



Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

December 12, 2023

THE HONORABLE JOHN BOOZMAN
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
United States Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Ranking Member Boozman:

The enclosed congressional report fulfills the directive in House Report 117-392 of the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and related agencies Appropriations Bill 2023, which requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to address the House Report's request for information on identifying barriers to access the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers program, and provide recommendations for improvement of the program.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this information with you. If you have questions, please have a member of your staff contact the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement at (202) 720-6350. We will send a similar letter to Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow.

Sincerely,

/s/ Thomas J. Vilsack

THOMAS J. VILSACK
Secretary

Enclosure



Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

December 12, 2023

THE HONORABLE DAVID SCOTT
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture
House of Representatives
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Ranking Member Scott:

The enclosed congressional report fulfills the directive in House Report 117-392 of the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and related agencies Appropriations Bill 2023, which requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to address the House Report's request for information on identifying barriers to access the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers program, and provide recommendations for improvement of the program.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this information with you. If you have questions, please have a member of your staff contact the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement at (202) 720-6350. We will send a similar letter to Chairman Glenn Thompson.

Sincerely,

/s/ Thomas J. Vilsack

THOMAS J. VILSACK
Secretary

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Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

December 12, 2023

THE HONORABLE DEBBIE STABENOW
Chairwoman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
United States Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow:

The enclosed congressional report fulfills the directive in House Report 117-392 of the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and related agencies Appropriations Bill 2023, which requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to address the House Report's request for information on identifying barriers to access the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers program, and provide recommendations for improvement of the program.

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Sincerely,

/s/ Thomas J. Vilsack

THOMAS J. VILSACK
Secretary

Enclosure



Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

December 12, 2023

THE HONORABLE GLENN "GT" THOMPSON
Chairman
House Committee on Agriculture
House of Representatives
400 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Thompson:

The enclosed congressional report fulfills the directive in House Report 117-392 of the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and related agencies Appropriations Bill 2023, which requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to address the House Report's request for information on identifying barriers to access the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers program, and provide recommendations for improvement of the program.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this information with you. If you have questions, please have a member of your staff contact the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement at (202) 720-6350. We will send a similar letter to Ranking Member David Scott.

Sincerely,

/s/ Thomas J. Vilsack

THOMAS J. VILSACK
Secretary

Enclosure

**United States Department of Agriculture
Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement**

Report to Congress



**2501 Program
FY 2023 Report**

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) develops and maintains partnerships focused on solutions to challenges facing rural and underserved communities in the United States, and connects those communities to the education, tools, and resources available to them through USDA programs and initiatives.

OPPE administers the 2501 Program, also known as the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program). The 2501 Program was established to address the historical and ongoing challenges faced by underserved farmers and ranchers and Veteran farmers and ranchers).

OPPE awards grants annually under the 2501 Program and collaborates with non-profit and tribal organizations, higher education institutions, nonprofit and community-based organizations, and youth-serving organizations to enable equitable participation of underserved farmers and ranchers and Veteran farmers and ranchers in USDA programs, increase their agricultural productivity and profitability, and promote equity in the agricultural sector.

This report addresses House Report 117-392's request for information on identifying barriers to access the 2501 Program and recommendations to improve the program.

Program Overview

The Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 first authorized and provided appropriations to the 2501 Program. The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 expanded the authority of the Secretary of Agriculture to award grants and enter into cooperative agreements and transferred the administrative authority to the Office of Advocacy and Outreach (renamed the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement under the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018).

The Agricultural Act of 2014 further expanded the program to include outreach and technical assistance to veterans. OPPE's Military Veteran Agricultural Liaison (MVAL) shares resources with veteran groups/organizations to offer farming and agriculture as an alternative career choice upon separation from the military.

The 2501 Program provides financial and technical assistance through competitive grants to eligible organizations that offer outreach, technical assistance, and education to underserved f and Veteran farmers and ranchers. Grantees work directly with underserved and Veteran farmers and ranchers to enhance their understanding of and access to USDA programs, facilitate participation with sustainability of their operations in mind, and provide holistic support to overcome historical barriers.

Program funding:

- o Total FY 23 2501 Program funding is \$27.6 million.

Historical Funding Levels

Year	Grantees	Appropriation
2023	41	\$27,658,196
2022	51	\$34,630,736
2021	29	\$18,652,375
2020	49	\$17,682,518

Barriers to Access

While the 2501 Program has made strides in addressing the needs of underserved and Veteran farmers and ranchers, several barriers to access the program have been identified.

- a. Lack of awareness: Many potential applicants and beneficiaries are unaware of the existence and benefits of the 2501 Program. Outreach efforts have not reached all targeted communities, leaving potential beneficiaries underserved.
- b. Limited technical knowledge: Some applicants face challenges in navigating the application process due to limited grant-writing expertise and/or understanding of program requirements.
- c. Limited funding: The program's funding levels are insufficient to meet the demand for assistance, resulting in a competitive environment that may disadvantage smaller organizations.
- d. Language and cultural barriers: Language and cultural differences can create obstacles to effective communication and participation in the program, especially for non-English speakers and diverse cultural groups.
- e. Historical disadvantages: Ongoing effects of historical discrimination and limited access to resources still impact underserved and Veteran farmers and ranchers, hindering their ability to participate in the program fully.

Program Improvements

With equity at the forefront for this program, the USDA has made advancements to improve its stewardship and capacity to report on the program's performance. OPPE recently hired a Performance Improvement Officer (PIO) and has initiated the process of the development of performance measures, logic model(s), project categorization, and measurement procedures that align with USDA's mission and the federal grant programs targeted at underserved communities.

Additionally, to help nonprofits, community-based organizations, higher education institutions, industry leaders, stakeholders, partners, and grantees keep abreast of USDA programs, services and funding opportunities, OPPE maintains a database of contact information on grantee organizations to send periodic notifications, information on current and upcoming events, industry-related information, and funding opportunities useful to underserved and Veteran farmers and ranchers and agricultural organizations serving these populations. The 2501 Program team also conducts monthly 2501 Grantee Spotlight webinars to share best practices and provide opportunities for grantees to communicate directly with USDA officials. The program team also hosts monthly internal Outreach Coordinators' meetings with all USDA agencies designated outreach professionals to collaborate on outreach activities in a coordinated approach.

Since 2015, OPPE has hosted an Annual OPPE Partnership Symposium. All current and former 2501 grantees, applicants, farmers, ranchers, Veterans, agricultural organizations, agricultural educational institutions, and public officials are welcome. Apart from FY 2020 due to COVID-19, attendance at the symposium is about 300 people annually. The 2023 symposium resumes in-person interactions and will be conducted in Austin, Texas. The symposium provides a forum where attendees can network, promote partnerships, share best practices, and learn about programmatic updates and USDA programs and services. Surveys following the symposium confirm the value in holding this type of forum annually.

As part of the program's continuous process improvement, the 2501 Program team has updated the 2501 Grant Award's Terms and Conditions to reflect the ongoing changes to 2 CFR 200, Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards. The update more adequately defines the roles and responsibilities of organizations that receive grant funding and addresses their financial, legal, administrative, and operational capacity to carry out the objectives of the 2501 Program.

The program team also updated the 2501 Program's Notice of Funding Opportunity Announcement to clarify eligibility criteria and clarify certain priority points based upon the Secretary's priorities, performance measures requirements, and outcomes that meet OPPE goals and objectives for creating the best possible economic impact in the communities we serve.

Additionally, the 2501 Program team conducts public facing webinars during the open period of each announcement where each section of the funding opportunity is addressed, requirements are

clarified, and a question/answer period follows. These two-hour long webinars are designed to provide comprehensive instruction on how to apply and for the 2501 staff to address every question posed by attendees. The webinars are recorded and made available on the 2501 Program webpage for those who want a refresher or were unable to attend the scheduled live webinar sessions.

Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness of the 2501 Program and overcome barriers to access, the following recommendations are suggested:

- a. Expanded outreach efforts: The USDA should increase collaboration efforts with community-based organizations, minority-serving institutions, and local agricultural agencies to ensure comprehensive outreach and education about the program. Utilizing diverse media channels and multilingual materials can expand the program's reach.
- b. Simplified application process: The USDA should streamline the application process and provide clear guidance to applicants, including workshops and webinars, to assist potential applicants and beneficiaries in navigating the requirements.
- c. Policy, program, and funding changes: To meet the needs of underserved and Veteran farmers and ranchers adequately changes could be made to a suite of other USDA programs ranging from modifying FSA farm loan program rules to continuing many of the programs and new funding streams created in the American Rescue Plan Act and Inflation Reduction Act. Special attention should be given to policy changes and funding streams that support smaller organizations that may struggle to compete for limited funds and those that are designed to benefit underserved farmers and ranchers, including Veterans.
- d. Performance and Evaluation: Conduct evaluation of grants to better understand the progress and outcomes as well as establish program metrics to review program effectiveness and impact of resources.
- d. Culturally competent support: Ongoing training for program staff and partners to be more culturally competent, ensuring effective communication and understanding of the unique challenges faced by different communities.
- e. Increased technical assistance: To address geographic accessibility challenges, the USDA can utilize technology and/or leverage local county offices of USDA that travel or serve a geographic radius to provide on-site support and increased assistance to potential beneficiaries.

Conclusion

The USDA's 2501 Program plays an important role in supporting organizations that work closely with underserved and Veteran farmers and ranchers. By addressing barriers to access to these funds and implementing the suggested recommendations, the 2501 Program can enhance its impact, promote equity in the agricultural sector, and contribute to the prosperity of all underserved farmers and ranchers across the United States. Continuous efforts and collaboration are vital to ensuring the program's success in the long term.