

May 27, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
200-A Jamie L Whitten Building
1400 Impence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

As strong supporters of the creation of the Office of Advocacy and Outreach (Section 14013) in the 2008 Farm Bill, we write to thank you for the progress being made on its implementation. We appreciate especially that your compelling April 21 memo on "*A New Civil Rights Era for USDA*," includes a strong commitment to establishing this office as a separate departmental function, underscored by the Administration's May 7 budget request including a \$3 million appropriation for a freestanding office within the Executive Operations.

We believe this office will help hasten improvements to our food system by uplifting the small farms and beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, and farmworkers who are crucial to a sustainable system that nourishes all who depend upon it, while sustaining our land and resource base. By having this office directly report to you, many new opportunities are opened to best serve and support these rapidly evolving sectors of US agriculture. The new law provides a wide vision of the duties of the new office and includes critical authorities to allow the establishment of departmental goals and objectives, the measuring of outcomes, and clear channels for input into programmatic and policy directions and decisions.

We urge you to take a proactive approach to the implementation of this office, and look forward to commenting on any regulations you may issue. As such, we are unified in offering the following recommendations to you as you complete your plan for the office.

- 1) The mission of the OA&O is critical to the Department and the nation. The new authority could be productively used to not only assure access to all socially disadvantaged, beginning and small farmers and ranchers to USDA, but to expand their ability to nourish our communities and contribute to the economic vitality and sustainability of rural areas. The new office needs to be a place where new policy initiatives and policy coordination ideas are developed for your consideration and where departmental goals and objectives related to the structure of agriculture get articulated and benchmarks get set against which to measure future outcomes.
- 2) The structure chosen by Congress for an office with career civil servant as continuous leader is similar to the structure that has worked effectively for OBPA and the Office of the Chief Economist. By providing authority for this office with career public servant to provide leadership, Congress has provided an important tool to best integrate critical departmental functions that have been often moved and neglected, long lacking a permanent placement, cohesion and resources.

- 3) An effective structure can best be developed if the implementation team and the new directors and staff of the office include agency coordinators and others with a deep understanding of the current and emerging programs of the Department and significant experience in addressing the programmatic needs of this sector of producers.
- 4) The new structure should rest on the foundation of the knowledge base and relationships contained in the existing networks of the Outreach and the Small Farm Coordinators within USDA and its agencies; and the organizations that represent the sectors served by each of the two branches, the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Group and the Small and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Group.
- 5) The separation of the office for the critically important Civil Rights function achieves two important advances: the ability of the ASCR to work proactively to ensure past injustices are resolved and new accountability and compliance structures to prevent future occurrences is strengthened, while the OA&O is focused on policies to build a better future for all farmers, ranchers and farmworkers. The separation of Outreach from Civil Rights also limits its use in some future administration as a public relations tool to cover USDA inadequacies.
- 6) USDA should develop a concrete plan for how the OA&O will relate to and coordinate with all the USDA mission areas and agencies and with existing structures for small, beginning, socially disadvantaged and American Indian coordinators.
- 7) The Outreach and Technical Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, and the contracting authority associated with it, can provide an important tool to allow the effective and sustained use of partnerships with Community Based Organizations to meet the missions and goals of the Office. This program should be in place in its new location in time to allow the next grant round to be delivered from this office.
- 8) The Farmworker Coordinator can provide an important role in developing a new relationship between the Department and a critical component of our food system. We appreciate that you already have appointed a special assistant to cover labor issues. This long awaited function for the Farmworker Coordinator should also be instituted as soon as possible.
- 9) The O O&A should also develop a clear method to relate to whatever intergovernmental structure is established to work with American Indian Nations.

The Department's focus on small farms and beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers as key sectors of agriculture has been sporadic and fractured, to the detriment of the producers. We believe that this new office and authority will allow you to devote the full front-and-center attention that will allow this sector to flourish to the benefit of rural communities and our farm and food system. We look forward to working with you and your staff on this vital initiative.

Sincerely,

Farm and Food Policy Diversity Initiative

Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural – *Washington, DC*
Intertribal Agriculture Council – *Billings, MT*
Land Loss Prevention Project – *Durham, NC*
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund – *East Point, GA*
National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association – *Washington, DC*
Organización en California de Lideres Campesinas – *Oxnard, CA*
Farmworker Association of Florida – *Apopka, Pierson, and Princeton, FL*
Willie C. Velasquez Institute – *San Antonio, TX*
National Hmong American Farmers. Inc. – *Fresno, CA*

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) - *Salinas, CA*
Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO) - *Helena, MT*
California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) - *Santa Cruz, CA*
California FarmLink - *Sebastopol, CA*
CASA del Llano (Communities Assuring a Sustainable Agriculture) - *Hereford, TX*
Center for Rural Affairs - *Lyons, NE*
Clagett Farm/Chesapeake Bay Foundation – *Upper Marlboro, MD*
Community Alliance with Family Farmers - *Davis, CA*
Dakota Rural Action - *Brookings, SD*
Delta Land and Community, Inc. - *Almyra, AR*
Ecological Farming Association - *Watsonville, CA*
Flats Mentor Farm - *Lancaster, MA*
Florida Organic Growers - *Gainesville, FL*
Georgia Organics - *Atlanta, GA*
Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT) - *Chicago, IL*
Grassworks - *Wausau, WI*
Illinois Stewardship Alliance - *Rochester, IL*
Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation - *Des Moines, IA*
Island Grown Initiative – *Vineyard Haven, MA*
Izaak Walton League - *St. Paul, MN/Gaithersberg, MD*
Just Food - *New York, NY*
Kansas Rural Center - *Whiting, KS*
Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture - *Poteau, OK*
Land Stewardship Project - *White Bear Lake, MN*
Land for Good - *Belchertown, MA*
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute - *East Troy, WI*
Michigan Integrated Food and Farming Systems - *East Lansing, MI*
Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Service - *Spring Valley, WI*
National Catholic Rural Life Conference - *Des Moines, IA*
National Center for Appropriate Technology - *Butte, MT; Fayetteville, AR; Davis, CA*
New Mexico Acequia Association - *Santa Fe, NM*
Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA) - *Deerfield, MA*

Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society - *Fullerton, ND*
Ohio Ecological Food & Farm Association - *Columbus, OH*
Organic Farming Research Foundation - *Santa Cruz, CA*
Rural Advancement Foundation International, USA - *Pittsboro, NC*
Sierra Club Agriculture Committee - *Nationwide*
Union of Concerned Scientists (Food and Environment Program) - *Cambridge, MA;*
WDC
Virginia Association for Biological Farming - *Lexington, VA*
Washington Sustainable Food and Farming Network - *Mount Vernon, WA*
Wild Farm Alliance - *Watsonville, CA*

cc: Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan
Chairman Collin Peterson, House Committee on Agriculture
Chairman Tom Harkin, Senate Committee on Agriculture
Representative Joe Baca, Chair, Subcommittee on Department Operations and Nutrition,
House Committee on Agriculture
Representative Barbara Lee, Congressional Black Caucus
Representative Nydia Velazquez, Congressional Hispanic Caucus
Senator Russ Feingold