utility Service. It is my understanding that rural electric cooperatives power over 56 percent of the nation's landscape and serve over 90 percent of persistent poverty counties. They can play a big role in both the President's energy independence and rural prosperity agendas.

Finding affordable housing in Western mountain communities can be very challenging. Chairman John Boozman and I were able to pass the Flexible Partnership Act as a part of the 2018 Farm Bill. Senator Steve Daines and I led the effort last Congress and it passed as part of the EXPLORE Act. This bill authorizes the Forest Service to lease unused administrative sites to support local affordable housing and infrastructure needs. Despite strong interest from many counties, cities, and towns in Colorado, the Forest Service is pursuing a small number of projects under this new authority and only one contract has been signed in Colorado. I am concerned with the pace and scale of implementation.

12. Can you assure me the Forest Service will prioritize this authority to help address the dire need for housing in our rural communities?

    I am aware of the housing affordability crisis. I have heard from Members on both sides of the aisle that we have more work to do to ensure our communities, especially Gateway communities, have adequate, available, and affordable housing opportunities. If confirmed, I look forward to receiving a briefing by the Forest Service on this issue.

13. Will you provide my office with a list of all the administrative sites in Colorado that would be eligible to use this new authority?

    If confirmed, I will work with the Forest Service to inventory administrative sites that can benefit from expanded authorities.

As you may know, the report of the National Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission is the product of a two-year, congressionally-chartered nonpartisan group of 50 experts, including a number of Coloradans, that came together to offer 148 consensus recommendations for urgent new approaches to the wildfire crisis, more collaboration, more proactive action, increased use of beneficial fire, workforce improvements, modernizing decision-making tools, and investing in resilience. While Congress continues to work on implementing the recommendations that require a change in law, there are many good recommendations that the Administration can execute.

14. Will you commit to receiving a nonpartisan briefing on the commission and its report as you get up to speed?

    Yes. I look forward to reading the commission report and learning more about the recommendations they put forward.

I continue to hear from Colorado producers about labor hardships. The Adverse Effect Wage Rates (AEWR) are set to increase by over 4% nationally in 2025; however, lowering the AEWR isn't a silver bullet solution. Our entire immigration system is broken and our agriculture sector acutely feels the pains of the costs, the burdensome paperwork, and the fears of ICE raids. I worked with colleagues across the aisle to craft a thoughtful measure to reform the H-2A Ag Labor program.

15. Will you work with me, other departments, and folks in the agriculture industry to fix the program once and for all?

    It's my understanding there is historical context with respect to the first Trump Administration acting on the Adverse Effect Wage Rate. If confirmed, while I would like to review past actions, I am more broadly committed to working with Congress and Department of Labor (DOL) Secretary-designate Chavez-DeRemer to ensure our legal immigration programs better support agriculture.

Currently, SNAP benefits may be used to purchase most food and drink products except for alcohol and prepared foods. As a program that is intended to supplement food budgets, SNAP recipients need more choices to meet their dietary needs. While most Americans do not eat according to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, research indicates that SNAP and non-SNAP households have similar food purchase patterns.

16. To provide additional healthy food choices to SNAP beneficiaries, I plan to reintroduce my bill, the Hot Foods Act, to allow purchases of hot foods such as rotisserie chicken or hot soup. Do you support proposals such as this that improve nutritional choices for SNAP beneficiaries consistent with the food purchases of most Americans?

    As mentioned in my confirmation hearing, I have a deep concern with the rates of diet-related, chronic disease in children, including obesity. I look forward to evaluating data on nutritional choices in existing programs as well as existing programs' legal authorities related to nutrition.

Access to basic needs like healthy food is essential for individuals and families to thrive, both personally and professionally. Programs like SNAP provide this critical foundation. In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress strengthened the SNAP Employment & Training program by expanding opportunities for paid work-based learning, pre-apprenticeship, and apprenticeship programs. However, an unintended consequence occurred; now, individuals earning a paid wage during their federal work program (like SNAP E&T) are becoming ineligible for SNAP benefits. A

prerequisite to being eligible for SNAP E&T is to be on SNAP; thus, people have to choose between food security and job training.

17. Will you work with me to ensure that individuals participating in paid work-based training programs can continue to receive SNAP benefits and access to healthy food?

One of the great things about SNAP is the built-in programs that encourage work and self-sufficiency. Work and job training is a core component of the SNAP program and I am committed to working with anyone who will come to the table on those issues, like the one identified here, to find the best solutions to maximize opportunities for individuals to receive the support and training they need to be successful.

Senator Tina Smith

1. As you know, the United States has trust and treaty obligations to 574 Tribal nations in the United States, including 11 Dakota and Ojibwe nations in Minnesota. Every part of the Federal government, including the USDA, has a responsibility to uphold these government-to-government relationships with Tribes and to uphold treaty obligations to Tribal members. There is considerable room for improvement, particularly in the reforms to self-governance. This is an area of bipartisan interest.

   a. If confirmed, are you committed to upholding USDA's responsibilities and obligations toward Tribal Nations?

   Like you, I agree that we need to ensure USDA's responsibilities to and/or programs impacting our tribes work much better. If confirmed, I will look forward to working on these matters closely with the Office of Tribal Relations, in the Office of the Secretary at USDA.

   b. How can we work together to improve the USDA's relationships with and policies toward Tribal Nations?

   I look forward to working with Congress as appropriate to ensure current programs are responsive to Tribal Nations' needs.

2. Today, our rural communities are confronting profound change. More than a third of farm and ranch land in the United States is expected to change hands in the next 20 years. Simply put, without new farmers taking over and building new agricultural businesses,

we will lose farms and land that is essential to our rural and urban communities and food security.

At the same time, I have met with many young people eager to build new agricultural ventures, and just last summer we heard in this committee from a beginning farmer, Tessa Parks, who has confronted numerous obstacles as she and her spouse Wyatt raise grass-finished beef in Rice County, Minnesota, which they sell direct-to-consumer at farmers markets.

Tessa said it best "I believe we can build a brighter future together through necessary improvements to the farm safety net, by building fairer and more competitive markets, and by creating better opportunities for the next generation of farmers.

a. What specific actions will you take, as Secretary of Agriculture, to ensure that beginning farmers, including Native farmers, Hmong farmers and Latino farmers are able to thrive?

If confirmed, I look forward to exploring ways to improve the USDA Beginning Farmers and Ranchers programs and others designed to lift up all beginning farmers. This is a particularly important effort, given the average age of today's farmer is 58 and only 9 percent of all producers are under the age of 35. This is also important, given the number of farms in the U.S. declined by 141,733, or 7%, in the last U.S. Census of Agriculture.

b. What are the biggest obstacles that you see beginning farmers confronting as they build their businesses across the country?

Barriers to entry for beginning farmers and ranchers include lack of access to capital, high input costs, overregulation, and in recent history, generally low commodity prices.

3. Nearly ninety years ago, with the help of the federal Rural Electrification Act, neighbors came together to help farms and rural families in America to turn the lights on by forming rural electric cooperatives. Thanks to this work, 50 coops in Minnesota today provide electric service to nearly one third of the state.

But in the ninety years since, 2022 was the first year we again made big investments in our rural energy systems. Congress created the New Empowering Rural America (New ERA) program through the Inflation Reduction Act, which helps reduce energy costs and pollution for people in rural communities. USDA estimates that co-ops participating in

this program will save their members up to eight hundred dollars per rural household each year.

In Minnesota, and in communities across the country, rural electric coops are using assistance from New ERA to diversify their energy sources while lowering costs for businesses and families. We must protect these investments so our rural communities can thrive. If confirmed, will you commit to upholding USDA's investments in our rural communities through the New ERA program?

If confirmed, I intend to learn more about USDA Rural Development, Rural Utility Service programs, including the new New ERA program, their current status, and whether they have been additive to U.S. energy dominance.

4. For years, the USDA has been investing in farmers and rural small business through a relatively small but important Farm Bill program, the Rural Energy for America Program, or REAP. REAP is popular and has long had bipartisan support. For example, investments to help farms and rural small businesses in Minnesota this past year will save people thousands of dollars every year and create enough energy savings to power more than 15,000 homes. In this way, these investments will help farmers and business owners save money and improve their bottom lines while reducing harmful carbon emissions. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing support for our farmers and rural small businesses through USDA's REAP program?

   If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about USDA Rural Development programs, including the Rural Energy for America Program, from departmental experts.

5. It's no secret that one of the biggest factors causing rising input costs is the lack of options farmers face when looking to buy their inputs, including fertilizer and seeds. And on the processing and marketing side of farming it is the same thing. There are fewer and fewer options for farmers to send their animals to be processed and their goods to be marketed. Ag industry consolidation has resulted in farmers receiving just 14.9 cents of every food dollar that consumers pay. Costs like marketing, processing, transportation, and others now account for nearly 85 cents of every food dollar spent in the United States. Producers, especially beginning farmers, are getting squeezed on both ends of farming, from inputs to harvest to marketing. What is your plan as Secretary to help farmers facing rampant consolidation across the ag sector?

   Current market conditions are especially difficult for farmers. If confirmed, I look forward to evaluating all available legal authorities and programs to ensure our farmers are competitive and receive appropriate support to succeed.

6. The 2018 Farm Bill created the Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC) program. Dairy producers have generally been happy with this program. I believe that the DMC worked because Congress and the USDA laid out a plan after we passed the last Farm Bill to promote the new program and to really make sure it worked. The framework laid out by Sen. Stabenow last year made smart updates to the DMC that I, along with Ranking Member Klobuchar and Sen. Baldwin pushed for. Despite the DMC being a much more effective risk management tool than its predecessor programs, we continue to see the number of dairy farms in states like Minnesota decline. The Farm Service Agency has announced the enrollment period for 2025 DMC coverage from January 29 until March 31st of this year.

   a. Can you speak to the importance of the DMC, and how it has helped farmers weather market fluctuations?

      Consistent with your observation above, it is my understanding that, after years of improvement, dairy producers are generally pleased with the Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC).

   b. What improvements do you think this Committee should be considering to improve the DMC?

      I have much to learn about DMC, and I'm hopeful that this is a topic we can discuss in the weeks and months to come as Congress works to reauthorize the farm bill.

   c. Will you commit to ensuring that the DMC is working well for all dairy farmers, and ensure USDA conducts a robust outreach effort to ensure dairy farmers are enrolling in this important risk management tool?

      If confirmed, I commit to working with Congress to ensure DMC is working well for dairy farmers. As for outreach, I commit to raising this issue with the team at the Farm Production and Conservation mission area and discuss ways to make sure producers are aware of the options available to them.

Senator Richard J. Durbin

Mass Deportations

1. During the hearing, I asked about your work with the America First Policy Institute, where on multiple occasions, you had expressed support for conducting "the largest deportation exercise in history" at a "scale that actually matters." During the hearing, I referred to undocumented workers, but your think tank also issued policy papers that

criticized the temporary foreign worker visa programs as putting pressure on wages of vulnerable Americans and straining public services.

As I indicated, in Illinois, I hear from pork producers, meat packers, apple orchards, dairy operations, that they cannot find local workers for these jobs, and in these instances, they are using workers with legal temporary visas, or other legal visas, like those authorized by the U.S. Mexico Canada Trade Agreement, among other types of official authorizations approved by the U.S. government.

Should farmers expect federal agents to appear unannounced to search their private property for workers who are legally authorized?

Your question asks about authorities that belong to the Secretary of Homeland Security and other agencies. As a private citizen, I am not aware of their enforcement priorities.

If the focus, as was stated, is on "criminals first," then, what should the food and agriculture sector expect to be the second focus and third focus?

Your question asks about authorities that belong to the Secretary of Homeland Security and other agencies. As a private citizen, I am not aware of their enforcement priorities.

2. Recently, the Trump Administration instructed federal employees to report co-workers who do not adhere to the new administration policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion. There are about 2,124 FSA county offices, a highly localized federal presence in nearly every rural county in America whose expertise is to have their eyes and ears on local farming and ranching.

   Should farmers anticipate that USDA employees in FSA County Offices will be instructed to examine, investigate, and report on farmers in their service area whom they believe are employing foreign workers, including authorized workers?

   If confirmed, my focus will be ensuring our farmer and rancher customers are receiving first-rate customer service with respect to how USDA is implementing the dozens of programs within the Food Production and Conservation mission area, especially on the local FSA level.

USDA Payments—Nutrition and Farms

3. I understand you have made comments over the years supporting work requirements for SNAP recipients.

Do you believe that the current SNAP program, the nutrition safety-net, encourages long-term reliance on government payments?

As I mentioned to Senator Smith during my confirmation hearing, my commitment is to ensure I have the data, the research, and a thorough understanding of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). That includes learning more about the churn and/or longevity that exists in the program, and how the Department can work to support both working families and those looking to enter the labor market.

Do you support replacing the SNAP formula with state block grants?

At this time my priority is to better understand the program as it operates, including how the states administer it. As I have said, I want to preserve the program for those in need while respecting the generosity of the American taxpayer funding it.

4. Farmers tell me they prefer to get their revenues from the market. USDA farm payments have existed since the 1930s.

Do you believe the USDA farm safety-net encourages long-term reliance on government payments?

No. Over the last 30 years, the farm safety net has become considerably more market-oriented and risk-based. The farmers and ranchers I've met over the course of my life make decisions based on things like the market, the equipment they own, local weather conditions at the time of planting, and maintaining crop rotations—not the availability of government support.

Do you support replacing the farm safety-net formula with state block grants?

As I've learned throughout my preparation for the confirmation process, the farm safety net is designed to be flexible and to respond to market and weather conditions. I look forward to reviewing this issue if confirmed.

5. Some believe that work requirements, and asset tests, as done with SNAP, should be extended as eligibility requirements for all USDA safety-net programs, such as an enforced verification of actively-engaged, majority contributions to the farm operation, or caps on the total assets owned.

If confirmed, how will you approach the enforcement of farm program eligibility requirements?

I will enforce the law as written.

School Nutrition

6. During the first Trump Administration, USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue, within the first six days of taking office, worked to reverse Obama Administration efforts to improve school meals, like reducing sodium and increasing fruits and vegetables. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the current nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services, has proposed to improve nutrition in school meals.

   What changed?

   Should we both be confirmed, I will welcome input from Secretary-designate Kennedy on policies related to school meals.

Nutrition Program – Women Infants and Children (WIC)

7. The USDA Women, Infants, and Children Program helps to improve the health of low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children under the age of five who are at nutritional risk.

   Do you agree that this program is critically important for children?

   I appreciate the value of the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) to pregnant and postpartum mothers and their children. I look forward to a comprehensive review of the program, including how the Department can work to ensure the healthy behaviors accumulated through use of WIC translate to families who transition to other programs, including SNAP.

   Can I receive a commitment from you that full funding of this program is key for WIC to carry out its goals?

   I do not want to get ahead of the President as he works to formulate a budget. However, I do commit to representing all interests of the Department as that budget is crafted.

Conservation Funds

8. Consumers, both globally and domestically, want to buy more products from farmers who increase key practices, such as conservation tillage, economical fertilizer management, and cover crops. This is understood by major agricultural businesses like Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, Bunge, and others, and companies like Kraft Heinz,

Kellanova, and Mondelez. Typically, regardless of policies, the consumer is the ultimate decider, and American farmers who prepare now, who stay ahead of this curve, will be the supplier of first choice, and at a major international business competitive advantage in the long run, compared to foreign competitors like Brazil, Argentina, Ukraine, and Canada. One example is the new market for sustainable aviation fuels made from crops. Most believe these new value-added market opportunities for farmers will offer revenue premiums above conventional crops, and can serve as a critical attribute when expanding into new export markets to reduce the agricultural trade deficit.

These farming practices also help with dust storms. Illinois has experienced severe dust storms; eight people lost their lives in a highway accident in 2023. These farming practices also help farmers to experiment with the most effective and economical applications of high-cost fertilizer.

USDA conservation dollars are voluntary incentives that help American farmers afford, prepare for, remain competitive, and find new revenue opportunities, in these new markets, that also can address dust storms and avoid costly fertilizer losses.

What are your plans for USDA conservation dollars?

I appreciate the voluntary nature of our nation's conservation programs, but I look forward to learning more about them. While any decisions left to the discretion of the Secretary will necessarily have to wait until I've had a chance to meet with my new team, I'm aware that Congress was prescriptive in many respects in directing how the funding is to be used for various programs. I look forward to digging into all of this if confirmed.

Assistance to Clothing Manufacturers

9. A clothing manufacturer in my state, Oxxford Clothing, produces high-end, tailored business wear and employs more than 120 highly specialized workers. Since 2014, USDA has administered the Wool Apparel Trust Fund and the Pima Cotton Trust Fund to provide payments to these American suit and shirt manufacturers to preserve domestic apparel and textile manufacturing. These industries that use cotton and wool fibers, yarns and fabrics have received support from USDA from these funds to assist with maintaining jobs. Should funding lapse from these funds, the risk is significant that these American jobs soon would be lost and relocated to foreign countries.

If confirmed, will you commit to support this industry by working to avoid any lapse in funding for these USDA programs this year?

If confirmed, I look forward to discussing available options with experts at the Department. At the same time, I recognize the importance of a five-year farm bill and the associated certainty.

Food Waste

10. More than 30 percent of food in our nation goes unsold or uneaten every year, and a large part of that waste ends up in landfills. Food loss and waste costs the U.S. economy more than $470 billion. Last Congress, Senator Grassley and I introduced the *Reduce Food Loss and Waste Act*, which would have created a voluntary certification program at USDA to incentivize food businesses to save millions of dollars of wasted inventory by donating more food or using an alternative disposal method, such as composting. This proposal was supported by groups like the National Restaurant Association, Consumer Brands Association, FMI-the Food Industry Association, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic.

    If confirmed, will you commit to having USDA assist with the development of this food waste reduction proposal?

    I appreciate the efforts of Senator Grassley and you to address food waste and look forward to learning more about your proposal and more about the work of the Department to address food loss and waste. I also think there is room at the table for other agencies to participate, so if confirmed, I look forward to a broader conversation.

Senator Cory Booker

1. I was very encouraged by your commitment to helping this nation's small farmers. One of the most egregious ways small farmers are not being served is through our disaster relief and crop insurance safety nets, which often work well for large, commodity-crop farms, but poorly or not at all for small, multi-crop farms.
    a. Can you work with my office and other Senators from small farm states to make sure that small farmers are able to apply with minimal burdens for the emergency aid that was recently passed by Congress?

        Yes.

    b. Can you work with my office and other Senators from small / specialty crop states to understand and implement solutions to make sure crop insurance is useful and accessible to small, multi-crop farms?

        As I noted in the hearing, I am committed to ensuring the farm safety net works for farms of all sizes, both large and small and all sizes in between.

c. There is a serious lack of transparency with how crop insurance is functioning. Will you work with my office to request data from crop insurance companies, so we can better understand how crop insurance is being delivered to farmers?

Before committing to collecting additional data, I need to first evaluate the data the Risk Management Agency (RMA) already has at its disposal. Regardless, I look forward to working with you to ensure that crop insurance is working for your producers.

2. The U.S. government is the largest purchaser of food in America. Instead of leveraging these food purchasing dollars to support independent farmers and ranchers and local food systems, the majority of these taxpayer funds are directed to the world's largest and most abusive food corporations. Given the urgency of the viability crisis that small ranch operations face, I was disheartened by comments made by former USDA Secretary, Tom Vilsack, where he essentially said the USDA had no other choice than to buy meat from Brazilian-owned JBS. Will you commit to finding ways to leverage the Department's purchasing to better assist independent family farmers and ranchers?

While I have more to learn on this topic, I will commit to working with you as we seek the best ways to leverage limited taxpayer funding in helping those most in need.

3. Corporate consolidation in agriculture has had devastating consequences for farmers, rural communities, and consumers. Four companies now control 85% of the beef processing market, 82% of the nitrogen fertilizer market, and 62% of the global agrichemical market. This consolidation drives down prices paid to farmers, reduces competition that helps consumers, and leaves our food system vulnerable to supply chain disruptions. If confirmed as the next Secretary of Agriculture, will you commit to prioritizing the fight against corporate consolidation by using USDA's existing authority to enforce antitrust laws?

While I will be exploring any and all options for helping agricultural producers and consumers navigate the massive increase in costs they've experienced over the last few years, I'm also mindful that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) enjoy primary responsibility for the enforcement of our antitrust laws.

4. As I've traveled across the country I have heard directly from farmers and ranchers about the challenges they face in dealing with large meatpackers and processors. Many of these farmers and ranchers have shared how critical the recently finalized rulemakings under the Packers & Stockyards Act are for them to be able to stay in business. These rules are essential to ensuring fair competition and protecting farmers and ranchers from

discriminatory, deceptive, and retaliatory practices by dominant agribusiness corporations. The past administration has finalized three rules, one of which is Poultry Grower Payment Systems and Capital Improvement Systems. These rules would provide much-needed transparency, give producers stronger tools to hold corporations accountable, and help restore balance in a market that has become increasingly tilted against independent producers.

a. If confirmed as Secretary, will you oppose any attempts to undermine these final rules?

I cannot commit to supporting or opposing rules that I have not yet had the opportunity to review, but I will commit to engaging with Congress as appropriate.

b. And, will you commit to keeping my staff briefed on the status of these rules after you take office?

Yes.

5. President Trump set a precedent for connecting hungry Americans directly to farmers through his Farmers to Families Food Box program during the COVID pandemic. Modeled after this program, the USDA subsequently created the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Cooperative Agreement program, which provides funding for states to purchase foods from local producers to support food banks. Both farmers and food banks have expressed how beneficial this program has been, in both supporting agriculture and bringing healthy, fresh options to needy people. Will you commit to continuing this program?

The Farmers to Families Food Box was instrumental in connecting those in need with staple foods. I appreciate that program being used as a model for the Local Food Purchasing Program and look forward to learning more about it, including making certain that if it continues, it provides resources to all communities, even the most rural of our great nation.

6. WIC provides nutritious foods, breastfeeding support, nutrition education, and health care referrals to low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children at nutritional risk. WIC has been shown to reduce the risk of fetal death and infant mortality, and improve children's health outcomes even after they age out of the program. However, WIC has not kept up with the pace of technology changes in service delivery, making it more burdensome for participants. In recent years, Congress provided temporary authority for WIC to serve families through virtual platforms, putting WIC on par with other health care providers. USDA has also funded states to pilot online shopping, making it easier for busy and rural families to access the program's healthy

foods. If confirmed, will you support giving WIC families permanent access to virtual services, and expanding access to online shopping?

The Department's 16 nutrition programs will face a comprehensive review from my team, ensuring not only that they meet the needs of the families they serve, but respect the generosity of the American taxpayer funding them. I commit to better understanding the virtual services you mention and also reviewing online shopping for both the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

7. I have long been a proponent of bringing much needed reforms to commodity checkoff programs. Checkoffs are essentially taxes that farmers, ranchers, and producers must pay when they sell their products. In total, nearly $1 billion dollars per year are collected by government checkoffs. By federal law, checkoff dollars are not to be used for lobbying, but these lines have been blurred by lack of appropriate safeguards over the program. I am co-leading checkoff reform legislation with Senator Mike Lee. As Secretary, will you work to bring transparency and accountability to USDA checkoff programs?

I've heard a number of opinions on the commodity checkoff programs—including wide-ranging support from the agricultural community—but I'm committed to learning more about them and engaging in dialogue with Congress on the topic.

8. Significant political attention has been focused on the national security risks of adversarial foreign farmland ownership, but this has not addressed the wider problem of foreign interests that are behind corporate land purchases. Further, land is increasingly being bought up by hedge funds and other corporate investors like Bill Gates as assets, which drives up prices for farmers.
    a. Do you commit to USDA collecting more data on the size and ownership of farmland owned by large corporations, both domestic and foreign?

    Before committing to collecting additional data, I need to first evaluate the data USDA already has at its disposal.

    b. What measures do you propose to strengthen USDA's implementation and enforcement of the Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act?

    I'm aware that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently completed a review of USDA's implementation of the Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act (AFIDA), and I will start by reviewing those recommendations. If confirmed, I look forward to continuing discussions with Congress on this topic.

9. Tens of thousands of Americans have had their SNAP benefits stolen due to EBT skimming. These victims are suffering from organized criminal activity targeting their benefits. While the theft started in a few states, it has now spread nationwide, with California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, New York, and Texas particularly impacted. In 2024, Congress voted on a bipartisan basis to provide temporary funding to help states restore stolen SNAP benefits, but those funds and protections expired at the end of 2024. Do you support continued assistance to states to help these crime victims and restore their stolen SNAP benefits?

   I have learned that the majority of this theft stems from transnational criminal rings, and it is so maddening that they continue to target the most vulnerable among us. While states can—without delay—reimburse families, I will commit to ongoing conversations with Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) to ensure states, retailers, processors, and all involved across the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) system, are being held accountable to preventing instances of theft. I will also partner with other agencies seeing similar theft, like the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) via Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and local and federal law enforcement who have been tracking these breaches, to ensure a whole of government approach to protecting our families.

Senator Ben Ray Luján

1. Will you commit to opposing any proposed cuts to the National School Lunch Program?

   As I mentioned at my confirmation hearing, children are suffering from diet-related chronic disease at unheard of rates. School lunch is an important part of that conversation, because we should all want it to be the best meal eaten, not just the best meal served. So if confirmed, I commit to better understanding our child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

2. Do I have your support for my Acequia Act and to not reverse any actions regarding acequias that were implemented under the previous administration?

   If confirmed, I will gladly review the legislation.

3. In the Ag industry, there are twice as many open positions as there are qualified applicants. How do you envision elevating youth development programs, such as 4-H, FFA and other youth-based agriculture programs as an asset to fill the ag talent pipeline; and what steps will you take to ensure these programs receive the resources necessary to prepare young people for careers in agriculture?

As I noted in my confirmation hearing, I am a product of both 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) and look forward to bringing attention to the youth development programs if I'm fortunate enough to be confirmed. As for 4-H, I look forward to working with Congress as you all consider funding needs. With respect to FFA, I look forward to working with my dear friend Linda McMahon at the Department of Education.

4. If confirmed, how do you plan to maintain and expand the support that has been provided these past four years to farmers and ranchers experiencing extreme drought conditions?

   If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the various programs at USDA that provide assistance to drought-stricken producers, ranging from crop insurance to the Livestock Forage Program (LFP). I also look forward to working with my Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation—once confirmed—to implement the recently passed natural disaster assistance as quickly as possible. As for expansion, I look forward to providing technical assistance to Congress as you all consider changes to the farm bill.

5. Would you support keeping that exemption for Western States in place until we are able to come to a long-term solution?

   If confirmed, I look forward to having a follow-up discussion on this matter.

6. Are you willing to work with me to continue looking into ways that risk management programs can help drought-stricken areas, especially in the Southwest?

   I am always willing to listen and work with any office to find solutions that work for all involved. If confirmed, I look forward to our continued conversations.

<u>Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock</u>

1. The Federal Crop Insurance Program (FCIP) is a critical part of the farmer safety net that helps protect farmers from the financial consequences of adverse growing and market conditions.[1] In Georgia, federal crop insurance plans like the Hurricane Insurance Protection-Wind Index (HIP-WI) have been important lifelines for producers recovering

[1] Stephanie Rosch, *Farm Bill Primer: Federal Crop Insurance Program*, Congressional Research Service (Aug. 26, 2022), https://www.crs.gov/reports/pdf/IF12201/IF12201.pdf.

from Hurricanes Helene[2] and Debby,[3] which caused significant damage to agricultural operations across Georgia. However, I have heard from farmers in my state that the Risk Management Agency's indemnity payment process for HIP-WI, which relies solely on data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA),[4] has left some producers out when local data shows they should have received indemnity payments for hurricanes in 2024.

a. If confirmed, how will you work to maintain and strengthen FCIP's vital public-private partnerships to help ensure that all of Georgia's farmers have access to our nation's farmer safety net?

I've heard from multiple Senators—and from farmers and ranchers across the country—that crop insurance is the cornerstone of the farm safety net. I look forward to working with you and your colleagues on issues related to crop insurance and risk management for our nation's agricultural producers.

b. If confirmed, will you commit to working with Congress, NOAA, and RMA to improve HIP-WI's indemnity payment process so that HIP-WI better meets the needs of our farmers in the wake of hurricanes?

I am not familiar with the details of the Hurricane Insurance Protection-Wind Index, but I look forward to working with all stakeholders to meet the needs of farmers in the wake of hurricanes.

2. With over 4,000 slaughter and meatpacking workers in 2023, Georgia is a top state for meat processing jobs.[5] Meat processing workers are the backbone of our nation's meat processing facilities. However, I am concerned that meat processing workers are exposed to several risks that can lead to injury and illness, including harmful biological agents, hazardous chemicals, dangerous equipment, and high noise levels.[6] These workers suffer

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[2] Richard Flournoy, *Product Management Bulletin-PM-24-067 Hurricane Insurance Protection - Wind Index (HIP-WI) Payment Indicator and Trigger Event Date for Helene 2024*, Risk Management Agency (Oct. 11, 2024), https://www.rma.usda.gov/policy-procedure/bulletins-memos/product-management-bulletin/2024/pm-24-067-hurricane-insurance.

[3] *USDA Makes Indemnity Payments to Producers Impacted by Hurricane Debby*, Risk Management Agency (Aug. 23, 2024), https://www.rma.usda.gov/news-events/news/2024/washington-dc/usda-makes-indemnity-payments-producers-impacted-hurricane.

[4] *Hurricane Insurance Protection - Wind Index (HIP-WI)*, Risk Management Agency (Jan. 2025), https://www.rma.usda.gov/about-crop-insurance/highlighted-initiatives-plans/hurricane-insurance-protection-wind-index.

[5] *Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2023*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (May 2023), https://www.bls.gov/oes/2023/may/oes513023.htm.

[6] *Meatpacking*, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Jan. 2025), https://www.osha.gov/meatpacking.

serious injuries at double the rate of other workers[7] and are particularly susceptible to musculoskeletal disorders.[8] We must ensure that the health and safety of hard-working Georgians and the integrity of our nation's food supply remain a top priority.

a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to uphold strong worker health and safety standards while maintaining food safety within our nation's meat processing industry?

Yes.

3. The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers program helps farmers across the country meet their labor needs as domestic farm labor continues to become scarcer.[9] Farmers in Georgia continue to be top employers of H-2A workers to meet their seasonal needs.[10] However, some producers, including controlled environmental agricultural operators, are unable to use this essential program to meet their year-round labor needs.

a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with Congress and the Department of Labor to reform the H-2A program to better support the needs of year-round agricultural operations like controlled environment agriculture operations?

I understand that labor is very important to production agriculture, and I look forward to working with Congress, DOL Secretary-Designate Chavez-DeRemer, and stakeholders on related issues.

4. From our state's famous peaches to our high-quality pecans and our sweet Vidalia onions, Georgia's specialty crop farmers produce a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and nuts. One of the prominent, unique challenges that specialty crop producers in my state face is the import dumping of cheap, foreign-grown fruits and vegetables during the U.S. growing season that outcompete domestic specialty crops and harm domestic growers. I am glad that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) have already appointed members to their newly established Seasonal and Perishable Agricultural Products Advisory Committee to address this issue, and I am hopeful that this effort will remain top of mind throughout the next administration.

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[7] *US Department of Labor Releases New Inspection Guidance to Protect Workers in Animal Slaughtering, Processing Industries*, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Oct. 16, 2024), https://www.osha.gov/news/newsreleases/osha-trade-release/20241016.

[8] Scott Ketcham, *Inspection Guidance for Animal Slaughtering and Processing Establishments*, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Oct. 15, 2024), https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/standardinterpretations/2024-10-15.

[9] *See Farm Labor*, Economic Research Service (Jan. 8, 2025), https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor#h2a.

[10] *Id.* (Chart entitled "U.S. H-2A (temporary agricultural employment of foreign workers) positions certified by State, fiscal years 2005–23").

a. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing this vital partnership between USDA and USTR to address the unique issues facing domestic specialty crop growers, including the seasonal dumping of foreign-grown fruit and vegetable imports?

I look forward to working with you and my colleagues at the United States Trade Representative (USTR) on any issues of unfair foreign competition facing domestic agricultural producers, particularly specialty crop growers with concerns about seasonal dumping.

b. Will you seriously consider any recommendations of the Seasonal and Perishable Agricultural Products Advisory Committee to protect and better support the needs of our nation's specialty crop producers?

Yes.

c. If confirmed, will you work with me and my colleagues, to put effective trade measures in place to help curb these growing import levels and keep our domestic specialty crop farmers in business?

While I have much to learn about this topic before committing to taking specific actions, I commit to working with you on this issue.

5. Since its creation in 1933, the Secretary of Agriculture has used the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) to promote economic stability in the agricultural industry. I am glad previous secretaries have used the CCC to expand markets for specialty crops and fight hunger at home through The Emergency Food Assistance Program[11] and abroad[12] while supporting our farmers.
   a. If confirmed, will you advocate for preserving the Secretary of Agriculture's current authorities to utilize the CCC to help both farmers and families?

I commit to additional dialogue with Congress as I learn more about the scope of the Commodity Credit Corporation's authorities.

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[11] Melissa Abelev and David Tuckwiller, *Fiscal Year 2025 Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) Funding*, Food and Nutrition Service (Dec. 2, 2024), https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/FY25-CCC-TEFAP-Funding.pdf.
[12] *USDA, USAID Deploy $1 Billion for Emergency Food Assistance*, Foreign Agriculture Service (Apr. 18, 2024), https://www.fas.usda.gov/newsroom/usda-usaid-deploy-1-billion-emergency-food-assistance.

6. Agriculture is the top industry in Georgia. Yet over 1.4 million Georgians are facing hunger, and 461,720 of them are children.[13] The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is one of our nation's effective anti-hunger programs, which served nearly 1.4 million Georgians in 2023.[14] SNAP has been found to reduce poverty, improve health outcomes, and increase food security.[15] I am concerned that proposals to weaken SNAP and limit the dignity of choice within this program will hinder its effectiveness, especially for families in rural communities who may already have limited access to grocery stores and affordable fruits and vegetables.
    a. If confirmed, how will you ensure that SNAP participants who may already have limited access to grocery stores, affordable fruits, and vegetables will not be harmed by efforts to restrict SNAP choice?

       As mentioned in my confirmation hearing, I will undertake a comprehensive review of all nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to better understand their reach, administration, and impact, including impacts on healthy behaviors and outcomes for families.

7. Georgia is the number one forestry state in the nation with over 21.4 million acres of private timberland.[16] Georgia's forestry industry contributed $42 billion in revenue and 140,787 jobs to my state in Fiscal Year 2024, making massive contributions to Georgia's economy and especially our rural communities.[17] Maintaining and growing the vitality of Georgia's forestry sector is one of my priorities, and I am hopeful that the next administration will work with this Committee to tackle the domestic forest industry's most pressing issues.
    a. If confirmed, how will you promote family forest owners' access to the technical and financial resources needed to maintain their lands and participate in emerging markets?

       Family forest owners play a pivotal role in our nation's natural resource economy. We must strengthen our existing markets and create new markets

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[13] *What Hunger Looks Like in Georgia*, Feeding America (Jan. 2025), https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/georgia.
[14] Ife Finch Floyd, *The Basics of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Georgia*, Georgia Budget & Policy Institute (Nov. 2, 2023), https://gbpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20231103-The-Basics-of-SNAP.pdf.
[15] Brynne Keith-Jennings, Joseph Llobrera, and Stacy Dean, *Links of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program with Food Insecurity, Poverty, and Health: Evidence and Potential*, National Library of Medicine (Dec. 2019), https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6836787.
[16] *#1 Forestry State*, Georgia Forestry Association (Jan. 2025), https://gfagrow.org/about/numberone; *Georgia Forest Inventory & Analysis, 2018-2022*, Georgia Forestry Commission (Jul. 23, 2024), https://gatrees.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Georgia-Forest-Inventory-Analysis-2018-2022.pdf.
[17] *State and Private Forestry Fact Sheet: Georgia 2024*, U.S. Forest Service (Dec. 13, 2024), https://apps.fs.usda.gov/nicportal/temppdf/sfs/naweb/ga_std.pdf.

for domestic forest products. If confirmed, I will evaluate the Department's authorities as they relate to forest owners' access to markets and additional revenue streams.

b. How do you plan to align USDA programs to expand access to voluntary, market-driven solutions that support forest health and provide new revenue opportunities for family forest owners?

If confirmed, I will work across mission areas to ensure family forest owners have access to voluntary, market-driven opportunities. I will commit to learning more about the barriers to existing markets and working with Members of Congress, as appropriate, to ensure we are strengthening existing markets and building out new markets for American forests and forest products.

c. How will you work to expand traditional farm loan programs to better meet the needs of forest landowners and improve their access to affordable financing?

If confirmed, I commit to learning more about the financial challenges private forest owners face across the nation and how we can ensure private forest owners have access to the capital they need to continue growing one of America's greatest renewable resources.

d. How will you promote federal-private partnerships to improve wildfire resilience and mitigation on private lands?

If confirmed, I will work with the Forest Service and our state and local partners related to our investments in wildfire risk reduction to protect our communities and natural resources.

e. How will you help ensure the Forest Service considers the forestry management needs of all regions of the United States, which may differ, without negatively affecting the domestic forestry industry and private forest owners in the Southeast?

If confirmed, I will work to understand the market dynamics and regional forces impacting forest owners across the nation. With 193 million acres of Forest Service land, it is clear a one-size fits all approach to land management will not work. I look forward to working with Congress and our

local units to identify how we can continue actively managing our forests and supporting the rural economies that depend on these vital natural resources.

8. Georgia is home to Fort Valley State University, an 1890s Institution that plays a vital role in advancing my state's agriculture industry through education, research, and outreach.[18] Congress has authorized annual capacity grants for 1890 Institutions that require one-to-one nonfederal matching finds.[19] However, I am concerned that these critical institutions are not getting their fair share of funding.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with Congress to continue to close the gaps in funding for all 19 of our 1890 Institutions?

    If confirmed, I commit to continue this important conversation with Congress.

9. The Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) provides funding for state, tribal and territorial governments to purchase foods to help support local, regional, and underserved producers to improve agricultural supply chain resiliency while feeding local communities.[20] In Georgia, the Georgia Department of Agriculture is using $23.6 million in LFPA funding to purchase agricultural products from socially disadvantaged farmers and distribute these products to Georgia's eight regional food banks.[21]
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to continuing this program or a similar effort to strengthen local food supply chains and food security?

    If confirmed, I commit to reviewing the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program's impact and ensure any of USDA's programs are effective in providing resources to local communities.

10. Georgia is the top poultry production state in the nation with the "Poultry Capital of the World" in Gainesville, Georgia. The poultry industry employs over 88,000 hardworking Georgians and has an economic impact of more than $28 billion annually.[22] Growers in my state have long been concerned about the nationwide outbreak of Highly Pathogenic

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[18] *FVSU Is a Land-Grant Institution,* Fort Valley State University (Feb. 28, 2024), https://www.fvsu.edu/about-fvsu/fvsu-land-grant-institution.
[19] Genevieve Croft, *1890 Land-Grant Universities: Background and Selected Issues*, Congressional Research Service (Jun. 9, 2021), https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11847/2.
[20] *Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program*, Agricultural Marketing Service (Jan. 2025), https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/lfpacap.
[21] *Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) in Georgia*, Georgia Department of Agriculture (Jul. 28, 2023), https://www.agr.georgia.gov/news/local-food-purchase-assistance-lfpa-georgia.
[22] Margaret Lawrence, *Georgia Extension Supporting County Governments and Poultry Industry*, National Institute of Food and Agriculture (Sep. 15, 2022), https://www.nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa/blogs/georgia-extension-supporting-county-governments-poultry-industry.

Avian Influenza (HPAI), which had its first confirmed case in Georgia last week.[23] HPAI is a serious threat to the livelihoods of thousands of hardworking Georgians and the health of Georgia's thriving poultry industry that must be addressed urgently.

a. If confirmed, how will you work with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, state Departments of Agriculture, and Congress to mitigate any further spread of HPAI and minimize HPAI's negative effects on the domestic poultry industry?

I have been following the news about the first confirmed case in commercial poultry in Georgia just last week.

Eradicating and preventing animal disease remains a top priority, as mentioned in my hearing testimony. If confirmed, I look forward to requesting an immediate briefing on the Department's highly pathogenic avian influenza response efforts to date.
Robust coordination, not just on the federal level, but on the state level—with state departments of agriculture, state veterinarians and local officials who are on the frontlines—is paramount to eradicating and preventing further spread of diseases, like highly pathogenic avian influenza.

Will you commit to advocating for sufficient funding to ensure USDA has the necessary resources to research and address animal diseases like HPAI that threaten the integrity and security of our nation's food supply chain?

Yes, and if confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress to ensure USDA programs are well equipped to fight animal diseases like highly pathogenic avian influenza.

11. USDA's Office of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OSCAR) leads efforts to facilitate the fair and equitable treatment of USDA customers and employees and enforce civil rights initiatives.[24] On January 21, 2025, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on USDA's efforts to address internal workplace discrimination complaints. Within this report, GAO made three recommendations for the Secretary of Agriculture to take to improve OSCAR's effectiveness and strengthen USDA's response to internal discrimination complaints.[25]

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[23] Tyler Harper, *Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Confirmed in Commercial Poultry Flock in Georgia, All Poultry Activities in Georgia Suspended*, Georgia Department of Agriculture (Jan. 17, 2025), https://agr.georgia.gov/pr/highly-pathogenic-avian-influenza-confirmed-commercial-poultry-flock-georgia-all-poultry.

[24] *Office of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Jan. 2025), https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/staff-offices/office-assistant-secretary-civil-rights.

[25] Equal Employment Opportunity: USDA Could Strengthen Efforts to Address Workplace Discrimination Complaints, Government Accountability Office (Jan. 21, 2025), https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-105804.

a. If confirmed, will you commit to reading GAO's report entitled this report and take seriously the recommendations of this report?

Yes, if confirmed, and thank you for bringing this report to my attention.

b. How will you work with OSCAR to respond to GAO's recommendations within this report?

It would be premature to respond with an answer, given I am not confirmed and have not yet read the report.

12. In addition to the $21 billion in natural disaster recovery funding, last year, Congress provided $10 billion to help farmers stay afloat through widespread economic hardship. Like the natural disaster funding, it is critical that USDA work swiftly to distribute this economic assistance funding to growers as they prepare for the 2025 crop year.
    a. If confirmed, how will you work to ensure this economic assistance is distributed both swiftly and equitably?

    As stated during my hearing, deploying the more than $30 billion in economic and natural disaster assistance recently authorized by Congress as quickly and effectively as possible (including by the 90-day deadline for economic assistance) is a chief priority.

13. Georgia is the nation's leading peanut producer, growing more than 50 percent of the United States' peanuts in 2022.[26] Peanut farmers in my state are concerned about trade barriers between the United States and the European Union regarding aflatoxins, which peanuts are naturally susceptible to. Domestic growers have long partnered with USDA to ensure that their harvest is safe; however, they have also faced difficulty meeting the European Union's rigorous testing requirements for aflatoxin, which have limited producer's access to foreign markets.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to working with the USTR to negotiate an effective solution to this ongoing non-tariff trade barrier with your E.U. counterparts?

    I will commit to learning more about this issue, including working with USTR. Market access is so extremely important, and I will make certain American agriculture always has a seat at the table.

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[26] Maria Bukowski and Aaron Ates, *Georgia Leads U.S. Production of Peanuts, Outproducing All Other States Combined, Economic Research Service* (Mar. 29, 2023), https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/charts-of-note/chart-detail?chartId=106192.

b. Will you keep me and my colleagues updated on your progress with addressing this issue?

I am always willing to remain in touch with concerned offices, and I look forward to it.

c. If confirmed, will you commit to submitting requests for sufficient funding for research to the White House Office of Management and Budget during the annual appropriations process to ensure USDA has the necessary resources to research and address aflatoxin?

I will make certain this and many other issues are part of my conversations with the Department's Office of Budget and Program Analysis.

14. Approximately 30 million children in the United States are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals.[27] However, when schools close for the summer, many families and children lose access to these regular meals. Summer EBT, or SUN Bucks, is a new summer feeding program that works to close the summer meal gap by providing families with $120 per school-aged child to buy groceries during the summer months.[28] While I am encouraged that the majority of states have chosen to participate in SUN Bucks, I am hopeful more states will choose to participate in this critical anti-hunger program.
    a. If confirmed, what steps will you take to support the expansion and effectiveness of the Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) summer feeding programs like SUN Bucks to ensure that *all* our nation's students, including those who live in rural areas, do not go hungry when school is on break?

    As mentioned above, and if confirmed, I will be embarking on a review of all nutrition programs under the jurisdiction of the Department, including Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT). I strongly believe in states' ability to serve their communities, so my team and I will also spend time learning from those who have chosen to implement as well as those who have chosen other pathways.

    b. Will you commit to working with FNS and states to assess and address any implementation or administrative barriers that may hinder state participation in SUN Bucks?

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[27] Zoë Neuberger and Katie Bergh, *Permanent Summer Grocery Benefits Are a Big Win for Children in Low-Income Families, Despite Disappointing Tradeoffs*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Dec. 20, 2022), https://www.cbpp.org/blog/permanent-summer-grocery-benefits-are-a-big-win-for-children-in-low-income-families-despite.

[28] *SUN Bucks (Summer EBT)*, Food and Nutrition Service (Jan. 2025), https://www.fns.usda.gov/summer/sunbucks.

As mentioned above, if confirmed, my team and I will review all nutrition programs, including Summer EBT. That review will include administrative or implementation barriers, as well as discussion with states who chose more local, regionalized approaches to serving families in need, in lieu of federal programs like Summer EBT.

15. As a long-standing anti-hunger advocate, I am also concerned that 343 million people around the world are facing hunger.[29] Georgia is home to MANA, one of our nation's two manufacturers of ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF), which is used to treat the most extreme forms of hunger. This product also supports peanut farmers in my state who grow the main ingredient of RUTF, peanuts.
    a. If confirmed, how will you work to scale-up RUTF procurement and distribution?

    If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF), the companies who manufacture it, and its benefits to children facing malnourishment across the globe. This understanding will certainly be influenced by conversations with your team, the Agency for International Development (USAID), and relevant stakeholders.

16. On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Orders on "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing"[30] and "Initial Rescission of Harmful Executive Orders and Action."[31] To comply with these orders, federal agencies, including USDA, announced that they would place diversity, equity, and inclusion workers on leave.
    a. How many USDA employees have been placed on leave as a result of these actions?

    Until confirmed, I do not have access to this information.

    b. Which USDA departments and/or offices have been affected as a result of these actions?

    Until confirmed, I do not have access to this information.

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[29] *A Global Food Crisis*, World Food Programme (Jan. 2025), https://www.wfp.org/global-hunger-crisis.

[30] *Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing*, The White House (Jan. 20, 2025), https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing.

[31] *Initial Rescission of Harmful Executive Orders and Action*, The White House (Jan. 20, 2025), https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/initial-rescissions-of-harmful-executive-orders-and-actions.

17. I successfully fought to include $5.2 billion in critical funding for our nation's farmers in Sections 22006 and 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). Section 22006 provided $3.1 billion for economically distressed farm loan borrowers to keep our farmers and ranchers afloat. Thanks to this program over $87 million in funding has gone directly to 1,279 farm loan borrowers in Georgia, so they can keep farming.[32] I am concerned that President Trump's Executive Order entitled "Unleashing American Energy" may pause the rollout of these obligated funds for economically distressed borrowers.[33]
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring that USDA completes the swift distribution of all Section 22006 IRA funds so that our nation's producers get the financial relief they need to keep farming?

       Unleashing American energy production is so incredibly important to President Trump and myself. If confirmed, I commit to learning more about Section 22006, including past disbursements, and will look forward to continued conversations with your team.

18. During your testimony, you affirmed your commitment to work with the Agriculture Committees to pass a Farm Bill.[34] As you know, Congress has used the Farm Bill reauthorization process to stand up new programs and improve existing ones, including initiatives that are aimed at supporting specific groups like the 2501 Program for underserved farmers, which Congress created in the 1990 Farm Bill and expanded in the 2014 Farm Bill. The 2501 Program works to ensure that underserved and veteran farmers can equitably participate in USDA programs.[35] As Secretary of Agriculture, you would be responsible for carrying out this program as Congress intended.
    a. If confirmed, will you commit to implementing *all* programs as Congress has directed and intended?

       If confirmed, I will follow the law.

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[32] *Keeping Farmers Farming: Biden-Harris Administration Assistance for Distressed Farm Loan Borrowers*, Farm Service Agency (Jan. 2025), https://www.farmers.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fsa-22006-impacts-report.pdf.
[33] *Unleashing American Energy*, The White House (Jan. 20, 2025), https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/unleashing-american-energy.
[34] Brooke Rollins, *Rollins Confirmation Statement* (Jan. 22, 2025), https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/9034b53a-0a87-e8d1-842e-6821551fc940/Testimony_Rollins_01.23.2025.pdf.
[35] *Underserved and Veteran Farmers, Ranchers, and Foresters*, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Jan. 2025), https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/staff-offices/office-partnerships-and-public-engagement/underserved-and-veteran-farmers-ranchers-and-foresters.

Senator Peter Welch

1. Late last year, I was very disappointed that the year-end spending and Farm Bill extension package excluded funding for key organic "orphan" programs, even though the original bipartisan agreement had included funding for those programs.

   I am very concerned about the consequences of that failure on the organic farmers of Vermont and nationwide, as well as the impact on USDA's ability to crack down on fraudulent organic imports.

   Specifically, my biggest concerns are about the defunding of:

   The Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP), which is a tool established by Congress to help organic farms and businesses offset the annual cost of organic certification. Without it, the certification costs to organic operations will increase significantly in 2025. I fear that this may force many smaller farms to abandon organic certification altogether.

   a. Can you provide details about how the defunding of this program will impact organic farmers and businesses in 2025, and how much funding would be needed to fully operate the program in 2025?

      Given I am not confirmed and am not yet serving at USDA, I am unable to provide formal details and technical assistance regarding the impacts of certain, unfunded orphan programs.

   The Organic Certification Trade and Tracking Program (OCTT) I am concerned that its defunding will hamper the USDA's ability to safeguard the integrity of the organic label. Most importantly, the new Strengthening Organic Enforcement rule, which originated in the first Trump Administration, has established new enforcement procedures to crack down on fraudulent organic imports. When fake organic products are allowed to enter our market, it not only undermines U.S. organic farmers, but it also negatively impacts the integrity of the USDA organic label and consumer trust in that label. The OCTT funding is critical to fully implement the new tracking technology system that is central to that effort.

      b. Can you provide more details about how the defunding of this program will impact the ability of USDA enforce rules against fraudulent organic imports?

      Given I am not confirmed and am not yet serving at USDA, I am unable to provide formal details and technical assistance regarding the impacts of unfunded programs.

2. Farmers across America currently lose as much as $3,300 dollars every year because of broken or inoperable equipment. This problem is significantly exacerbated by rampant abuse of restrictions on the ability of farmers and independent repair shops to fix equipment after it is sold. Manufacturers like John Deere — which alone controls more than half of the market for tractors and combines — prevent anyone but their authorized retailers from repairing Deere equipment, forcing farmers to watch their crops wither on the vine or the fields to sit unplanted waiting for an appointment at a shop that can be hundreds of miles away. In fact, the Federal Trade Commission just filed a complaint against Deere for making millions off of this unfair practice.

    a. Should you lead the Agriculture Department, will you commit to a comprehensive review of farm equipment markets and take action on any anticompetitive conduct this investigation might uncover? Will you cooperate with enforcers at the FTC and DOJ in any efforts they might undertake?

    The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) enjoy primary responsibility for the enforcement of our antitrust laws, including investigating farm equipment companies for alleged anticompetitive conduct.

3. Over the last fifty years, lax antitrust enforcement has allowed major corporations to establish unprecedented levels of concentration and control over virtually every sector of our economy. Nowhere is this truer than in food and agriculture, which has some of the highest degrees of concentration in any industry. As we seek to address potential abuses of these company's monopoly power, it is critical that we prevent the largest corporations from growing even larger. I was relieved to see the Federal Trade Commission successfully block Kroger's illegal proposed acquisition of their primary competitor, Albertsons, but am concerned that our enforcers might lack the resources or will to prevent future mega-mergers in agriculture.

    a. As Secretary of Agriculture, would you support a temporary moratorium on mergers from the largest agribusinesses?

    The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) enjoy primary responsibility for the enforcement of our antitrust laws, including merger reviews.

4. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Development (RD) oversees more than 70 programs to support Rural America. Every year, RD provides over $40 billion in loans, loan guarantees, and grants to rural communities, helping rural areas access capital,

and supporting community efforts related to disaster preparedness, resiliency, and recovery

Thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act, Vermont received historic investments to reduce energy costs, create jobs and investment, and support energy independence. For example, Vermont received $40 million through the Rural Energy for America Program to help farmers and rural businesses invest in renewable energy projects or energy efficiency improvements. This includes $14 million from the IRA. And for the first time ever, Vermont received $1 million for a technical assistance pilot program through USDA Rural Development's Disaster Assistance Fund. The pilot program will help communities respond and recover in the wake of natural disasters.

These investments would not have been possible without Vermont's USDA RD dedicated state team, who understood how small towns operate, and the challenges their communities faced. Their knowledge is irreplaceable, in helping effectively invest in rural communities' futures. However, there is a challenge we must address. The regional RD office that serves Vermont and New Hampshire is currently operating at just 61% of its staffing capacity, the lowest of any regional office. This staffing shortage limits RD's ability to support our communities effectively. In addition, during President Trump's first term, USDA moved its administrative services to the national level, meaning all hiring decisions are now handled by USDA's national HR office. This has slowed down the hiring process. If we returned to the old system, where HR was managed within each state, the RD offices in Vermont and New Hampshire could hire staff more quickly and efficiently.

And earlier this week, President Trump announced a hiring freeze of federal employees. This is deeply concerning for my state's local RD office that is already understaffed.

a. How will you work to address the staffing shortages to help USDA RD effectively deliver its programs for rural communities?

If confirmed, and as I implement the President's agenda, maintaining first-rate customer service, especially at the state and local level, remains a top priority.

5. Earlier this week, President Trump announced that all federal employees return to the office full time. This is deeply concerning for USDA offices in my state. Specifically, in 2022, USDA awarded Lumen Technologies a $1.2 billion contract to deliver internet services across 9500 USDA locations. This transition to a new internet service provider has led to slower internet access at FSA offices in my state, limiting FSA agents' ability to do work. Many of them have used the flexibility to telework to help them finish their tasks and use their time to efficiently serve rural communities.

Without the ability to telework, FSA agents would not be able to serve our rural communities effectively.

a. How do you plan to advocate for telework policies to ensure that USDA is able to complete their work efficiently and in a timely manner, while ensuring that they're able to deliver essential services to farmers and rural communities?

I have not had a chance to review the particulars of the Executive Orders nor initial Department responses. However, if confirmed, and as I implement the President's agenda, maintaining first-rate customer service, especially at the state and local level, remains a top priority.

6. The United States has long been a leader in the fight against global hunger, however, just the week, President Trump announced a 90-day pause in foreign development aid, pending a review. As you know, USDA plays a large part in global nutrition aid through programs like Food for Peace and McGovern-Dole Food for Education, which have helped American farmers feed hungry people and support fellow farmers around the world for decades.

   This is why this pause in aid is deeply concerning. As conflicts can cause hunger, hunger can cause conflict – with global instability on the rise, we can hardly afford to renege on our commitments to end hunger at home and abroad.

   a. Ms. Rollins, can you speak to how you plan to advocate for the importance of United States' global food aid programs in the Trump administration?

   For more than 70 years, commodities grown by America's hard-working farmers have been the centerpiece of USDA and the Agency for International Development (USAID) global food security programs. As mentioned in my confirmation hearing, I will be a voice for all of American agriculture. I will commit to reviewing the jurisdiction the Department holds, and where appropriate, engage with USAID.

7. Since the beginning of 2019 food prices have risen by 28%. There are many reasons why food prices have risen since 2019, including supply chain disruptions due to the covid pandemic, the bird flu, severe weather, and corporate consolidation of the food industry to name a few.

   While I am determined to work with my colleagues to bring down the cost of food,

currently more than 47 million people in the United States face hunger, including 1 out of every 5 children. Those families need help now and cannot wait for market pressures and policy changes to be implemented. That is why USDA has programs like SNAP, WIC, and TEFAP. They are meant to ensure that no one goes hungry in our country when there are shocks to food prices, especially not children.

Unfortunately, administrative hurdles and rumored Republican-led cuts to SNAP threaten make it even more difficult for Americans to access these programs in the face of high food prices.

a. Ms. Rollins, I've introduced multiple bills in the last Congress—including the *Streamlining Nutrition Paperwork Act* and the *SNAP Recertification Reform Act*—to reduce red tape in the SNAP program. If confirmed, how would you reduce administrative burden on SNAP and WIC applicants while maintaining and expanding access to these programs?

As mentioned during my confirmation hearing, and should I be confirmed, my team and I will spend time reviewing all nutrition programs housed at the Department, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). I look forward to better understanding all that is involved, including state administration, policy options, and program integrity and compliance.

8. In 2015, Vermont had 853 dairy farms, today that number is 441, with small and medium-scale farms representing the majority of closures. This is a trend mirrored throughout the country. Rising consolidation in the dairy industry has depressed prices, reduced competition, and forced smaller farms out of existence. Unfortunately, when these farms go out of business, the rural communities that they support begin to die too, leading to a hollowing out of Rural America.

a. Ms. Rollins, if confirmed, how do you plan to address the exponential loss of family-scale dairies and farms in the United States?

If confirmed, I look forward to gaining a fuller picture of how USDA's several dairy policies—including the Organic Dairy Marketing Assistance Program, the Dairy Margin Coverage Program, the Dairy Forward Pricing Program, and the Dairy Indemnity Payment Program—are serving small and medium-scale farms, and whether they are additive. Exploring new export markets for U.S. agricultural products, including dairy, will also be a key priority.

Senator John Fetterman

1. I was encouraged last year, as part of the farm bill discussion, that sugar growers and food manufacturers agreed on some changes to the sugar program. Historically, that's unusual, to say the least. **As Congress writes a Farm Bill, will you commit that in making sugar policy decisions within the executive branch, you will take into account the interests of all parties, including growers, manufacturers and consumers?**

   I commit to welcoming input from a variety of stakeholders.

2. I'm increasingly concerned with USDA procurement and its inaccessibility for small producers. For example, according to the Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition, 50% of USDA's $4 billion food procurement budget was spent with only 25 businesses in 2022[36]. **As the Big Four meatpackers continue to consolidate and push out competitors in the livestock sector, will you commit to work with me on increasing USDA procurement from small farmers and ranchers?**

   Consistent with applicable law and to the extent practicable, I will work to ensure USDA programs, including procurement processes, best serve farms and ranches of all sizes. This is particularly important, given the number of farms in the U.S. declined by 141,733 farms or 7 percent in the latest USDA Census of Agriculture.

3. Specialty crops make up nearly one-third of U.S. agricultural production value, yet the availability of tailored crop insurance options remains inadequate for these producers, leaving them disproportionately exposed to financial risks. **What specific steps will you take to ensure that USDA's crop insurance programs better reflect the unique needs of specialty crop farmers, and how will you prioritize expanding accessibility to these critical tools?**

   During my confirmation process, I have learned a lot about the important role specialty crops play regionally and throughout the United States.

   It is my understanding there are a variety of tools and programs designed for specialty crop growers at USDA, including those you suggested under the Risk Management Agency, as well as the Agricultural Marketing Service, Farm Service Agency, Foreign Agricultural Service, National Institute for Food and Agriculture, among others. If confirmed, I look forward to hearing directly from specialty crop

[36] Richardson, S. & Waterman, C. (2023). Modeling climate, environmental, and social benefits of values-aligned food purchasing. *Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition.*

growers about their existing challenges with USDA programs and their proposed solutions. I look forward to working with you on these matters as well.

4. In 2023, USDA unveiled two new summer feeding options, Summer EBT and rural non-congregate, for eligible families at risk of hunger while their children are out of school. The Urban Institute found that state officials implementing Summer EBT specifically had issues with timelines to implement[37].
    a. **What is your plan to support and grow these programs to ensure eligible children have consistent access to nutritious food during the summer months?**

       If confirmed, I will be embarking on a review of all nutrition programs under the jurisdiction of the Department, including Summer Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT). I strongly believe in states' ability to serve their communities, so my team and I will also spend time learning from those who have chosen to implement as well as those who have chosen other pathways.

    b. **How will you promote Summer EBT, especially, to encourage the states who did not adopt it in summer 2024 to adopt it in summer 2025?**

       Similar to above, and if confirmed, my team and I will spend time learning from those who have chosen to implement Summer EBT, as well as those who have chosen different, perhaps more localized, responses to hunger during the summer months.

5. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a non-pricing meal service for schools with a high number of eligible, low-income students. Schools that participate in CEP typically have fewer students going to class hungry, which results in improved test scores, attendance rates and behavioral outcomes. **How do you plan to support schools currently participating in CEP and how do you plan to expand the program's reach?**

   If confirmed, I will work to better understand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), including its growth in recent years, to make sure it is not only working for families, but protecting the taxpayers responsible for funding the programs that benefit from it. And most importantly, making certain school meals are the best meals consumed, not just served.

6. An increasingly important part of US fruit and vegetable production is indoor farming, known as Controlled Environment Agriculture. However, most farm programs are

[37] Gupta, P., Gutierrez, E., Meltzer, A., & Tezel, B. (2024). Opportunities to Improve Summer EBT. *Urban Institute.*

designed to support traditional outdoor farming. I'm also supportive of small scale urban agriculture for food security. **How can USDA better support the needs of controlled environment agriculture and urban agriculture through the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production or other policy opportunities?**

I am aware that Pennsylvania has long been a leader in Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA), and is even considered the mushroom capital of the world. These innovative technologies and systems provide Americans with access to healthy, local products and support the cultivation of these products year-round. In addition to CEA having the potential to improve Americans' health, these technologies and systems can also reduce our reliance on foreign imports.

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production created in the 2018 Farm Bill, related programs, and how they can better support innovative production practices like CEA.

7. Meat and poultry slaughter and processing workers face many job risks that can lead to severe injury, illness and death. Workers in these plants have also said that higher line speeds make it harder to maintain food safety. Meat and poultry processing workers work in cold, wet, noisy, and slippery conditions making tens of thousands of forceful repetitive motions on each shift. They are injured at 2.4 times the rate and face illness at 17 times the rate of other industries. This has led to a crisis of confidence with many workers leaving the industry and plants not fully staffed, which can lead to higher food prices.
   a. **What will you do to ensure the safety of meat processing workers and give American workers the confidence they need to take these jobs?**

      With respect to USDA's meat, catfish, poultry and egg safety inspection activities, I will work alongside the Department of Labor's Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) and Congress to uphold rigorous worker safety standards grounded in data.

   b. **What actions do you think that the Department of Agriculture needs to take to better protect workers' health and safety to prevent a slowdown in meat production and increased meat prices for American consumers?**

      With respect to USDA's meat, catfish, poultry, and egg safety inspection activities, I will work alongside OSHA and Congress to uphold rigorous worker safety standards grounded in data. I believe this can occur while achieving our mutual goals of ensuring the U.S. has the safest, most abundant, and most affordable food supply.

8. One of the most consequential actions you will take if confirmed is the next reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP). In 2021, USDA updated TFP, for the first time in decades, to consider the real costs and decisions Americans were facing at home and the grocery store. This modern update was made possible by the 2018 Farm Bill and it was bipartisan. **Will you commit to continuing this precedent of updating TFP based on the economic and other facts, and not predetermine that you will cut costs before the process even starts?**

   If confirmed, I intend to prioritize not only a review of the 2021 process and outcome, but also any work on the 2026 update initiated under the Biden-Harris Administration.

9. In the 2023 appropriations omnibus (Division HH, Title IV, section 501(a)(2) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023), Congress directed USDA to issue regulations to improve EBT card security, with the goal of protecting against card skimming, card cloning, and other similar fraudulent actions[38]. More and more Pennsylvanians are falling victim to skimming, losing money they need to put food on the table. **Will you commit to publishing the notice of proposed rulemaking as quickly as possible?**

   This is an issue of high priority for me. I have learned that the majority of this theft stems from transnational criminal rings, and it is so maddening they continue to target the most vulnerable among us. While states can—without delay—reimburse families, I, if confirmed, will commit to ongoing conversations with Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) to ensure states, retailers, processors, and all involved across the EBT system, are being held accountable to preventing instances of theft. I will also partner with other agencies seeing similar theft, like the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) via Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and local and federal law enforcement who have been tracking these breaches, to ensure a whole of government approach to protecting our families.

10. A critical provision to extend SNAP benefit replacement for victims of SNAP benefit theft was excluded from the farm bill extension in the Continuing Resolution in late December. I am deeply concerned about the impact benefit theft is having on low-income Pennsylvanians and Americans. I hope you will join me in pushing for the critical protection to be restored at the next possible opportunity. In the meantime, it is important that USDA's dashboard that tracks skimming claims and payments be updated for the most recent information states report through the first quarter of fiscal year 2025 so that we have complete information on the scope of the problem while the benefit replacement provision was in effect. **Will you commit to maintaining this database and updating it regularly with current data?**

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[38] Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Office of Management and Budget. RIN: 0584-AE99. (2024).

If confirmed, I will prioritize reviewing what the Biden-Harris Administration published and work with my team on how to best convey what is happening across states.

11. I understand President Trump has different perspectives on regulations than his predecessor. One of the regulations that I hope we can agree on focuses on increasing transparency and competition in an industry facing monopolistic power: contract broiler production. As American Farm Bureau Federation President Zippy Duvall said, about the *Poultry Grower Payment Systems and Capital Improvement Systems* final rule, "This rule takes a step in the right direction, including requiring companies to provide insight into payment rates and details on capital improvements as part of a contract renewal. The final rule will benefit contract poultry growers nationwide.[39]" It's imperative that you review each regulation individually, and not blanket overturn each one just because the previous administration issued it. **Will you commit to promoting a fair, transparent, competitive agriculture industry, including by using Packers and Stockyards Act regulatory authority?**

    If confirmed, I look forward to hearing from stakeholders and departmental experts about the various recent efforts pursued by both the Executive Branch and Congress aimed at market transparency in the food industry.

12. As of the most recent USDA report, there were roughly 8,700 units of occupied Section 515 housing units. All of these units are at risk of leaving the program if there isn't an investment made in preserving the portfolio. This would put thousands of families in rural Pennsylvania at risk of displacement and homelessness in a time where the Commonwealth is already facing a growing housing shortage and affordability crisis.
    a. **Will you commit to taking all available actions under current authorities to keep existing USDA affordable housing stock in the portfolio?**

        Section 515 offers loans for the development of new, or rehabilitation of existing, rental housing for low-income households in rural areas. If confirmed, I hope to gain a better understanding of USDA's authorities under the Housing Act of 1949, including Section 515.

    b. **Will you work with Congress to help pass important rural housing reforms?**

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[39] Duvall, Z. (2025). Tournament Rule Provides More Transparency for America's Farmers. *American Farm Bureau Federation*. Press release.

If confirmed, I will work with both Congress and Scott Turner, Secretary-designate for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, on rural housing.

Further, Secretary-designate Turner and I have a long history of working together on issues impacting disadvantaged communities, dating back to when he served as Executive Director of the White House Opportunity and Revitalization Council, and when I led the White House Domestic Policy Council.

13. Dairy farmers in Pennsylvania and throughout the country have spent decades building international markets that they rely upon to grow and thrive. Mexico is the largest international dairy market and consistently ranks at the top for most other U.S. agricultural exports. **As the new administration works to address various issues with Mexico, what is your plan to ensure that our important partnership on agricultural trade is not disrupted?**

I appreciate the work of President Trump, United States Trade Representative Lighthizer, and so many others in the crafting of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. I look forward to a more fulsome review, as well as participating, as the President sees fit, in the 2026 potential renegotiation. Because at the end of the day, our trading relationships and ability, not only to create but also to maintain market access, is so important to our producers' success.

Senator Adam B. Schiff

1. Federal wildland firefighters are entitled to pay that is commensurate with the critical and dangerous nature of the work they do. It's not only what they deserve, but it is key to recruiting and retaining the next generation of firefighters. The *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117-58)* included a long-overdue pay raise for federal wildland firefighters that is set to expire in March. On Monday, January 20, 2025, President Trump issued an executive order directing all agencies to immediately pause the disbursement of funds appropriated under this legislation. Within 90 days, the EO directs all agency heads to submit a report on funds appropriated through the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* that will inform the administration's support or opposition for the program. Ms. Rollins, do you believe that the pay raise afforded to the hardworking wildland firefighters under the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* aligns with the policy priorities outlined in section 2 of this executive order?

While I am not ready to comment on the details of the initial Executive Orders, if confirmed, I am committed to ensuring that USDA has the best possible workforce to serve the American people. I have committed to understanding the extent of funding that the Department has available to distribute to specific projects.

2. As Secretary, will you allow pay cuts for federal wildland firefighter employees to go into effect?

My prayers are with the frontline first responders who have been tirelessly putting themselves at risk during these tragic disasters. I have also met with your colleagues, including Senators from both sides of the aisle, about the need to professionalize the wildland fire workforce. I am committed to working with Congress to support these brave men and women as every day they protect our communities.

3. During your nomination hearing, we discussed the important role that USFS plays in supporting state and local agencies' response to wildfires. Since the start of this month's wildfires in Los Angeles, USFS has allocated on-the-ground resources to state and local first responders, including 2,300 wildland firefighters, 12 large airtankers, 20 helicopters, 6 scoopers, and 8 Modular Airborne Firefighting Aircrafts. I appreciate your commitment during the hearing to ensure that California will receive the wildfire resources it needs from USFS, if you are confirmed as USDA Secretary. As Secretary, will you fulfill requests from the state of California specifically for the needed number of wildland firefighters, helicopters, scoopers, and Modular Airborne Firefighting Aircrafts during wildfire emergencies?

If confirmed, I look forward to working with you in the recovery effort and ensuring your constituents have the resources they need to rebuild quickly, efficiently, and safely.

Importantly, I appreciate California's commitment to waive the environmental and coastal commission requirements to expedite rebuilding efforts.

4. Under the first Trump administration's Market Facilitation Program, only 8 of the nearly 400 specialty crops grown in California were eligible for direct assistance. If confirmed as Secretary, will you work with Congress on a bipartisan basis to increase the number of specialty crops eligible for USDA financial assistance programs and ensure that the eligibility determinations are made without regard to the political party affiliation of the state's population?

During my confirmation process, I have learned a lot about the important role specialty crops play regionally and throughout the United States, including in California.

If confirmed, we will work to the best of our abilities to ensure USDA financial assistance programs are based on data–not politics–and that they are appropriately distributed.

5. Will you commit to working with myself, other members of the California delegation, and California's agriculture stakeholders to determine eligibility requirements under future USDA financial assistance programs for farmers, including those meant to offset losses from tariffs?

If confirmed, I look forward to working with Members of Congress and impacted stakeholders from California, and all regions of the country for that matter, to see that any future USDA financial assistance programs are appropriately distributed.

6. For several months, California dairy farmers have grappled with massive outbreaks of avian flu among their herds. USDA is currently working with farmers, scientists, and state and local officials to conduct regular testing and surveillance of avian flu cases in cattle throughout the state. If confirmed as Secretary, will you ensure that these coordinated testing and surveillance efforts continue without interruption?

Getting a handle of recent animal-disease outbreaks is critical to protecting our domestic food security and reducing price volatility.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza was initially detected in 2024 in dairy, and since then 16 states have reported outbreaks in dairy cows. I know for your state, Senator, California dairies have been especially hit hard.

Further, all 50 states have seen outbreaks in poultry.

If confirmed, I look forward to requesting an immediate briefing on the Department's highly pathogenic avian influenza response efforts to date, including the most recent actions of milk testing which you describe above.

7. On matters that span both agriculture and public health – such as avian flu – it is critical that experts across federal agencies work together to implement a coordinated response. If confirmed as Secretary, how will you work with federal health agencies to respond to public health concerns under USDA's jurisdiction?

It is imperative that USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Health and Human Services' Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and White House Policy Councils execute strong, coordinated responses and consistency when it comes to animal disease outbreaks.

Robust coordination, not just on the federal level, but on the state level—via state departments of agriculture, state veterinarians and local officials all on the frontlines—is paramount to eradicating and preventing further spread of diseases, like highly pathogenic avian influenza and New World Screwworm.

I am already familiar with dozens of state departments of agriculture, and, if confirmed, I will work with them to eradicate and prevent further spread of animal disease.

8. There are nearly 40 two-year community colleges in California that have 180+ active degree and certificate programs in agriculture or agricultural-related fields, such as agribusiness, plant and animal science, and agricultural science and technology. As Secretary, what actions will you take to support institutions that help strengthen agricultural education and workforce training, recruitment, retention, and graduation pipeline that leads to good-paying jobs in the industry in California?

Whether growing up in Glen Rose, Texas, or now as a parent of four children, my life has always revolved around agricultural education, including through Future Farmers of America, 4-H, and Texas A&M. As such, I maintain a deep appreciation for all levels of agricultural education and training. If confirmed, I look forward to more directly partnering with institutions and also to exploring USDA Beginning Farmers and Ranchers programs. This is a particularly important effort, given the average age of today's farmer is 58 and only 9 percent of all producers are under the age of 35.

Further, I look forward to partnering with Department of Education Secretary-designate Linda McMahon on this exact type of education and workforce training.

9. In 2020, the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program Round One (CFAP-1) provided direct relief to agricultural producers who faced price declines and additional marketing costs due to COVID-19. Unfortunately, specialty crops were largely excluded from eligibility under the program. What changes, if any, would you make to the CFAP-1 program structure to increase specialty crop eligibility?

While broadly familiar given my prior time working in the White House, I have not been debriefed on the full, complex mechanics of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program Round 1 (CFAP-1). It is my understanding, however, that the CFAP-1 program application period closed September 11th, 2020, and that there were subsequent rounds of CFAP in CFAP-2 and CFAP-3.

Throughout my confirmation process, I have learned a lot about the importance of specialty crops regionally and throughout the United States—including in California. I will ensure they are rightfully considered for future USDA programming, when lawful and appropriate.

10. In 2022, the USDA Forest Service launched a 10-year strategy to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires. The strategy provides priority landscapes nationwide, including three in California, with the resources needed to help limit the impact of future wildfires. If confirmed as Secretary, will you continue the implementation of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, and will you do so without regard to the political party affiliation of the state's population?

The devastating wildfires in California are an example that regardless of jurisdiction, the agency will respond with all the resources available to protect communities. I look forward to working with Congress and our state and local partners to understand and learn from these tragic events, to ensure we are addressing the threat of catastrophic wildfire and remain steadfast in our commitment to protecting communities across the nation.

11. USDA rural housing programs, such as Section 515 and Section 502, are essential for addressing housing needs in rural communities. However, these programs face persistent funding shortages and have been severely cut over the last few decades. If confirmed, what actions will you take to support access to affordable housing for rural families, seniors, and farmworkers?

If confirmed, I hope to gain a better understanding of USDA's authorities under the Housing Act of 1949, including Section 515 and 502.

Further, I look forward to working with Scott Turner, Secretary-designate for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, on tackling issues facing rural housing.

Secretary-designate Turner and I have a long history of working together on issues impacting disadvantaged communities, dating back to when he served as Executive Director of the White House Opportunity and Revitalization Council, and when I led the White House Domestic Policy Council.

12. Will you commit to maintaining support for USDA broadband efforts, including the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants and ReConnect Program?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about ongoing efforts within USDA's Rural Development, Rural Utility Service, and its five major programs that support broadband deployment in rural areas.

As I shared with the Committee, one of my top policy priorities is to explore improvements to the Department's Rural Development programs in pursuit of long term, rural prosperity.

13. What steps will you take at USDA to ensure the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants, and ReConnect Program are successful and completed on time and on budget?

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about ongoing efforts within USDA's Rural Development, Rural Utility Service, and its five major programs that support broadband deployment in rural areas.

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