



## **NSAC Advocacy in Support of Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers**

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) is an alliance of grassroots organizations that advocates for federal policy reform to advance the sustainability of agriculture, food systems, natural resources, and rural communities. NSAC works on an array of programs and projects that benefit society as a whole, including minorities and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. NSAC's work focusing specifically on supporting these communities includes the following programs, projects, and campaigns.

### **FARM BILL PROGRAMS ADVOCATED BY NSAC**

**Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP)** – NSAC developed the legislative proposal that created BFRDP, including the funding set-aside, in the 2002 Farm Bill. This competitive grant program, administered by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, funds education, extension, outreach, and technical assistance, and reserves at least 5 percent of its annual funding for projects serving limited-resource and socially disadvantaged groups, including minority, immigrant, and women farmers and ranchers. NSAC led the charge to secure mandatory funding in 2008, and successfully advocated for \$100 million in the 2014 Farm Bill.

**Outreach & Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers & Ranchers Program** – NSAC supports this program, also known as "Section 2501" Program, and has often included it in our annual agricultural appropriations campaign. It provides grants to a variety of institutions and organizations that work with minority and veteran farmers to successfully acquire, own, operate, and retain farms and ranches. The program is administered by USDA's Office of Advocacy and Outreach. NSAC worked with our organizational partners and allies to secure mandatory funding in the last two farm bills, including \$50 million for the program included in the 2014 Farm Bill.

**Value-Added Producer Grants Program (VAPG)** – NSAC helped to create VAPG in 2000 and developed successful legislative campaigns to improve the program in each of the past three farm bills. VAPG provides competitive grants designed to start value-added producer-owned businesses, and gives priority to projects that increase opportunities for socially disadvantaged producers and cooperatives. NSAC frequently champions the program in our agricultural appropriations campaign, and currently VAPG receives about \$11 million in annual appropriations, in addition to the \$63 million in mandatory funding that NSAC fought for in the 2014 Farm Bill.

**Conservation Set Asides** – In the 2014 Farm Bill, NSAC successfully advocated for maintaining the set-asides of dedicated funding for socially disadvantaged farmers in both the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). CSP also guarantees a minimum payment to socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers in any fiscal year that a contract's payment amount total is less than \$1,000.

**Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** – NSAC successfully supported EQIP's increased cost-share and advance payment provisions for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in the last two farm bills. EQIP is a voluntary conservation program administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service that offers financial cost-share and technical assistance to producers who implement conservation practices on agricultural working land. EQIP provides increased cost-share assistance and an advance payment option to socially disadvantaged producers to pay for upfront costs for materials and contracting. NSAC successfully advocated for increasing the advance payment rate from 30 to 50 percent in the 2014 Farm Bill.

**Conservation Reserve Program – Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP)** – NSAC developed this program option and helped steer it through the legislative and regulatory process in the 2008 Farm Bill. CRP-TIP offers a special incentive of two years of extra CRP rental payments to owners of land that is currently in the CRP but returning to production who rent or sell to beginning, socially disadvantaged, or veteran farmers and ranchers who will use sustainable production practices. NSAC was successful in securing \$33 million in the 2014 Farm Bill.

**Conservation Loan Program** – NSAC developed the original language for the Conservation Loan program back in 1990 and helped push the socially disadvantaged farmer priority language during consideration of the 2008 renewal of the program. The program provides loans for the costs of establishing conservation practices, and gives priority to socially disadvantaged farmer and rancher loan applicants. NSAC successfully advocated for raising the guarantee amount for all applicants, including socially disadvantaged applicants, in the 2014 Farm Bill.

**Loan Fund Set-Asides** – NSAC championed loan fund target rates for beginning farmers, while also playing a supporting role in target participation rates for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. Loan fund set-asides work to raise the participation rates of socially disadvantaged, minority, and women farmers and ranchers in the direct and guaranteed farm ownership and operating loan programs administered by USDA’s Farm Service Agency. These set asides also give priority to socially disadvantaged farmers to purchase land acquired by the government through foreclosures, by giving them first priority to purchase these properties at their appraised market value during the first 135 days the land is on the market. NSAC advocated that these target rates and priority consideration be continued in the 2014 Farm Bill, and also increased the flexibility for farmers to meet the management experience requirement to qualify for a direct farm ownership loan.

**Down Payment Loans** – NSAC developed and successfully advocated for beginning farmer down payment loans in the early 1990s to assist with first time farmland purchases. In the last two farm bills, NSAC supported a variety of improvements to the program as well as expansion to include socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. In the 2014 Farm Bill, NSAC successfully advocated for increasing the limit on the total farmland value that can be financed under this program to help beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers afford to purchase land in areas with high real estate values.

**Specialty Crop Block Grant Program** – During the farm bill debate, NSAC advocated that this program specify that State plans be balanced and ensure an equitable distribution of grants across the full array of specialty crop agriculture, including production by socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. We also advocated that the program be expanded to include traditional foods of federally recognized Indian tribes and other minority communities. Even though the farm bill did not make those changes, we are continuing to press those issues with USDA.

## **OTHER NSAC ACTIVITIES AND CAMPAIGNS**

**Pigford II Discrimination Suit Settlement** – NSAC supported the efforts of African-American farmers to secure the Pigford II Settlement, a \$1.25 billion settlement for a class-action lawsuit brought against USDA for outstanding discrimination claims. In addition to signing on to numerous letters to Congress and USDA supporting funding and a speedy resolution of this on-going lawsuit, NSAC also did some important behind the scenes direct advocacy to gain a down payment on settlement funding as part of the 2008 Farm Bill.

**Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)** – NSAC has made supporting SARE and seeking funding for the program a priority since it was first created in 1988. Each of SARE’s four administrative regions maintains individual projects and programs targeting socially disadvantaged producers. For example, North Central SARE hosts a “Circle of Sustainability” committee which calls for and manages grant work exclusively with Native Americans; Southern SARE provides for sustainable community innovation grants that have helped minority communities, institutions and producers create new economic opportunities; and Western SARE has extensive indigenous agriculture outreach and programming in the Pacific Islands.

**Farm to School Program** – NSAC’s advocacy also benefits consumers, nutrition, and public health. This includes on-going support for the national Farm to School Program, which connects K-12 schools with local farms in order to improve school lunches, and gives priority to grants to school districts with higher free and reduced price lunch populations. In alliance with several organizational partners, NSAC developed the revised language for the authorization of Farm to School, including the priority for low-income schools, during consideration of the Child Nutrition Act reauthorization in 2010. NSAC will be launching a campaign to secure increased mandatory funding and expansion for the program during the Child Nutrition Reauthorization, which is set to expire in September 2015.