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Contact: Reana Kovalcik, 202-547-5754

### **Building an Economic Engine in the Mississippi Delta**

*Dr. Sandra Hayes of Tougaloo College Along with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition Ask Congress to Support Mississippi's Underserved Farmers and Ranchers*

Washington, D.C., July 15, 2016 – Sandra Hayes, Dr.P.H. is a long-time champion for the health of Mississippians. Currently the Executive Director for the Tougaloo College Owens Health and Wellness Center, Hayes had previously led research on health disparities related to the development of infectious and chronic diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, TB, diabetes, and asthma. Hayes' work at Tougaloo is what first connected her to the agricultural community – the Owens Health and Wellness Center is host to Tougaloo's "Farm Aid 2501 Program", which provides outreach services and education, technical assistance, training and financial education to socially disadvantaged and military veteran farmers and ranchers (SDVFRs) residing in the Mississippi Delta.

"In the Delta, farms are economic engines that provide jobs and opportunities, creating more sustainable communities," said Hayes. "However, the inability of socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers to access financial and human resources has stifled their growth and, in most cases, hindered their ability to maintain their farms."

This week, Hayes left Mississippi and traveled north, where she and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) joined forces in urging Congressional appropriators to support the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program, also known as "Section 2501".

Section 2501 has served for decades as the only farm bill program dedicated to addressing the specific needs of minority farmers; recently the program was also expanded to serve military veterans. Section 2501 helps academic institutions and community-based nonprofits provide critical resources, outreach, and technical assistance to serve these historically underserved producers. This year the President's budget request included \$10 million in discretionary funding, an amount that would restore total annual funding to the 2501's pre-2014 Farm Bill level and allow the program to better address the increased demand for outreach and technical assistance by underserved producers.

Mississippi's unemployment rate (8%) is the highest in the nation, and its Delta region is currently struggling with the highest joblessness numbers in the state. Using support from Section 2501 grant funds, Tougaloo's Farm Aid 2501 Program helps combat the unemployment epidemic by assisting SDVFRs in owning and operating farms and ranches and demonstrating agriculture's connection to access to healthy food and community and economic development. The project offers services to the following MS Delta counties: Bolivar, Coahoma, Tallahatchie, Tunica, Yazoo, Quitman, Washington, and Humphreys.

Seeking to garner additional support for 2501, Hayes and NSAC met with Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS), who chairs the Senate's Appropriations Committee and also sits on the Senate's Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, and Representative Bennie Thompson (MS-02), a long-time champion for minority and socially disadvantaged farmers.

“Congressional appropriators have very few working days left to act on USDA funding priorities,” said NSAC Policy Director Ferd Hoefner. “Combine that with the chaos of an election year, and you’ve got a situation where it’s a real challenge to bring attention to these important sustainable agriculture programs. Thankfully, we’ve got some great farmer and rancher representatives who are willing to leave their busy lives and come to D.C. to speak to Congress about what these programs mean to them and for their businesses.”

The Senate Appropriations Committee’s bill included an additional \$3 million in discretionary funding for Section 2501, while the House’s version included no additional funds. Now that both Appropriations Committees have passed their respective agriculture appropriations bills, the door is open for them to go to the full House and Senate for consideration. Neither bill is yet on the schedule for floor action.

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#### About the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC)

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition is a grassroots alliance that advocates for federal policy reform supporting the long-term social, economic, and environmental sustainability of agriculture, natural resources, and rural communities.

Learn more: <http://sustainableagriculture.net>

#### About the Tougaloo Farm Aid 2501 Program

The Farm Aid 2501 Program is a USDA sponsored program that provides outreach services, technical assistance, and specialized training to socially disadvantaged farmers and veterans. Farm Aid’s primary goal is to enable farmers in being self-sufficient and successfully operate their farm operations.

Learn more: <https://www.tougaloo.edu/administration/owens-health-and-wellness>