

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 19, 2020

Mike Beatty
Director, Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 205010

Dear Director Beatty:

During this difficult time, farmers across the U.S. face unprecedented challenges in keeping their farms afloat and their livelihoods intact. For many producers, the impacts of this current crisis are compounded by years of depressed prices, volatile markets, and historic levels of farm debt. We are increasingly concerned about the sustainability of our nation's most underserved farmers who often have the fewest resources to draw on and who most need our support in these challenging times.

In this regard, we write to raise concerns that funding appropriated in Fiscal Year 2020 to support the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers (i.e. Section 2501) program has been redirected for other purposes.

As you are aware, the Section 2501 program has served as the only Farm Bill program dedicated to addressing the specific needs of Black, American Indian, Asian American, Latino, and military veteran family farmers and ranchers. The Section 2501 program aims to reverse the disparities that have existed for these historically underserved communities by funding innovative outreach and technical assistance programs through the community-based organizations, Tribes, and educational institutions best prepared to reach and serve them.

In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress affirmed its support by providing mandatory funding for the Section 2501 program under the new Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) program. In recent years, Congress has provided additional funding through annual appropriations to further boost resources for Section 2501 projects that directly address the urgent needs of traditionally underserved farmers and ranchers.

We were therefore concerned to learn that instead of directing Fiscal Year 2020 Section 2501 appropriations to grants established through the 2018 Farm Bill, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) redirected this funding to a new initiative created by the Administration – the Centers for Community Prosperity (CCP), as published in the Federal Register on July 10, 2020 (85 FR 41516). Additionally, we understand this decision was made without a thorough process for input and consultation with Section 2501 stakeholders and the communities of color and veterans that they serve.

Because of the importance of the Section 2501 program to many of our constituents, we ask that you answer the following questions regarding the CCP:

- 1) What specific Farm Bill authorities and funding is USDA using to authorize and administer CCP? Did USDA transfer any funding for this purpose, and were any transfers in line with USDA's 7 percent transfer authority under 7 U.S.C. § 2257 (or any other authority USDA relied on to do so)?
- 2) What differentiates CCP from the Section 2501 program? How will CCP projects overlap or be duplicative with projects funded through Section 2501? What justification can the Department provide for the decision to create a separate outreach and technical assistance program rather than a single program to serve socially disadvantaged farmers?
- 3) Will all CCP projects be required to focus exclusively on socially disadvantaged (SDA) and veteran farmers, as required under 7 U.S.C. 2279(c)? Will CCP grantees be required to demonstrate experience and provide documentary evidence of working with SDA farmers during the three year period preceding the submission of applications for CCP funding, as required under 7 U.S.C. 2279(c)? Provide specifics on how socially disadvantaged farmers will benefit from CCP.
- 4) How will funding decisions be made as to which grants are awarded under the CCP? Will USDA employ an external peer review panel as required by 7 U.S.C. 2279(c)(4)(I)?
- 5) What stakeholders (if any) were consulted in the development of the CCP prior to the RFA being issued, and what the outreach was conducted specifically related to this new RFA, as required by 7 U.S.C. 2279(c)(4)(J)?
- 6) Will USDA be issuing a correction to 85 FR41516 to require that any Section 2501 funding awarded under CCP must meet the "eligible entity" definition in 7 U.S.C. 2279(c)? If so, please provide a timeline for when the correction will be published.
- 7) Veterans are an explicit part of the Section 2501 program. What involvement did the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs have in developing the CCP program?

In addition to these questions, we expect USDA to comply with the reporting requirements as outlined in 7 U.S.C. 2279(c)(4)(D). As such, we expect USDA to submit to Congress, and make publicly available, the following information on all CCP grantees:

- The recipients of funds made available under this program;
- The activities undertaken and services provided;
- The number of current and prospective socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers served and outcomes of such service;
- The problems and barriers identified by grantees in trying to increase participation by current and prospective socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers;
The number of farms or ranches started, maintained, or improved as a result of funds made available under this program;
- Actions taken by the Secretary in partnership with grantees to enhance participation in agricultural programs by veteran farmers or ranchers and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers; and
- The effectiveness of these actions.

The House passed H.R. 7608, the first Fiscal Year 2021 appropriations minibuss, which includes \$5 million for the FOTO program as authorized by the 2018 Farm Bill in addition to the \$35 million in total mandatory funds available in 2021. It is our expectation that any and all additional funds appropriated in Fiscal Year 2021 to support outreach and technical assistance for socially disadvantaged farmers under 7 U.S.C. 2279 be directed to the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers program, as was intended for the funds USDA is using to support CCP.

We appreciate your prompt consideration of these questions.

Sincerely,



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Ben Ray Luján
United States Representative



Tom Udall
United States Senator



Alma Adams
United States Representative

/s/ Chris Van Hollen

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Earl Blumenauer
United States Representative



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



G. K. Butterfield
United States Representative



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



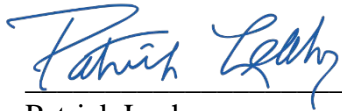
Ed Case
United States Representative



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Jim Costa
United States Representative



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator

/s/ Cory Booker

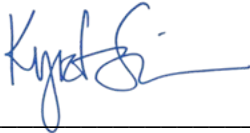
Cory Booker
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
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Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Doug Jones
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Angie Craig
United States Representative



Antonio Delgado
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Marcia L. Fudge
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Ruben Gallego
United States Representative



Deb Haaland
United States Representative



Jahana Hayes
United States Representative



Kendra S. Horn
United States Representative



Chrissy Houlahan
United States Representative

/s/ Martin Heinrich
Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Jon Tester
United States Senator

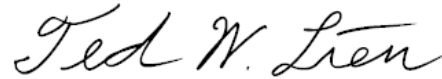


Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/ Eddie Bernice Johnson
Eddie Bernice Johnson
United States Representative



Ann McLane Kuster
United States Representative

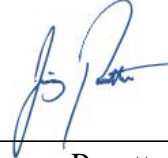


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/s/ Sean Patrick Maloney
Sean Patrick Maloney
United States Representative



James P. McGovern
United States Representative



Jimmy Panetta
United States Representative



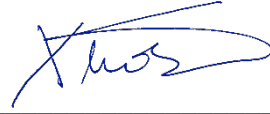
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Peter Welch
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