

# Farmers bewildered after USDA suggests cutting DEI from energy projects

The Agriculture Department said it would release funds withheld from farmers for months but also suggested they alter projects to align with Trump's agenda.

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By [Daniel Wu](#)

The Agriculture Department has a message for farmers owed federal grant money: Consider eliminating “harmful DEIA” from your projects, and get your funds sooner.

The department told those farmers in a letter last week that it would begin processing long-withheld payments after 30 days. But it is first encouraging farmers to agree to change their energy projects, such as installing solar panels or improving ventilation systems, to remove diversity aspects or make other revisions to better align with President Donald Trump's agenda.

“When I got that, I forwarded it to my USDA rep and said, ‘What in the world does this mean?’” said Michael Protas, who was awarded funds to install solar panels on his Dickerson, Maryland, farm.

The disruption to three rural energy programs, frozen by the Trump administration in January, has left farmers in the lurch and prompted a federal lawsuit. In its letter last week, the Agriculture Department said that it would begin disbursing the suspended payments and that all awardees would eventually receive their funding.

The department also sent affected farmers a voluntary online survey inviting them to propose changes within 30 days. Those who answered the survey — even if to say they would not revise their projects — would have their funding processed immediately, pending approval of any changes, according to the department. Those who don't will have to wait a month for the department to begin processing their funds.

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said the department was issuing a course correction after the Inflation Reduction Act, President Joe Biden's signature climate and health-care law, “delivered more bureaucracy than benefits for rural families.”

But farmers said the announcement created only more confusion and another hurdle to receive funding they desperately need to pay off loans and replenish money already spent on projects. Some reported finally receiving their payments this week without having altered their projects. Others said that they feared their contracts with the USDA would be voided if they responded to the survey in the wrong way and that they weren't sure what changes the Agriculture Department is looking for.

"DEI has nothing to do with solar panels," Protas said. "I don't know what they're asking for."

The Agriculture Department declined to answer questions from The Washington Post about what changes to remove diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility from rural energy projects could entail.

The funding freeze dates from Trump's first day in office, when he signed an executive order to withhold millions of dollars of funding promised to farmers in previous years to implement sustainable and energy-efficient practices. Many commitments were to reimburse farmers for expenses, and the pause in disbursements left them on the hook.

On March 13, several farmers and nonprofits sued the Agriculture Department, accusing it of unlawfully withholding congressionally appropriated funds. (One plaintiff in the lawsuit received funding Monday, according to Hana Vizcarra, an attorney for Earthjustice. The Agriculture Department did not answer questions from The Post about the lawsuit.)

"They expect the government just to fulfill their obligations," Vizcarra said. "And instead, as the new administration came in, they just froze all the funds and disrupted work that was already ongoing and put everything at risk."

The request for farmers to complete a survey and consider changing their projects came as another frustrating curveball to those who have waited months for their money under the Empowering Rural America (New ERA), Powering Affordable Clean Energy (PACE) and Rural Energy for America (REAP) programs.

"It just adds more confusion," said Protas, who took out a roughly \$97,000 loan to install solar panels on his farm. A REAP grant was supposed to cover about half the amount.

The Agriculture Department's letter said that, besides removing diversity features, project revisions could include using "more affordable and effective energy sources" and implementing changes to increase "production, transportation, refining and generation capacity of energy and critical minerals."

The department has previously boasted of opposing grants that support diversity initiatives. Rollins said in a March social media video that she canceled a \$397,000 grant to a California nonprofit that runs a training program for young farmers, which she said was educating "queer, trans, and BIPOC urban farmers and consumers about food justice," Civil Eats reported.

Earthjustice called the announcement a “stunt” and accused the department of creating a pretext to deny farmers their funds if they decline to change their programs. Vizcarra added that farmers funded under several other USDA programs still do not have their promised funding.

“This just feels like an unnecessary hoop to jump through,” she said. “They don’t need to confuse these grant recipients anymore with whether they need to submit the magic words to get their funds that the government’s already agreed to award them.”

Travis Forgues, who runs a creamery in Westby, Wisconsin, with his wife, Amy, said he is waiting for a roughly \$55,000 REAP payment to help cover a solar panel installation. The couple filled in the USDA’s survey last week and indicated they would make no changes to their project.

“I hope that we didn’t make a mistake with that,” Forgues said. “When you’re trying to talk about solar or energy independence, this is not a DEI issue. And, quite frankly, if it was a DEI issue, who cares?”

David Funk, who runs an energy consulting firm that provides services subsidized by REAP to farmers in Idaho and neighboring Washington state, said he indicated in the form last week that he would not make changes to his program and advised his clients to do the same. He received his money Monday afternoon, but some farmers he works with are still waiting.

Funk said he welcomed the Agriculture Department finally committing to paying awardees. But he added that it felt wasteful for the government to put farmers through so much uncertainty before reopening access to funds.

“They have hurt lots of businesses [and] made government less reliable in their quest to rid DEI from stuff that doesn’t really have it,” Funk said.

### **What readers are saying**

The comments express strong criticism of the USDA's suggestion to remove diversity aspects from energy projects for faster funding, with many attributing the decision to the Trump administration's policies. Commenters highlight the perceived incompetence and ideological... [Show more](#)

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