

Equity Action Plan Digest: Department of Agriculture

Summarized by Travis Reginal

This is one in a series of Urban Institute digests summarizing federal agencies', subagencies', and commissions' 2022 equity action plans, which were released in response to the Biden administration's January 2021 executive order, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. The Department of Agriculture's equity action plan is available at <https://www.usda.gov/equity/action-plan>.

Overview

What problem is the agency trying to solve?	Redressing historical harm the USDA has perpetrated against underserved groups that has resulted in decades of "lost equipment, land, farm operations, and opportunities to train future generations of diverse producers" and "barriers that have kept underserved communities including Native Americans, beginning farmers and ranchers, veteran producers, farm workers, and other underrepresented groups from full and fair access to USDA programs and services, including but not limited to USDA farm programs" (p. 1)
Priority groups	Black, Latino, and Native American people, people in rural areas, and women
Historic harm mentioned?	Yes
Partners in implementation	Minority-serving institutions (p. 6), organizations focused on improving outreach to underserved producers (p. 9), technical assistance providers (p. 4), tribal-serving organizations (p. 20)
Equity defined as	Ensuring that "all USDA applicants, customers, employees, and stakeholders are provided fair access to all opportunities, programs, and services" (p. 3)

Pillars and Principles of Equity

Acknowledgement of past harm and present barriers	Taking responsibility for "flawed design of programs as well as individual acts of discrimination, over the course of decades, most often through institutional practices that administer credit and other farm support programs" (p. 1)
Impact goals	Building and maintaining trust (p. 2); reducing barriers to access (p. 2); increasing investment in underserved communities (p. 2); building a USDA that reflects the communities it serves (p. 2); partnering with minority-serving institutions and tribal governments to build pathways to careers in the USDA (p. 6)
Actions and activities	Make environmental justice part of its mission (p. 4); provide technical assistance to underserved producers (p. 7); remove barriers for Indigenous and tribal access to USDA programs and services (p. 18); promote tribal self-determination (p. 18); adapt the USDA's programs to include tribal values and Indigenous perspectives (p. 18); developed a detailed dashboard in consultation with the Chief Data Officer that breaks contracts down to the level of ethnicity of the business owner and is refreshed in real time from SAM.gov (p. 18)
Accountability measures and approaches	Each office and mission area drafted equity action plans and a quarterly accountability time frame (p. 2)

Note: For the rubric we used to evaluate these components of the equity action plans, see the appendix to the Urban Institute's 2023 brief "Pathways to Equity at Scale: An Analysis of the 2022 Federal Equity Action Plans and Recommendations for 2023 Plans," available at https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Pathways%20to%20Equity%20at%20Scale%20Appendix_0.pdf.

Types of Equity and Related Activities

Procedural (example: expanding language and translation services; simplifying the vendor application process)	Expanded equitable access to USDA nutrition assistance programs by providing more money for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (p. 5); removed barriers to online ordering for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (p. 5); reducing if not eliminating administrative burdens (p. 9); simplifying funding application processes/systems (p. 10); transitioning from paper to electronic-based administration of USDA programs (p. 12)
Distributional (example: creating new procurement program)	New Heirs' Property Relending Program to protect farmland and family farm legacies (p. 5); new programming that will fill gaps in technical assistance provision to underserved producers (p. 7); developing new urban agriculture programs (p. 10)
Structural (example: policy change via proposing legislation related to an equity goal; changing organizational functions)	Increasing diversity within the USDA (p. 2); establishing an equity commission composed of external stakeholders (p. 2); internal equity assessments (p. 2); creation of a diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility strategic plan (p. 2); expanding tribal self-determination policies (p. 4); hiring a chief diversity and inclusion officer; removing "legacy" preferences for nontribal providers and borrowers (p. 19); ensuring that tribal lands, entities, and communities are eligible for USDA programs across the board (p. 19); prioritize training on civil rights, equity, and other core competencies critical to reducing barriers to access and crafting equitable policies and programs for USDA staff and leaders (p. 22)

Key Metrics to Measure Progress on Equity

- increase annual average monthly participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children by more than 350,000 over the strategic plan's time frame (pp. 11–13)
- delivering 40 percent of "investment benefits from certain federal programs to disadvantaged communities" (p. 15)
- move goal from 16 percent to 21.5 percent allocation of contracting dollars going to small disadvantaged businesses (p. 17)
- expand tribal pilot participation by 30 percent with increased outreach and funding (p. 20)

Looking Ahead: Key Reflections for Plan Implementation

Where is the agency set up for success?	Improved access to USDA programs and services for American Indian and Alaska Native tribal nations; providing additional support to underserved producers
Areas for future investment and growth	Improved collaboration with other federal agencies such as the Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, the Interior, and Transportation, and the regional commissions (e.g., Southeast Crescent Regional Commission) to support communities; improving access, generosity, and use of its nutrition assistance programs; engagement of stakeholders from underserved communities when planning and developing programs; supporting the creation of the Black Belt Regional Commission to truly help redress the harm, exclusion, and theft that Black communities, particularly in rural communities, have suffered; reparations for the farmers, ranchers, and landowners (former, current, and potential) the USDA has excluded, exploited, and stolen from