



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# Equity Action Plan

## 2023 Update





# Contents

- Message from the Secretary ..... 1
- Equity Mission Statement ..... 3
- Executive Summary ..... 3
- Equity Progress: Update and Accomplishments ..... 5
  - Reducing Barriers to USDA Programs ..... 5
  - Partnering with Trusted Technical Assistance Providers ..... 7
  - Directing USDA Programs to Those Who Need Them the Most ..... 9
  - Expanding Equitable Access to USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs ..... 10
  - Advancing Equity in Federal Procurement ..... 11
  - Empowering Tribal Sovereignty and Upholding Treaty Responsibilities to Indian Tribes ..11
  - Committing Unwaveringly to Civil Rights ..... 12
  - Operating with Transparency and Accountability ..... 13
  - Environmental Justice Scorecard ..... 15
  - National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality ..... 15
  - Advancing Equity Through Key Legislation ..... 15
- Strategies to Advance Equity in FY 2024 ..... 19
  - Strategy #1: Ensure agricultural resources and assistance for producers are broadly accessible, while creating new, more, and better market opportunities so USDA policies and programs advance agriculture for all who want to participate, not just a few ..... 19
  - Strategy #2: Promote rural prosperity and economic security by connecting business owners to new markets, empowering people with modern infrastructure, and supporting community-driven opportunities and solutions to build brighter futures in rural America .. 23
  - Strategy #3: Promote nutrition security and health equity through USDA nutrition assistance programs to ensure all Americans have access to the nutrition they need ..... 26
  - Strategy #4: Ensure equitable access to forest resources, funding opportunities, and outdoor experiences; and target wildfire prevention and conservation investments where they are most needed ..... 29
  - Strategy #5: Advance equity in federal procurement by providing underserved and disadvantaged businesses tools and resources to increase access to funding opportunities, and by helping promote safe and secure provision of services and supplies ..... 33
  - Strategy #6: Empower tribal sovereignty and uphold treaty responsibilities to Indian tribes, removing barriers to access to USDA programs and incorporating indigenous values and perspectives in program design and delivery ..... 35
  - Strategy #7: Commit unwaveringly to civil rights by improving tools, skills, capacity, and processes to more effectively and efficiently enforce them ..... 38

## A Message from the Secretary



At the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), we recognize that our pursuit of equity isn't just the right thing to do. Equity is essential for building our Nation's economy from the bottom up and the middle out. When we create opportunity for all—regardless of zip code or background—farmers, farmworkers, ranchers, landowners, communities, families, and business owners get access to the tools they need to thrive in the communities they love. On day one of the Biden-Harris Administration, President Biden issued [Executive Order 13985, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved](#)

*Communities Through the Federal Government*. The Executive Order recognized that although equal opportunity is a bedrock ideal of American democracy, it is too often thwarted by entrenched disparities in our laws, public policies, and institutional structures and processes. The Order kicked off an ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda, initiating a learning process in pursuit of a more perfect union.

Committed to living up to its name as the “People’s Department,” USDA embraced the Administration’s equity agenda. We took immediate action, listening to internal and external stakeholders to understand where barriers to accessing USDA programs and services exist, and assessing data to identify opportunities to advance equity. USDA mission areas and staff offices were directed to develop comprehensive plans to incorporate equity into farm, family, community, and food programs that touch every American’s life, every day. Since that beginning, we’ve continued meaningful steps to fortify equity and racial justice within our organization and across the communities we serve. To make good on the President’s commitment

and in response to congressional direction in the American Rescue Plan Act, we stood up the USDA [Equity Commission](#) and its two subcommittees. These independent committees bring together members from diverse backgrounds, who both share their insights in a way that is shaping USDA policymaking and hold us accountable to progress.

Centering equity in everything we do is crucial to the future prosperity of children and families throughout the country and to rural and agricultural America. USDA’s 2022 [Equity Action Plan](#) described a subset of the hundreds of actions we are taking, spotlighting those with high potential impact for underserved farmers and ranchers, families, children, and rural communities. This 2023 update builds on that strong foundation and follows the lead of President Biden’s [Executive Order 14091](#), which regularizes equity action planning and insists that federal agencies use all the policy levers we have to make progress. President Biden has emphasized that equity is a generational commitment, not a one-year project. I emphatically agree. Success depends on the institutionalization this year’s plan reflects. At USDA, we have embedded equity in the work we do across the Department, and we are moving forward together, based on the insight that our country is stronger when everyone has a seat at the table and everyone has food on their plate. It is our moral imperative to do the challenging but achievable work of building a more inclusive future. Under this Administration, equity is more than a catchphrase. It’s a promise.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas J. Vilsack".

Thomas J. Vilsack  
U.S. Secretary of Agriculture

## Equity Mission Statement

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



Xochitl Torres Small, currently USDA Deputy Secretary and formerly Rural Development Under Secretary, toured Mahaska Health, a hospital in Oskaloosa, Iowa, and participated in a roundtable discussion to highlight USDA investments in rural healthcare.

## Executive Summary

Over the course of its existence, USDA has faced several pivotal moments—times when our direction and efforts can fundamentally reshape the lives of agricultural producers, rural Americans, our country, and the world. Today, we are at such a moment. We must decide—Do we want to continue to use a system that benefits only a few or do we want

a system that benefits all? USDA and the Biden-Harris Administration recognize that meeting this moment for all Americans means transforming the current system.

USDA's work is not just about farms and the people who work them and their associated processes.

- It's about keeping businesses alive in small towns.
- It's about school children having access to healthy food grown in their own communities.
- It's about protecting our planet from droughts and wildfires and natural disasters.
- It's about America leading the way in what it means to be a sustainable, inclusive, resilient place.

Centering equity in this work is essential.

USDA has identified seven equity strategies to focus on over the upcoming year:

1. Ensure agricultural resources and assistance are broadly accessible, while creating new, more, and better market opportunities so USDA policies and programs advance agriculture for all who want to participate, not just a few.
2. Promote rural prosperity and economic security by connecting business owners to new markets, empowering people with modern infrastructure, and supporting community-driven opportunities and solutions to build brighter futures in rural America.
3. Promote nutrition security and health equity through USDA nutrition assistance programs to ensure all Americans have access to the nutrition they need.
4. Ensure equitable access to forest resources, funding opportunities, and outdoor experiences; and target wildfire prevention and conservation investments where they are most needed.
5. Advance equity in federal procurement by providing underserved and disadvantaged businesses tools and resources to increase access to funding opportunities, and by helping promote safe and secure provision of services and supplies.
6. Empower tribal sovereignty and uphold treaty responsibilities to Indian tribes, removing barriers to access USDA programs and incorporating indigenous values and perspectives in program design and delivery.
7. Commit unwaveringly to civil rights by improving tools, skills, capacity, and processes to more effectively and efficiently enforce them.

These strategies update USDA's 2022 Equity Action Plan, learning from hundreds of engagements with our customers and would-be customers—through listening sessions, requests for information, outreach events, tribal consultations, and advisory committees (including, preeminently, the Equity Commission). In addition, we have ourselves observed which of the improvements identified in 2022 are working and which need further refinement and adjustment.

We will operationalize our goals by:

- Directing USDA programs to those who need them the most.
- Reducing administrative, economic, historical, and other barriers to program access, and ensuring our programs include processes to assess, understand, and remove or mitigate such barriers.
- Partnering with trusted technical assistance providers to ensure that underserved producers and communities have the support they need to access USDA programs.
- Operating transparently and accountably, providing the information on Department programs that Congress, stakeholders, and the general public need to hold us to account on our equity agenda, and working systematically to collect and incorporate public feedback, including input from underserved communities.

## Equity Progress: Update and Accomplishments

USDA's commitment to equity spans the Department's mission areas and agencies. Here is some of the progress since 2021. For more information see: Equity Accomplishments page at <https://www.usda.gov/equity/activities> and the Department's agency/office equity action plans at <https://www.usda.gov/equity/action-plan>.

## Reducing Barriers to USDA Programs

**WIC modernization.** USDA is investing in outreach, innovation, and modernization to ensure that the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program serves more eligible families and better meets their needs. [WIC modernization](#) is focused on enrolling and keeping enrolled all eligible families; making shopping simple and convenient; continuing to leverage technology to make applying for the program, scheduling appointments, receiving nutrition services, and interacting with WIC between appointments easy; and making WIC equitable and accessible for all. While evaluations of the modernization effort are not yet complete, preliminary data shows that WIC participation is rising in most states, with 6.7 million moms, babies, and young kids benefiting from the program as of July 2023.

**Simplified direct farm loan application process.** Approximately 26,000 producers submit direct loan applications to Farm Service Agency (FSA) annually, but there is a high rate of incomplete or withdrawn applications, due in part to a challenging and lengthy paper-based application process. In response, FSA implemented a [simplified direct farm loan](#) application process in February 2023, drastically reducing the burden and time spent on its forms, which shrank from 10 different forms with 29 pages of paperwork

to a single 13-page document (including a cover page and checklist for the applicant's information). The new form is estimated to save nearly half the time needed for completion. FSA has also [rolled out a loan assistance tool](#) that helps farmers and ranchers better navigate the farm loan application process.

**Reducing barriers posed by fund match requirements.** The Forest Service made significant changes in July 2022 to its grants and agreements program, which will more equitably open doors for underserved communities, tribes, and non-traditional partners. Financial matching requirements that are not mandated by statute are being waived for all cooperative agreements with tribal communities. A program review is underway to ensure that, where discretion permits, financial matching requirements are waived or significantly reduced for agreements serving disadvantaged communities.

**No-match access to broadband.** Rural Development's (RD) [ReConnect Program](#) provides loans, grants, and loan-grant combinations to bring high-speed internet to rural areas that lack sufficient access to broadband. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, in the program's third round of funding, RD authorized 100% grants (without matching requirements) for Alaska Native Corporations, tribal governments, colonias, persistent poverty areas, and socially vulnerable communities. For the fourth round, an additional no-match funding category was added in August 2022 for projects where 90% of households lack sufficient access to broadband.

**Increasing access to NAP.** The Farm Service Agency (FSA) has long heard about the challenges underserved farmers have faced in navigating the [Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program](#) (NAP). In January 2023, FSA [announced](#) program updates to reduce the paperwork burden on these producers to access free basic NAP coverage with a NAP service-fee waiver. Specifically, the requirement for a separate application for coverage prior to the loss event was eliminated for anyone already certified as an underserved producer—that is, for beginning, veteran, limited resource, women, or minority farmers. This eliminated otherwise annual application requirements; participation instead requires only loss notifications and applications for payment. The result has been substantial growth in producer participation.

**Language access.** USDA is working across the Department to increase language access for customers and potential customers whose English proficiency is limited. The Department has announced a new [Language Access Plan](#) to guide Department-wide and agency plans and implementation. USDA agencies have already made significant progress in increasing the availability of non-English resources. For example, in FY 2022, USDA's Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area translated more than 730 products spanning 30 languages and created 200 new Spanish-language webpages on farmers.gov. Webpages translated into Spanish include the farm loan discovery and service center locator tools and pages highlighting priority programs, deadlines, and opportunities. FPAC also established a centralized and streamlined intake process to ensure customer-facing employees have easy access to timely language access services while maximizing efficiencies and minimizing costs.

## Partnering with Trusted Technical Assistance Providers

**Leading whole-of-government rural partnerships.** Rural Development is leading the [Rural Partners Network \(RPN\)](#), an all-of-government place-based program that brings together 20 federal agencies and regional commissions to help rural communities access resources and funding to create jobs, build infrastructure, and support long-term economic stability on their own terms. Federal agencies and commissions are collaborating to improve how we provide resources to help rural people build the futures they envision. The RPN was launched in April 2022 and expanded in November 2022, to [now include 36 community networks across 10 states and Puerto Rico](#). In May 2023, \$394 million in awards were [announced to provide loans and grants to support 52 projects](#) to support long-term visions for strong, local economies.



US Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Domestic Policy Council Director Susan Rice, Congressman Bennie Thompson, and City of Greenwood Mayor Carolyn McAdams, hold a press conference outside the Greenwood Leflore Hospital in Greenwood, MS.

**American Rescue Plan technical assistance cooperators.** Underserved farmers, ranchers, and foresters have historically lacked equitable access to information that could aid them in accessing and navigating USDA programs. USDA is helping ensure access to tools, programs, and support needed to succeed in agriculture by investing over \$100 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding in over 30 organizations to provide [technical assistance](#) connecting underserved producers with USDA programs and services. So far [two cohorts](#) of organizations have been selected for their proven track records working with underserved producer communities, such as veterans, new farmers, limited resource producers, and producers living in high-poverty areas. They are providing targeted support for producers to mitigate losing lands, develop sound business plans, expand revenues and their markets, and unlock access to capital.

**Conservation partners.** In FY 2022, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) invested [\\$50 million](#) in Racial Justice and Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements. [118 partners were selected](#) for two-year projects that support underserved farmers and ranchers with climate-smart agriculture and forestry by expanding the delivery of conservation assistance. In February 2023, NRCS opened up a [second round](#) of cooperative agreement funding, of up to \$70 million, seeking applications for two-year projects that encourage participation in NRCS programs, especially in underserved communities and among urban and small-scale producers.

**Risk management education cooperative agreement and grant application support.** USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) reinstated its cooperative agreement program, to ensure access for underserved communities, RMA also began an innovative [new service](#) to assist underserved organizations with formulating proposals for grant applications and with project management to ensure they meet all obligations. Assistance is available to agriculture-related non-profits and Minority Serving Institutions of higher education.

**Broadband technical assistance.** For too long, too many people in rural America and on tribal lands have been left out of the digital economy. Long distances between customers and difficult terrain make building broadband networks in rural areas difficult, and provision of broadband services more expensive. To further support rural communities in need of high-speed internet, Congress has directed USDA to implement a broadband technical assistance strategy. In response, RD is making funding available to rural communities, technical assistance providers, and cooperatives through a new [Broadband Technical Assistance \(BTA\)](#) program, which promotes broadband expansion in rural areas with support for project planning and community engagement, financial sustainability, environmental compliance, construction planning and engineering, accessing federal resources, and data collection and reporting. \$20 million is available to help rural communities access broadband technical assistance resources and to support the development/expansion of broadband cooperatives. This funding is part of President Biden's historic Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and underscores the Biden-Harris Administration's commitment to investing in rural infrastructure and affordable high-speed internet for every American.

## Directing USDA Programs to Those Who Need Them Most

**Rural investments where they are most needed.** In 2022, informed by its new systems to better direct investments where they are needed most, RD invested [over \\$5 billion](#) in underserved rural communities for projects such as expanding access to housing, water infrastructure, and high-speed internet.

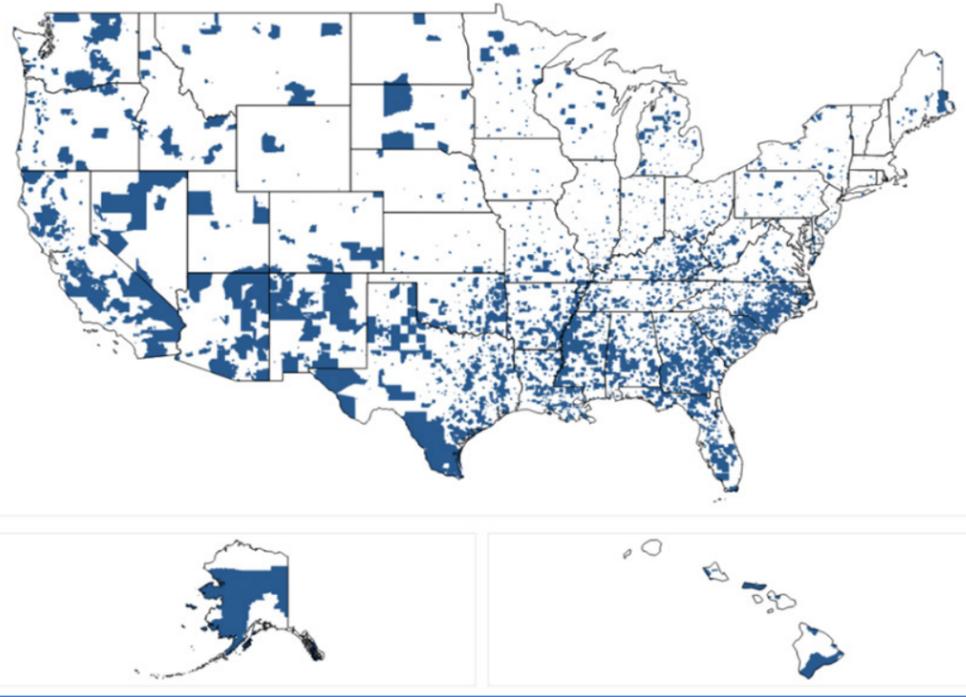


Figure: FY 2022 Rural Development investments in socially vulnerable communities (Counties where the CDC's Social Vulnerability Index is above 0.75).

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/rural-data-gateway/rural-investments/social-vulnerable-communities>

**10-Year Wildfire Strategy.** In FY 2022 the Forest Service [integrated](#) consideration of social vulnerability in analysis of landscape vulnerability to wildfire risk, prioritizing risk reduction investments where ecological and social need are greatest. In March 2023, FS [announced](#) an investment of nearly \$200 million to reduce wildfire risk to communities across state, private, and tribal lands; 99 funded project proposals will benefit 22 states and seven tribes, as part of the [Community Wildfire Defense Grant program](#).

**Urban tree planting.** In September 2023, Forest Service announced up to \$1 billion in direct federal support, under the Inflation Reduction Act, to local communities for urban tree-planting and maintenance through the Forest Service's [Urban and Community Forestry](#) (UCF) program. 100 percent of the awards will go to disadvantaged

communities across the country. This historic funding will support projects throughout the U.S. to improve public health, increase access to nature, build climate resilience, and deliver tangible economic and ecological benefits. This funding supplements \$250 million previously awarded to state and territory forestry agencies in April 2023.

## Expanding Equitable Access to USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs

**Expanding access to healthy school meals.** In September 2023, USDA [finalized a regulation](#) expanding the availability of the school lunch program [Community Eligibility Provision](#), commonly known as CEP, which gives about 3,000 more school districts in high-need areas the option to serve breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost. USDA is also supporting expanded access to healthy school meals by offering extensive [financial support for schools](#), including providing 50 cents more per lunch and 18 cents more per breakfast for school year 2023-24, compared to last school year's base reimbursement rates, through [annual inflation adjustments](#) and [Supply Chain Assistance](#) funds; \$30 million in [Healthy Meals Incentives grants](#) to 264 small and rural school districts nationwide; \$30 million in FY 2023 Equipment Grants for states and school districts operating school lunch programs; and nearly \$11 million in FY 2023 Farm to School Grants, serving 1.2 million children.

**Supporting emergency food operations.** USDA awarded nearly \$100 million in [Reach & Resiliency](#) grants to 42 state agencies to expand [The Emergency Food Assistance Program](#) (TEFAP) operations in underserved areas, including remote, rural, and tribal communities. USDA also [announced a second round of nearly \\$1 billion](#) in funding through USDA's [Commodity Credit Corporation](#) for states to order commodities from USDA vendors for emergency food providers, including food banks and community kitchens, as they face high demand and supply chain disruptions. The investment is part of USDA's continued efforts to make nutritious food grown by American producers more accessible for families and students nationwide.

**Increasing access to summer nutrition assistance.** Starting in summer 2023, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is allowing certain rural areas to distribute summer meals to kids outside of the typically required group (congregate) settings through the [Summer Food Service Program](#) and [National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option](#). This action will help close the summer hunger gap and ensure equitable access to nutritious food for children in all parts of the country during the summer months. FNS is also partnering with states and stakeholders to stand up a permanent Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) program starting in summer 2024, which will provide benefits to purchase groceries over the summer to families with children who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

## Advancing Equity in Federal Procurement

As Secretary Vilsack has emphasized, “most of the work of building and supporting the economy is done by small business owners”—but small businesses have long faced obstacles to participating in federal procurement. USDA is committed to removing those barriers, and has made significant progress implementing initiatives like USDA’s [Procurement Forecast webpage](#), which allows small businesses to easily search and filter USDA procurement forecasts, identify the opportunities most relevant to them, and download the results for easy reference. Agency-level initiatives are key as well and are described at <https://www.usda.gov/equity/activities>.



Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and others at an Asian American and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) event in the Peoples Garden in Washington, DC.

## Empowering Tribal Sovereignty and Upholding Treaty Responsibilities to Indian Tribes

**The Forest Service’s Action Plan on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships**, released in February 2023, provides guidance on respecting tribal sovereignty and treaty obligations, and supporting tribal self-determination

policies. It focuses on strengthening relationships between Indian tribes and the Forest Service and enhancing co-stewardship of forests and grasslands. With this tool in hand, the Forest Service’s management of federal lands and waters can seek to incorporate treaty, religious, spiritual, subsistence, economic, and cultural interests of federally recognized tribes consistent with USDA authorities. A March 2023 [announcement](#) committed [\\$12 million](#) from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to be invested in FY 2023 to complete projects in support of the [Tribal Forest Protection Act](#) (TFPA). Funded projects will focus on improving relationships, co-stewardship, restoring traditionally significant plants, and reducing hazardous fuels, while incorporating indigenous knowledge in decisions processes, creating job opportunities for tribal crews, and increasing youth engagement.

**Deepening co-stewardship.** As part of President Biden’s Tribal Homelands Initiative, USDA signed [Joint Secretarial Order 3403](#) in November 2021. The Order acknowledges that tribal nations can and must play an important role in the management of lands and waters the Federal Government has been entrusted to manage for the benefit of all Americans. [One year later](#), the Department [reported](#) historical progress in collaborating with tribal nations across the country to foster opportunities for co-stewardship. In total, in FY 2022 Forest Service signed approximately 60 new co-stewardship agreements; in FY 2023 Forest Service nearly doubled that with approximately 120 new co-stewardship agreements.

**Indigenous food sovereignty initiative.** In November 2022, the Secretary [launched](#) this USDA-wide initiative to reimagine many of our food and agricultural [programs](#) from an indigenous perspective. The first year of the initiative delivered dozens of recipes and videos demonstrating how to add indigenous and foraged foods to foods available through USDA’s [Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations](#) (FDPIR), created a manual to help interested cattle producers transition to bison, and created several regional indigenous seed saving hubs.

In November 2022, the Farm Service Agency [announced Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program \(CREP\) partnerships with three tribal nations](#) in the Great Plains, covering 3.1 million acres, to help conserve, maintain, and improve grassland productivity, reduce soil erosion, and enhance wildlife habitat. These are the first-ever CREP agreements with tribal nations.

## Committing Unwaveringly to Civil Rights

**Improving processing times for civil rights complaints.** USDA has drastically improved the timeliness of its processing of civil rights complaints by customers, including investigations, decision making, and appeals, and has built the capacity to further reduce processing time for new USDA-customer discrimination complaints from three years to 225 days, going forward.

**Improving accountability.** A 2021 Office of Inspector General (OIG) audit [evaluated](#) USDA's civil rights office's oversight of the customer civil rights complaints process, and issued 21 recommendations for improvements. The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) has fully implemented 18 of the 21; progress continues on the three remaining.

**Improving processes.** USDA has updated key civil rights directives, including [Departmental Regulation 4330-0002](#), Nondiscrimination in Programs and Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance from USDA.

## Operating with Transparency and Accountability

USDA has expanded its dedicated **Equity Commission** by adding a Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittee, and has moved towards implementing the Commission's recommendations. USDA's Equity Commission is an independent body, now with 41 Commission and Subcommittee members charged with evaluating USDA programs and services and developing recommendations on how the Department can reduce barriers. The Department's implementation will ensure everyone has a fair shot at resources, begin closing the racial wealth gap, and address longstanding inequities in agriculture. In February 2023, the Commission issued 32 interim recommendations, and in October 2023, finalized its work by voting on a total of 66 recommendations that will be included in the Final Report to be published in 2024.

USDA continues to work Department-wide on equity improvements and has now published **Equity Action Plans** for each mission area/agency. These 14 documents share both accomplishments and commitments across the Department.

The new **Rural Data Gateway** strengthens USDA Rural Development's partnerships with rural people, entrepreneurs, government officials and Congress by making RD's data readily available. Its dashboards significantly expand access to RD financial data with an easy-to-use interface encompassing more than 65 RD programs.

In June 2023, USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) released two **new public web resources** allowing users unprecedented ability to access high-level data about agricultural research funding investments and giving applicants the ability to track the status of their grant applications. The NIFA [Grant Funding Dashboard](#) allows users to pull information on funding investments by research program and grant type, congressional district, recipient type (including land-grant, minority-serving institutions, tribal, Hispanic-serving institutions, and extension), and other focused searches. It allows users to search for information related to requirements, waivers, and the amount of match funding provided by recipient type and award. Users can also explore a funding map to find NIFA funding obligations by states and congressional districts. The second resource, the NIFA [Application Status Dashboard](#), enables users to quickly check the status

of their application using their assigned Grants.gov tracking number. This new look-up tool offers an easy, convenient way for prospective grantees to view the status of their applications for any NIFA funding opportunities.



Home Telephone Company, Inc employees perform directional drilling to insert underground fiberoptic cables, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture USDA Rural Development RD ReConnect 50/50 grant.

## Environmental Justice Scorecard

USDA is committed to continually improving services to communities marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution, with a particular emphasis on the dozens of departmental programs covered by the Administration's [Justice40 Initiative](#), pursuant to Executive Order 14008—programs whose investments relate to climate change, clean energy and energy efficiency, clean transit, affordable and sustainable housing, training and workforce development, remediation and reduction of legacy pollution, and the development of critical clean water and wastewater infrastructure. Across USDA, over 12,000 grants, agreements, and contracts associated with Justice40 Initiative covered programs were distributed in FY 2022, promoting nearly \$7 billion in economic development. The programs have a broad and varied reach. In FY 2022, for example, the [Forest Service's Job Corps program](#) provided more than 1,500 young adults from underserved backgrounds with over 273,000 hours of training focused on firefighting, conservation, and rural development, furthering employment opportunities. From July 2022 through June 2023, the program graduated 671 students and placed 755 graduates and former students in jobs, including conservation work, military service, and registered apprenticeships. For each covered program, USDA has committed to an implementation plan to ensure that disadvantaged communities receive benefits of new and existing Federal investments.

## National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality

Many of the items identified elsewhere in this Plan are particularly relevant to women and reflect USDA's commitments under the [National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#), under [Executive Order 14020](#), which is fully included in the Department's equity action planning. This is true, for example, of the Department's work promoting robust health and safety standards in the agricultural workforce. And because women are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, the nutrition assistance improvements discussed are likewise vital contributors to gender equity. The work highlighted in this plan increasing small-business access to USDA contracts also includes a focus on women-owned business. In FY 2022, the Department's contracting goal of 5% for women-owned small businesses (with a future proposed goal of 7%) was met and surpassed by the year-end result of 9.99%.

## Advancing Equity through Key Legislation

Each of the Biden-Harris Administration's landmark statutes—the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)—has given USDA deep opportunities to advance equity across the Department and all the communities we touch. To highlight just some of the progress:

In partnership with the Department of the Interior, in November 2022 the **NRCS Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations Program (WFPO)** [allocated](#) \$40 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to assist relocation of Alaskan Native villages due to climate change, erosion, and flooding. Seven villages have been chosen from a set of the highest-risk villages. The funding is covering feasibility studies, watershed planning and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance and move design.

**Increasing land, capital, and market access for underserved producers.** In June 2023, the Department announced the investment of [approximately \\$300 million to fund 50 innovative projects](#) to improve access to land, capital, and markets for underserved farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. Thanks to the ARPA and the IRA, [the Increasing Land, Capital, and Market Access \(Increasing Land Access\) Program](#) promotes access to farm ownership; strengthens results for those with heirs' property or fractionated land; increases access to markets and capital that affect the ability to access land; and improves land ownership, land succession, and agricultural business planning.

**Cultivating the next generation of diverse U.S. agricultural professionals.** In June 2023, USDA announced a \$262.5 million investment to support 33 projects, across U.S. institutions of higher education, designed to train the next generation of diverse agricultural professionals. The projects are led by 1890 land-grant institutions (historically Black land-grant universities), 1994 land-grant institutions (tribal colleges and universities), Alaska native-serving institutions and native Hawaiian-serving institutions, Hispanic-serving institutions, and institutions of higher education located in the Insular Areas. Most projects involve collaboration with other minority-serving institutions and a myriad of other partners, including other academic institutions, non-profit and private-sector organizations, and state and USDA agencies. Resourced by the ARPA, as amended by the IRA, the [From Learning to Leading: Cultivating the Next Generation of Diverse Food and Agriculture Professionals](#) (NextGen) Program is enabling minority-serving institutions to engage, recruit, retain, train, and support students to build and sustain the next generation of the food, agriculture, natural resources, and human sciences workforce, including the future USDA workforce. It is administered by NIFA, which is also partnering with The Extension Foundation to increase the capacity of the funded institutions. The Extension Foundation will provide free grant proposal development as well as technical assistance to all grantees to support project management. Additionally, NIFA is working with the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) to determine the overall effectiveness of the NextGen program; IDRA will track program outcomes, report impact, and evaluate individual and program-wide activities. This historic investment will provide training and support to more than 20,000 future food and agricultural leaders through 33 projects executed by more than 60 institutions across 24 U.S. states and Insular Areas.

**Helping financially distressed farm loan borrowers.** USDA has helped more than 30,000 farmers and ranchers who were in financial distress stay on their farms and farming, thanks to resources provided through [Section 22006 of the Inflation Reduction Act](#). The Inflation Reduction Act allocated \$3.1 billion for USDA to provide relief

for distressed borrowers with certain direct and guaranteed loans, and to expedite assistance for those whose agricultural operations are at financial risk due to factors outside their control, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the law was signed in August 2022, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) has provided over \$1.9 billion and counting in immediate assistance (as of December 31, 2023).

**Discrimination Financial Assistance Program.** On July 7, 2023, the Department [announced](#) the opening of the financial assistance application period for eligible farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners who experienced discrimination in USDA farm lending programs prior to January 2021. [Section 22007 of the IRA](#) directed USDA to provide this assistance, and provided \$2.2 billion for it. USDA launched the [Discrimination Financial Assistance Program](#) website to provide an overview of the program, information about eligibility, deadlines, and an e-filing platform. The application period is open until January 13, 2024. Through implementation, USDA hopes to recognize and acknowledge the discrimination suffered by individuals, take steps to rebuild trust with communities, and create a better and stronger U.S. agriculture that is more diverse and resilient.

**Supporting farmworker health and safety.** In coordination with other Federal agencies, in June 2022, USDA announced the [Farm Labor Stabilization Pilot](#) program (FLSP), providing up to \$65 million in American Rescue Plan funding to support agricultural employers in implementing robust health and safety standards. The program will promote a safe, healthy work environment for both U.S. workers and workers hired from Northern Central American countries under the seasonal H-2A visa program, while safeguarding domestic food security by addressing current agricultural labor shortages. FSA conducted three listening sessions in September 2022 to receive input from agricultural employer organizations, labor unions, farmworker advocates, farmworkers, and other relevant stakeholders, as it works to develop and implement this pilot program.

**Connecting more families to WIC's proven benefits.** Through a cooperative agreement with the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), FNS [has awarded](#) \$16 million in funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to 36 projects aimed at testing innovative outreach strategies to increase participation and equity in WIC. The WIC Community Innovation and Outreach Project, (WIC CIAO), subgrantees include WIC state and local agencies and community-based organizations, including four subgrants led by tribal nations or entities.

**Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program** is now supporting projects across the country through [\\$1 billion in grants](#) made available the IRA to expand access to urban nature, combat the climate crisis, and advance environmental justice. In addition to the grant funding, the Forest Service is providing up to \$250 million to states and territories to further local efforts to support urban communities through equitable access to trees and the benefits they provide. Advance release of these funds to states occurred in April 2023, specifically for support to disadvantaged communities. The Forest Service established a new agreement with the African American Mayors Association (AAMA) to provide communications and stakeholder engagement support

of underserved communities. As a result, the Urban and Community Forestry IRA Public Notice of Funding appeared in the May 2023 AAMA newsletter, increasing visibility and outreach of program opportunities.

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

**Clean energy for rural America.** Rural Development [rolled out](#) two programs made possible by the Inflation Reduction Act, providing \$11 billion in grants and loan opportunities that will help rural energy and utility providers bring affordable, reliable clean energy to their communities across the country, support new jobs and healthier communities. This represents the single largest investment in rural electrification since President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Rural Electrification Act into law in 1936. Also, through the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, the [Rural Energy for America Program](#) (REAP) has been [provided over \\$2 billion](#) for renewable energy systems and energy efficiency improvement grants for agricultural producers and rural small business owners.



Farmer returns WIC EBT card to WIC shopper at the Santee Certified Farmers Market in Santee, California.

## Strategies to Advance Equity in FY 2024

### Strategy #1

*Ensure agricultural resources and assistance for producers are broadly accessible, while creating new, more, and better market opportunities so USDA policies and programs advance agriculture for all who want to participate, not just a few.*



Amy Surburg, the owner of Berry Goods Farm in Morristown, Indiana, (right) talks with Sydney Lockett, district conservationist for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, about the high tunnel NRCS helped Surburg build using assistance from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

**Whole of Government Equity Objective:** Economic Justice

**Collaborating Agencies:** N/A

**Barriers to Equity:** Agricultural production is a capital-intensive business, with high startup costs, which has created a barrier to entry for many who want to farm, and has made it overly difficult for small- and mid-sized farmers to succeed. Compounding this, over the course of decades, flawed policy and program design—for example, undue complexity and inflexibility—joined with over-emphasis on efficiency, lack of fair and competitive markets, and individual acts of discrimination, have cost smaller

and underserved producers equipment, land, farm operations, and opportunities to accumulate the generational wealth that has benefited others. For example, crop insurance programs have often excluded smaller producers, specialty crops, and less-resourced growers. In other safety net programs, statutory requirements cover only a small number of crops or a historical snapshot of production. Market concentration has meant that smaller growers have had little market power. In some cases, due to lack of access to credit and fair markets, or because of discrimination, producers have lost their farms, family homes, and valued links to their culture, history, community, and identity.

**Evidence Base to Support Strategy:** This strategy is responsive to the USDA Equity Commission's [interim recommendations](#) and [USDA's response](#); hundreds of [historical recommendations](#) by commissions, committees, external and internal watchdogs; the 2021 congressional [hearing](#) on the state of Black farmers; multiple listening sessions, including the [2021 Request for Information \(RFI\)](#), and [2022 RFI relating to IRA Section 22007](#); and abundant academic works examining difficulties faced by new, disadvantaged farmers, and barriers to their access to USDA programs.<sup>1</sup>

#### Actions to Achieve Equity:

- A. FSA will align farm credit and assistance with priorities and values.** FSA will continue to modify and improve farm loan programs to further reduce application processing times and enhance customer experience, and will prioritize its County Committees as key contributors for outreach and mentorship.
- B. USDA will identify statutory barriers that prevent USDA from serving a broader set of producers or that disproportionately harm certain producers.** Some hurdles and harmful policies—for example, the allocation of safety net programs by crop and historical plantings “[base acres](#)” or inflexible limits or life-time ineligibility for farm loans—are enshrined in statute and cannot be remedied through administrative action. As these barriers are identified, USDA will continue to explore opportunities to address them legislatively. Eight such legislative proposals were included for farm loans in the [President's FY 2024 Budget](#).
- C. USDA will identify weaknesses in farm safety-net program design that may be contributing to inequitable support, and remove hurdles and tailor programs to all types of producers, production and business models.** The Farm Production and Conservation mission area will improve Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program ([NAP](#)); Emergency Relief Program ([ERP](#)); Conservation Reserve Program ([CRP](#)); RMA products for [specialty crops and value added producers](#); and RMA [training](#) and recruitment of crop insurance agents, adjusters, and outreach educators. (Links include information on ongoing improvement efforts.)

<sup>1</sup> To cite just two of the many sources, see, e.g., S. Callahan & D. Hellerstein, “Access to Farmland by Beginning and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers: Issues and Opportunities,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Report AP-096 (2022). C.S. Colmore, R. Fraser, B.S. Herbert, & C. Scott, “Training of Small Farmers and Minority Agroforestry Landowners in Southeastern U.S. – An Evolving Model,” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 9, no. (2022): 359-375.

- D. USDA will create new, more, and better market opportunities for producers, which creates a fairer playing field for small- and mid-size farmers.** USDA is investing in developing new market opportunities and fairer markets so that producers have more power in the marketplace and greater opportunities to generate income and make a living in agriculture. Ongoing efforts involve investments in [new market opportunities](#), amelioration of [supply chain bottlenecks](#), and improvements in [fair competition](#).
- E. USDA will expand reach to all producers by leveraging partnerships with trusted technical advisors.** Across the Department—FSA, NRCS, RMA, NIFA, and the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE)—USDA will continue and expand grant and cooperative agreement programs that support delivery of [conservation assistance](#), [risk management education](#), [farming and production-related education](#), and [technical assistance to underserved farmers](#) (including beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers).
- F. USDA will target direct assistance and technical support based on degree of need.** USDA is implementing support for [support](#) for underserved producers; [progressive payment factoring](#); and [whole-farm revenue approaches](#) particularly suited to smaller operations. Where USDA has discretion, as in the ad-hoc [disaster programs](#), the Department has been pursuing these strategies administratively. Other permanent programs would need legislative action; USDA is providing technical assistance to Congress on these areas.
- G. USDA will institutionalize access for broader stakeholder viewpoints.** USDA is making a concerted effort to bring new voices to the table and to expand its stakeholder base. To that end, a large group of both longstanding and new formal committees are providing valuable input, including: the [USDA Equity Commission](#); [NRCS state technical committees](#); [FSA County Committees, including urban county committees](#); and other new and continuing Federal Advisory Committees ([Urban Agriculture](#), [Tribal](#), [Minority Farmers](#), [New and Beginning Farmers](#)).

**Proposed Metrics:**

- Decreased demographic disparities in loan application success.
- Increased proportion of total income derived from farming among small and midsize producers.
- Decreased participation disparities in small-grower programs.
- Increased and more diverse participation in County Committee elections and service.
- Improved or consistently high scores in responses to customer and non-customer experience surveys.

**Public Participation and Community Engagement:** This strategy is deeply informed by robust and equity-informed outreach. USDA has thousands of regional, state, and local offices, and they collectively host many thousands of county and state outreach events, webinars, and town hall discussions. Just to describe one agency’s approach as an exam-

ple, at NRCS, state outreach plans are each required to have a section that integrates equity considerations with outreach, and the plans’ aims include:

- Building relationships and trust with organizations and individuals at the local level that can help USDA reach historically underserved audiences.
- Increasing awareness of and participation in NRCS programs and services.
- Seeking out new partnerships and sharing ways to work with NRCS.
- Identifying program barriers that negatively impact producers’ ability to participate in programs and services, and working with partners to overcome these barriers at the state level.
- Identifying NRCS operational procedures that negatively impact producers’ ability to comply and participate in program and services.

This kind of equity-informed outreach allows USDA to understand and address the needs of diverse communities. For example, in 2023, USDA’s Risk Management Agency participation in 61 events addressing its Whole Farm Revenue Protection (WFRP) and Micro Farm Program (Micro), informed expanded program eligibility and less burdensome record keeping requirements.



Dr. Dewayne Goldmon (USDA Senior Advisor for Racial Equity, USDA), presents to the USDA Equity Commission, at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

## Strategy #2

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

**Whole of Government Equity Objective:** Housing Justice and Community Investment; Economic Justice

**Collaborating Agencies:** Departments of Commerce (DOC), Energy (DOE), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Transportation (DOT), Treasury (UST), Veterans Affairs (VA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Small Business Administration (SBA).

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

**Evidence Base to Support Strategy:** Academic and policy papers have demonstrated the need for governmental place-based policies and targeted investment in rural communities.<sup>2</sup> They explain that the private sector and philanthropy underinvest in rural areas, failing to appreciate the positive consequences that would follow from capacity building there.<sup>3</sup>

### Actions to Achieve Equity:

#### A. RD will target investments into rural areas through a data-driven approach paired with stakeholder engagement.

- **Rural Partners Network:** place-based staff serve as navigators of federal development resources and assist communities in building smart plans and strong applications.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy J. Bartik, "Who Benefits from Economic Development Incentives? How Incentive Effects on Local Incomes and the Income Distribution Vary with Different Assumptions about Incentive Policy and the Local Economy," Technical Report 18-934, Upjohn Institute, Kalamazoo, MI (2018). David Neumark & Helen Simpson, "Place-Based Policies," in Handbook of Regional and Urban Economics, vol. 5, ed. Giles Duranton, Vernon Henderson, & William Strange (2015), 1197–287.; Benjamin A. Austin, Edward L. Glaeser, & Lawrence H. Summers, "Jobs for the Heartland: Place-based Policies in 21st Century America," NBER Working Paper No. w24548 (2018).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis & Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, Investing in Rural Prosperity (2022) (featuring contributions from 79 authors that explore capacity gaps and barriers to accessing federal resources and outline a framework for how to approach rural development successfully).

- **RD engagement strategy:** State teams are engaging with 10 previously non-participating communities per state, in three phases. The teams identify and document community assets and barriers to participation, listen to the concerns of local leaders, analyze aggregate data, and connect communities with appropriate assistance by leveraging partners and existing networks.
- **RD priority points framework:** gives points (for scoring competitive projects) to projects in communities that experience barriers to accessing RD programs.

**B. RD will continue to work towards 100% connectivity** through the [ReConnect Loan and Grant Program](#), so all rural communities have the same access to high-speed affordable internet as their urban counterparts. To speed progress, RD has added funding categories for full grant funding (not loan and grant combinations), for Alaska Native Corporations, Tribal Governments, Colonias, Persistent Poverty Areas, and Socially Vulnerable Communities, as well as for projects where 90% of households lack sufficient access to broadband.

**C. RD will further support rural clean energy:** Once-in-a-generation funding opportunities for rural electric cooperatives, farmers, and rural businesses are augmenting access to clean energy for rural communities—particularly those disproportionately affected by high energy costs and climate change. RD will continue to implement its new technical assistance program for Rural Energy for America Program (REAP), allowing nonprofits to assist agricultural producers and rural small businesses to apply for REAP. This includes helping with filing for SAM and UEI registrations, application completion, planning activities, completion of environmental reports, and other activities that help underserved rural areas access funding opportunities.

#### D. RD will promote rural housing equity, furthering President Biden’s Blueprint for a Renters Bill of Rights.

- RD will promote tenant rights, via education, communication, regulation
- RD will contribute to the [government-wide effort](#) to bring more equity to property appraisals.

#### E. USDA will work to transform the food system to be fairer, more competitive, and more resilient.

- **Regional Food Business Centers:** 11 Regional Food Business Centers and National Intertribal Food Business Center will build out locally-focused and appropriate training, technical assistance, and capacity building support focused on underserved producers and food businesses to promote a more resilient, equitable and competitive regional food system.
- **Meat and Poultry Processing Capacity—Technical Assistance (MPPTA) Program:** USDA will ensure participants in USDA’s Meat and Poultry Supply Chain programs and initiatives have full-range access to technical assistance to support their project development and success, including one-on-one advising on project and proposal reviews, assistance with navigating USDA grant application processes, and webinars and other helpful resources.

- **Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program:** USDA will continue to strengthen the food system for schools and promoting a fairer, more competitive, and more resilient local food chain by providing funding for purchase of local foods with an emphasis on smaller and historically underserved producers and processors.
- **Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program:** USDA will expand funding agreements with state, territorial and tribal governments to purchase local foods for distribution through emergency food assistance networks with an emphasis on buying from historically underserved farmers, ranchers, and fishers in order to increase opportunities in local and regional markets and build more competitive and resilient food systems.

### Proposed Metrics:

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are revised when necessary and continually updated. Currently, they include:

- Total RD investments in underserved communities, measured by the investment amount and the number of communities.
- Percentage of total RD investment in distressed communities.
- Percentage of non-federal funding leveraged in socially vulnerable and distressed communities.
- Number of households connected to high-speed internet.
- Number of outreach and technical assistance sessions for high-speed internet.
- Number of producers and processors in underserved communities receiving localized assistance to access local/regional supply chains.

### Public Participation and Community Engagement:

- Through RD's Creating Opportunity through Rural Engagement (CORE) program, state field staff will engage with the community to learn about need and connect people and business with resources within RD and throughout USDA.
- RD will continue conducting webinars for stakeholders and the public to learn about new programs and to learn about processes to access new and existing federal resources. These webinars are sometimes conducted in conjunction with other USDA agencies as well as other federal partners.
- Rural Partners Network community networks are selected through a process contingent on public participation and community engagement. RPN is also conducting a series of community forums where communities share their vision and project plans while federal agencies and external stakeholders present on opportunities. And USDA is using lessons learned from RPN communities to inform systemic policy development and create whole-of-government rural economic development resources to help all rural communities identify and access federal funds, including through Rural.gov.

## Strategy #3

*Promote nutrition security and health equity through USDA nutrition assistance programs to ensure all Americans have access to the nutrition they need.*

**Whole of Government Equity Objective:** Health Equity

**Collaborating Agencies:** Health and Human Services (HHS)

**Barriers to Equity:** A complex web of factors causes food insecurity and contributes to diet-related diseases and health disparities. Poverty, or limited income or financial resources; education and job opportunities; access to health care, safe housing, and transportation; and neighborhood design all affect the ability to obtain food, make healthy choices, and remain physically active. A key barrier to healthy eating is lack of access to nutritious food. The food environment (e.g., proximity to stores, food prices, available food options) influences a person's food choices and diet quality. Disparities in food insecurity and diet-related diseases exist partly because of persistent structural inequities, such as lack of access to health care, safe housing, and transportation.

**Evidence Base to Support Strategy:** The Biden-Harris Administration [National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health](#), and the stakeholder engagement leading up to and following the [historic conference](#) at which the National Strategy was unveiled, provides an important snapshot of the state of hunger, nutrition, and health and a roadmap for addressing these challenges. This strategy, coupled with USDA's programmatic information, FNS learning, stakeholder engagement inputs, and academic literature<sup>4</sup>, informs the improvements identified below.

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

#### A. FNS will partner with program operators and stakeholders to address food and nutrition security equity and reach underserved communities.

- Implement the permanent Summer Food Service Program rural non-congregate option and Summer EBT, nationwide.
- Conduct a national outreach campaign to increase enrollment and retention in WIC, while reducing disparities in program access and delivery.
- Conduct a multi-pronged MyPlate nutrition education campaign that expands

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., J. Huang, E. Barnidge, & Y. Kim, "Children Receiving Free or Reduced-Price School Lunch Have Higher Food Insecurity Rates in Summer," *Journal of Nutrition* 145, no. 9 (2015): 2161–2168.

the reach of MyPlate resources among historically underserved communities.

- Provide resources to [TEFAP](#) state agencies on identifying and offering kosher and halal appropriate foods to observant communities; creates a webpage to provide information to stakeholders.
- Strengthen [employment and training programs for SNAP participants](#) through rulemaking, grants, and technical assistance to assist state agencies in using outcome reporting measures to support program equity efforts.

**B. FNS will ensure equitable and consistent access and participation opportunity for eligible populations.**

- Through a new [SNAP EBT Modernization Technical Assistance Center](#), provide technical assistance to retailers interested in offering online purchasing for SNAP participants. And, for WIC, expand online shopping by updating WIC regulations to remove regulatory barriers to online shopping and support a modern food delivery experience.
- Help close the summer hunger gap for children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals through the implementation of the new rural non-congregate summer nutrition option and Summer EBT.
- Bridge language barriers to FNS nutrition programs by expanding translation and interpreter access, training FNS and state agency staff, and promoting strategies to address these barriers.
- Continue to work with Puerto Rico to explore the feasibility of a potential transition from the current capped [NAP Federal nutrition block grant](#) to SNAP, in order to meet the needs of the island's population.

**C. FNS will strengthen program participants' ability to embrace healthy eating patterns:**

- Update the nutrition standards for School Meals and WIC food packages to reflect the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and in consideration of cultural and traditional foods consumed by program participants.
- Support school meal operators in improving the nutritional quality of meals through the [Healthy Meals Incentive Initiative](#) and other investments.
- Engage with tribal stakeholders to enhance the food package for the [FDPIR](#).
- Facilitate fresh fruit and vegetable consumption by participants in several FNS programs.
- Develop the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans jointly with the Department of Health and Human Services to provide science-based advice on what to eat and drink to promote health, reduce the risk of chronic disease, and meet nutrient needs.
- Conduct research to ensure that the 2026 Thrifty Food Plan re-evaluation reflects current food prices, food composition data, consumption patterns, and dietary guidance, as directed by the 2018 Farm Bill.

**Proposed Metrics:**

- Number of retail chains/independent stores participating in online SNAP.
- Number of materials/resources published for audiences with limited English proficiency.
- Number of new partnership agreements to expand the reach of MyPlate messages.
- Number of states and ITOs participating in Summer EBT.
- Number of congregate and non-congregate meals served in each state's peak summer month as a percentage of non-congregate free and reduced-price meals served during an average month during school year 2024-2025 (September through May).

**Public Participation and Community Engagement:** This strategy is deeply informed by robust and equity-informed outreach. USDA has thousands of regional, state, and local offices, and they collectively host many thousands of county and state outreach events, webinars, and town hall discussions. Just to describe one agency's approach as an example, at NRCS, state outreach plans are each required to have a section that integrates equity considerations with outreach, and the plans' aims include:

- FNS will engage with stakeholders and program operators through a variety of venues and formats, such as conferences, meetings, and virtual forums, public comment opportunities, and process updates shared online and via GovDelivery, in the implementation of new regulations and the development and sharing of resources and strategies.
- FNS will conduct and implement feedback from tribal consultations to increase access to USDA nutrition assistance programs and culturally competent nutrition education.
- FNS will expand and activate its partnership network to increase the reach of MyPlate messages and meet consumers in the spaces in which they live, learn, work, and play. Actions include identifying synergies, linkages, and channels and implementing new strategies that support partnership engagement—particularly among stakeholder organizations that serve historically underserved communities.

## Strategy #4

*Ensure equitable access to forest resources, funding opportunities, and outdoor experiences; and target wildfire prevention and conservation investments where they are most needed.*

**Whole of Government Equity Objective:** Environmental Justice, Economic Justice

**Collaborating Agencies:** Department of the Interior (DOI)

**Barriers to Equity:** The Forest Service strives to ensure all people—regardless of race, ability, or income—have equal access to and equitable benefits from agency programs and services. Indeed, communities with fewer resources frequently need services the most. Underserved and socially vulnerable populations face significant barriers—financial, political, or related to access to knowledge and information—to applying for, benefiting from, and participating in programs and services. Agency practices can add to these, for example, by imposing match requirements, or by failing to communicate and engage effectively with underserved communities.



USFS Chief Randy Moore and NRE Under Secretary Homer Wilkes toured Lucky Peak Nursery outside of Boise, Idaho.

**Evidence Base to Support Strategy:** Through extensive stakeholder engagement, Forest Service has identified opportunities for investment in underserved communities across the country, both forested and in need of tree canopy. On the topic of wildfire prevention especially, both academic investigations and the Forest Service’s own experience, informed by stakeholders and internal review, demonstrate that the devastating impacts of wildfires may be disproportionately felt by underserved and socially vulnerable communities, many of whom may face unique barriers to recovering post-fire due to economic, social, and ecological conditions.<sup>5</sup>

- Some studies have found more delivery of fire mitigation activities near communities with high socioeconomic status.<sup>6</sup>
- In the case of tree canopy coverage across our nation’s cities, similar patterns emerge; low-income communities experience less tree cover and higher temperatures when compared to high-income communities.<sup>7</sup>
- Forest Service has partnered with reputable organizations in this field, including the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention (SFLR) Network, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), and the African American Mayors Association (AAMA) to identify opportunities for responsive improvements.

### Actions to Achieve Equity:

#### A. Forest Service will target wildfire prevention where it is most needed, including underserved and tribal communities.

- Implement research, matching requirements, project-selection, training, mapping resources, barrier analysis, personnel to facilitate robust investment in wildfire protection in underserved communities.
- Enter into co-stewardship agreements with tribes across the country to reduce wildfire risk.
- Leverage [Community Wildfire Defense Grants](#) to support tribes, low-income and underserved communities facing high or very high wildfire risk.

<sup>5</sup> A.L. Kramer, J. Liu, L. Li, R. Connolly, M. Barbato, & Y. Zhu, “Environmental Justice Analysis of Wildfire-Related PM2.5 Exposure Using Low-Cost Sensors in California,” *Science of The Total Environment* 856 (2023). M. Méndez, G. Flores-Haro, & L. Zucker, “The (In) visible Victims of Disaster: Understanding the Vulnerability of Undocumented Latino/a and Indigenous Immigrants,” *Geoforum* 116 (2020): 50-62. White House Environmental Justice Interagency Council, “Addressing Environmental Justice Concerns in Disaster Preparedness, Response, Recovery,” IAC Natural Disasters and Environmental Justice Subcommittee (2023).

<sup>6</sup> S.E. Anderson, A.J. Plantinga, & M. Wibbenmeyer, “Inequality in Agency Response: Evidence from Salient Wildfire Events,” *Journal of Politics* 85, no. 2 (2023): 625-639. S.E. Anderson, A.J. Plantinga, & M. Wibbenmeyer, “Unequal Treatments: Federal Wildfire Fuels Projects and Socioeconomic Status of Nearby Communities,” *Environmental and Energy Policy and the Economy* 4, no. 1 (2023): 177-201. D. Flores, G. Falco, N.S. Roberts, & F.P. Valenzuela III, “Recreation Equity: Is the Forest Service Serving its Diverse Publics?,” *Journal of Forestry* 116, no. 3 (2018): 266-272.

<sup>7</sup> Robert I. McDonald, Tanushree Biswas, Cedilla Sachar, Ian Housman, Timothy M. Boucher, Deborah Balk, David Nowak, Erica Spotswood, Charlotte K. Stanley, & Stefan Leyk, “The Tree Cover and Temperature Disparity in US Urbanized Areas: Quantifying the Association with Income across 5,723 Communities,” *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 4 (2021): e0249715, 27 p., <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249715>.

**B. Forest Service will expand equitable access to grants, agreements, and contracts.**

- Integrate equity into proposal analysis, outreach, scoring, and guidance related to federal investments, including master participating agreements with non-profit organizations (multi-million and multi-year agreements that will leverage BIL and IRA funds to tackle the wildfire and climate crises at scale).
- Address the barriers to participation posed by cooperator matching requirements by institutionalizing national waivers of policy match requirements for tribes and agreements that will serve disadvantaged communities and designing a process for approving reduction of policy match requirements based on partner capacity.
- Improve engagement and communication with underserved communities through engagement sessions and the nascent community navigator program, funding robustly networked partners to help hard-to-reach communities identify funding opportunities and navigate grant and agreement processes.

**C. Forest Service will expand the benefits of urban forestry, which helps combat extreme heat and climate change and improves access to nature in cities, towns, and suburbs.** Increase access for disadvantaged communities, provide education to the public, and promote use of vulnerability- and equity-based data tools when making grants and targeting investments under the Forest Service’s [Urban and Community Forestry program](#), [Community Forest and Open Space program](#), and other similar efforts.

**D. Forest Service will promote access to recreation and outdoor experiences within underserved communities.**

- Conduct analysis to identify where underserved groups experience the greatest barriers to accessing recreation special use permits on Forest Service lands; promote responsive social science research; and update directives and policy, refining current competitive processes for permits.
- Develop an external facing online permitting application for special use permits on federal lands to better connect to underserved communities.
- Enhance partnerships and community engagement through collaboration; develop equity-centered communication strategies, including new inclusive recreation printed materials.

**E. USDA will advance environmental justice.** USDA’s internal Justice40 Initiative covered program implementation plans include dozens of program improvements. Among them:

- Increasing the diversity and inclusiveness of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program Advisory Committees.
- In many programs, updating proposal evaluation criteria to value proposal benefits to disadvantaged communities.
- Enhanced engagement with tribes and other underserved and disadvantaged communities during planning processes.

**F. Forest Service will improve its law enforcement cadre’s interactions with individuals with mental illness,** promoting equitable outdoor experiences and advancing [the work of the interagency Alternatives and Reentry Committee \(ARC\)](#)

- Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations (LEI) will require every officer and agent to attend Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) by Spring 2024 and incorporate this into annual performance measures. CIT is an intensive program that provides officers/agents with the tools to recognize some signs associated with individuals in crisis or who may have underlying mental illness that contributes to their behavior. This will train officers to make mental health referrals as opposed to an arrest in appropriate situations.
- Evaluate regulatory changes to allow an officer/agent encountering an individual in possession of a controlled substance to write a violation notice with an assigned fine that may be paid in lieu of an appearance in court for criminal charges.
- Increase the diversity and inclusiveness of the [Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program Advisory Committee \(CFLRP\)](#).

**Proposed Metrics:**

- Increase in funding allocated to wildfire risk reduction projects within and/or in proximity to socially vulnerable and disadvantaged communities through implementation of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy.
- Increase in proportion of benefits to socially vulnerable and disadvantaged communities,

**Public Participation and Community Engagement:** In partnership with the Next100 Coalition, Forest Service is conducting systematic and extensive engagement with diverse stakeholders, including tribes and tribal organizations, on the agency’s Reimagine Recreation strategic planning effort to help advise an updated strategy and action plan in creating a place for everyone to feel welcome and connected to the outdoors. To further progress with the Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) and tribal engagement, the Forest Service is conducting a four-part dialogue series, in partnership with the Intertribal Timber Council, to discuss tribal workforce capacity-building and finding mutual benefits in WCS implementation.

## Strategy #5

*Advance equity in federal procurement by providing underserved and disadvantaged businesses tools and resources to increase access to funding opportunities, and by helping promote safe and secure provision of services and supplies.*

**Whole of Government Equity Objective:** Economic Justice

**Collaborating Agencies:** SBA

**Barriers to Equity:** Underserved and disadvantaged businesses are often unfamiliar with contracting and the tools and resources that promote funding opportunities; information is difficult to find and understand.

**Evidence Base to Support Strategy:** USDA has received comprehensive feedback from small and disadvantaged businesses. For example, the [Forecast of Business Opportunities](#) tool and the [Path to Prosperity](#) program respond to a series of listening sessions with hundreds of small-disadvantaged businesses nationwide. There were three key takeaways from this listening: (1) small disadvantaged businesses who have not previously done business with the government, find many of the processes hard to understand and intimidating; (2) small disadvantaged businesses need more time to prepare for upcoming contracting opportunities and (3) for new entrants in particular, they do not know where to start or how to take full advantage of all of government resources. In addition, USDA experience with attempted interventions is a key source of insight.

**Actions to Achieve Equity:**

- A. USDA will expand and improve the [Forecast of Business Opportunities website](#),** including implementing real-time display of changes in contracting opportunities. The tool was designed to be easily accessible to any contractor or potential contractor who is interested; it is keyword searchable and does not require knowledge of NAICs codes, contract types, or USDA mission areas and agency details.
- B. USDA will continue no-cost business development series, “Path to Prosperity,”** to provide un-banked and under-banked small businesses, communities, and individuals with useful information, tools, resources, and opportunities.
- C. USDA will help protect children and others from exploitative and illegal labor practices,** continuing to meet and collaborate with agricultural stakeholders; developing and implementing contractual language providing USDA and the Department of Labor visibility into the supply chain to promote the safe and secure provision of services and supplies by responsible companies that have adequate experience, staffing, production capability, and technical ability to achieve successful contract performance without exploitation.

**Proposed Metrics:**

- Contracting outcomes, by type of business.
- Unique users of “Forecast” website.
- Connection of new entrants to contracting opportunities through Path to Prosperity event participation.
- Percentage increase in new small-disadvantaged business entrants

**Public Participation and Community Engagement:** Through the Path to Prosperity event series as well as other publicly available gatherings across the country, the Department will be engaging with thousands of small disadvantaged businesses and tracking their progress through the contracting pipeline. Registration and after-event survey data from participants in the Path to Prosperity events will allow the Department to track and learn from small disadvantaged businesses through the entire span of their experience with the USDA, from event participation to possibly winning a government contract. In addition, the Department is hosting an event early in FY 2024 focused on new entrants which will provide them with support and access to government officials to both ask questions and provide feedback on their experiences.



Katie of City Roots LLC labels freshly packed microgreens in Columbia, S.C.

## Strategy #6

*Empower tribal sovereignty and uphold treaty responsibilities to Indian tribes, removing barriers to access to USDA programs and incorporating indigenous values and perspectives in program design and delivery.*

**Whole of Government Equity Objectives:** Economic Justice

**Collaborating Agencies:** DOI

**Barriers to Equity:** The unique legal status of tribes, tribal jurisdiction, and tribal land holdings has significantly hindered access to USDA programs for tribes and Native Americans. For example: Tribal corporations are currently ineligible for RD programs. Many indigenous plants and animals are excluded from FNS federal nutrition programs and AMS procurement opportunities. And tribal commercial activity is deemed disqualifying for some RD programs, even though—because they lack a robust tax base—tribal nations often systematically participate in commercial markets to accrue revenue necessary to provide their nation, and often neighboring communities, with (public) goods and services. These kinds of barriers, sometimes the results of legislation and other times caused by poorly drafted departmental documents, have obstructed Indian Country access to USDA programs, in turn complicating economic development and tribal self-determination.



Then-Deputy Agriculture Secretary Dr. Jewel Bronaugh, and Dr. David Yarlott, Chair of the Board of American Indian Higher Education Consortium and President, Little Big Horn College, Montana, after signing the ceremonial USDA and AIHEC Memorandum of Agreement.

**Evidence Base to Support Strategy:** USDA has received feedback on the shortcomings of program delivery and other program inequities affecting tribal nations from internal reflections on barriers and numerous formal tribal consultations. Feedback included the annual USDA-wide Tribal Consultation on Equity and Barriers, most recently in May 2023. Tribal leaders identified the needs and barriers—confirmed upon internal review and by external evidence<sup>1</sup>—listed above. Actions also rest on program data and historical knowledge about discrimination and civil rights cases. From these inputs we categorized the USDAs priority take-aways into three policy actions: 1) Remove the barriers for indigenous and tribal access to USDA programs and services, 2) Promote tribal self-determination principles, and 3) Adapt USDA's programs to include tribal values and indigenous perspectives.

### Actions to Achieve Equity:

#### A. USDA will remove barriers for indigenous and tribal access to USDA programs and services.

- **FDIPR tribal bison and seafood procurement pilots.** FNS and AMS have created a [pilot project](#) using FDPIR procurement processes—which solely serve tribal communities—to test the flexibilities of existing procurement authorities to better incorporate bison, a key tribally identified indigenous food. After initial implementation, which began July 2023, we hope to replicate the process with seafood procurement.
- **Support indigenous meat processing capacity expansion.** USDA will pursue development and expansion of indigenous animal processing capacity, in support of the government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes and their self-governance goals of maintaining and improving food and agriculture supply chain resiliency.
- **Identify and address USDA program requirements for alignment with BIA agricultural leases.** Dedicated USDA staff will streamline access for Native producers and land managers by collaborating with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) with the goal to align DOI lease requirements with the Farm Service Agency agricultural financing program options and Natural Resources Conservation Service planning and practice standards.
- **Equity review of Forest Service grazing leasing process:** USDA will review leasing rules to promote for more equitable opportunities, including ensuring tribal applicants and tribal lands are eligible to compete for forest and grasslands leases.
- **Institutionalize eligibility of tribal owned entities for Rural Development programs:** RD has identified several programs for consideration of how best to mitigate barriers to tribal economic development entities such as wholly-owned tribal corporations.

## B. USDA will promote tribal self-determination principles.

- USDA currently makes most of the food purchases for the FDPIR program, crowding out self-determination and economic development opportunities for the affected tribal entities. Going forward, USDA will support ongoing tribal self-determination demonstration projects for the Food and Nutrition Service and Forest Service, expanding tribal self-determination policies to enable greater self-governance and decision-making.
- A dedicated Office of Tribal Relations Tribal Empowerment Team will increase awareness about Forest Service, RD, and NRCS Inflation Reduction Act opportunities that promote tribal self-determination principles.

## C. USDA will adapt programs to include tribal values and indigenous perspectives.

- FNS will increase the availability of indigenous food options in the NSLP to better recognize cultural practice and the needs of traditional diets.
- NRCS will add program flexibility in circumstances where conservation practices and programs do not align with tribal priorities relating to resources and land stewardship.

### Proposed Metrics:

- Increased tribal participation in referenced programs.
- Increased investments and new cooperative agreements with tribes and other indigenous communities and organizations.

**Public Participation and Community Engagement:** Over the last three years, USDA's Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) has held annual Equity and Barriers Consultations in response to Executive Order 13985, *Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*, and Executive Order 14091, *Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*. Covering all the USDA mission areas, these consultations have provided tribal leaders the opportunity to identify to key USDA decision makers the barriers their tribes have encountered and to work with USDA to formulate ways to reduce or eliminate those barriers. That feedback was directly incorporated into the above outlined plan, actions, and metrics, and OTR will continue to conduct consultations to get further insight from tribes.

## Strategy #7

*Commit unwaveringly to civil rights by improving tools, skills, capacity, and processes to more effectively and efficiently enforce them.*

**Whole of Government Equity Objective:** Civil Rights

**Collaborating Agencies:** DOJ, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

**Barriers to Equity:** Over the decades, intentional discrimination and agency policies, procedures, and practices that limited access to USDA programs and resources for underserved producers have imposed grievous harm on USDA customers and decreased their opportunities to accumulate generational wealth. Many of these barriers are built into organizational structures and embedded in day-to-day agency operations. In addition, longstanding administrative inadequacies—for example, unduly lengthy times for complaint processing—have undermined civil rights remediation.

**Evidence Base to Support Strategy:** Congressional reports about USDA as a whole and the Department's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) in particular, internal data, civil rights investigations, court actions and studies of them, and stakeholder testimony have documented a long history of inequity and discrimination against farmers from underserved groups and others USDA should be assisting. During the past two years, Requests for Information, listening sessions, and the USDA Equity Commission have updated the evidence base. The Commission, including its subcommittees on Agriculture and Rural Community Economic Development, bring together expert members, leaders with diverse backgrounds who have both gathered information and shared their own insights. The Equity Commission's recommendations on improving civil rights at USDA are a key part of the foundation of the actions set out below.

### Actions to Achieve Equity:

#### A. OASCR will transform USDA's program complaint process.

- Issue Departmental Manual 4330-001 (DM-4330-001), **Procedures for Processing Program Discrimination Complaints**, to establish the process and procedures for administrative complaints of discrimination and set guidance for mission areas and agency offices handling administrative civil rights complaints.
- Implement **streamlined and refined complaint** processing mechanisms to meet ambitious quality standards and timeliness targets (225 days) for program complaint processing.
- Implement a **fast-track emergency intervention program** complaint process to address critical cases in time to make a difference.

- Use a new **Program Complaints Task Force** to complete adjudication of existing aged case backlog.
- Complete **improvements responsive to Office of Inspector General (OIG) audit**, including (1) updating guidance to improve complaint resolution timeliness, (2) reviewing information technology guidance and plans to ensure OASCR can meet federal and departmental requirements, (3) reviewing processes to ensure sufficient documentation and support, (4) assessing compliance with USDA civil rights regulations and policies, and (5) updating the strategic plan.

**B. OASCR and agency civil rights offices will improve USDA’s civil rights infrastructure through evaluation of agency programs.**

- Establish and implement an **agency-head civil rights tool and performance evaluation** process. Provide oversight for Civil Rights Performance Assessment to ensure mission area and agency leadership compliance with civil rights laws and regulations. In FY 2024 OASCR will introduce an annual assessment for mission areas, under secretaries, agency heads, and select staff office directors (Office of Chief Information Officer (OCIO), Office of Chief Financial Officer (OCFO), and Departmental Administration).
- Improve **Civil Rights Impact Analysis (CRIA)** capabilities, including by developing and implementing agency-wide technical training.
- Build a **feedback loop** from complaints to prospective civil rights improvements, analyzing complaints to shed light on USDA programs, policies, and procedures and inform training, improvements, and communications.
- Build **dashboards** to track and monitor program complaints data, civil rights impact analyses, and workforce reporting requirements.

**C. USDA will foster civil rights community across USDA by bringing together department, mission area, and agency civil rights leaders to establish a community of practice to share processes, resources, and innovation.**

- Conduct coordinated monthly **Civil Rights Directors meetings** to provide guidance and information sharing.
- Conduct **quarterly listening sessions** with individual Civil Rights Directors on resource needs and challenges.

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

- Develop **Departmental Language Access Plan** to cover both federally conducted and federally assisted activities.

- Require each USDA agency to prepare its **agency-specific language access plan** covering federally conducted and federally assisted programs and activities.
- Establish a **governance structure**, including a coordinating committee, to assist mission areas and offices with implementation—including developing and periodically updating policies, procedures, and processes, with an appropriate internal reporting cadence and method.
- Create a process for **ongoing exploration of emerging technology**—artificial intelligence/machine learning, remote interpretation, and other similar technologies—that may allow more effective and more efficient language access strategies.

**Proposed Metrics:**

- Percent of program complaints received since 2023 that meet maximum processing time of 225 days. (Goal is 100% by end of FY 2024)
- Proportion of USDA agencies with language access plans.
- Availability and frequency of use of remote interpretation services.
- Number of translated products.
- Number of Civil Rights Performance Assessments.
- Number of Civil Rights Impact Analyses.

**Public Participation and Community Engagement:** USDA’s Equity Commission will continue to provide important public engagement opportunities and feedback on civil rights topics. Since its launch in February 2022, the [Equity Commission](#), composed of independent members from diverse backgrounds who have a personal or professional interest in USDA’s mission and services, has been working to identify how changes to USDA programs, policies, systems and practices can help lift barriers to inclusion or access and address systemic discrimination or racial, economic, health and social disparities. This feedback will be supplemented by inputs from engagements pursuant to USDA’s new equity outreach strategy. In accordance with federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex (including gender identity and sexual orientation), disability, age, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity.

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

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint](#) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov).

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