

NEWS

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Statement

by
Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickmanon
Program Delivery and Customer Service at USDA

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"During my tenure as Secretary, I have actively sought to ensure that Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs effectively serve minority and socially disadvantaged farmers. Today, I am initiating a national dialogue on USDA's service to these communities as part of an intensified effort to more effectively help socially disadvantaged and minority farmers continue their family traditions and stay on the land.

"First, I am directing each USDA agency that serves farmers to establish an outreach office that reports directly to the administrator. I am directing the state offices of the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Rural Development (RD), and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to establish outreach offices that report directly to the state directors and state conservationists. These outreach offices will work directly with constituency groups to improve the department's outreach and service to minority and socially disadvantaged producers.

"Second, I will hold a national forum early next year on the delivery of USDA programs. All USDA farm program agencies, including Extension, will be involved in the forum, as will headquarters, state, and county office personnel. The forum will provide an opportunity for minority and socially disadvantaged farmers to discuss their concerns about USDA program delivery. More importantly, it will identify new ways we can build partnerships and improve the department's outreach and service.

"Third, the state offices of NRCS, RD, and FSA will hold simultaneous statewide forums so that minority and socially disadvantaged farmers in every state can participate in this national dialogue. The outreach offices of each agency will work with our constituencies and partners in setting up these statewide meetings. Following the national forum, each state will submit a joint report to headquarters with recommendations for future action, including ways to build more effective partnerships among socially disadvantaged and minority producers and USDA leadership, including state officials.

"Fourth, I am requesting that USDA's Office of Inspector General begin an immediate investigation of the status of discrimination complaints against FSA and recommend a plan for promptly resolving these complaints. I am also asking them to investigate the level of participation of minorities and socially disadvantaged farmers in FSA's farm loan programs as well as FSA's effectiveness in serving these communities. I also will be directing other USDA agencies to launch comprehensive analyses of their service to minority and socially disadvantaged farmers and of their civil rights complaint and enforcement systems.

"I am committed to creating an environment in which every customer who comes to one of our offices is treated fairly, effectively, and efficiently. Improving program delivery and customer service means reaching all Americans. It means making sure that minority and socially disadvantaged

farmers have equal information about and access to farm loans, commodity programs and crop insurance. It means using our outreach grants for these farmers as effectively as possible.

"We have already made real progress. Those initiatives include committing millions of dollars to outreach and training for minority and socially disadvantaged farmers through colleges, universities, and community organizations serving primarily minority and socially disadvantaged populations. In addition, we have targeted loan funds specifically to members of minority groups to encourage farm ownership and production.

"But we can and will do better. The actions I am announcing today are the first steps to ensure that we do everything possible in the area of civil rights."

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