



August 9, 2022

Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack
US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250

RE: The NAREEE Board's Recommendations on Diversity and Equity at USDA and REE Programs

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

The National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board wishes to applaud the Secretary and USDA leadership for their proactive stance taken to tackle historical barriers that have limited access and opportunity to many Americans in this country. First, we would like to congratulate you on establishing the Equity Commission with its first meeting during Black History Month to set the tone as we move forward to an equitable future at USDA. Secondly, we look forward to supporting the Justice 40 initiative, which is in alignment with our Board's interests and our proposed recommendations regarding diversity and equity. Also, we commend the Secretary on the recent launch of the Action on Nutrition Security given we are in the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition.

In light of recent national events, the NAREEE Advisory Board recommends that the USDA develop action plans with accountability and transparency to the public to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion regarding historically marginalized communities and underrepresented groups in REE programs to truly reflect unity and better serve all of the United States of America.

After our meetings on February 9-10, 2022, the Board agreed to form a working group to further outline recommendations to put forth to the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee agreed to meet on March 3, 2022, via videoconference to further discuss and finalize recommendations before bringing them to the full Board. To address historic and structural inequities, the NAREEE Advisory Board recommends the Secretary address the following issues in REE.

1. We recommend that USDA **take a place-based approach (by zip codes) to its research to ensure food and nutrition security with an intersectional lens** (factoring intersectional identities such as rural Black/Latino women) to address the interlocking inequities challenging both urban, perirural/periurban, and rural Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Research has documented that BIPOC



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National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board

communities are at a higher risk of food insecurity due to higher rates of poverty among these minority groups. The residual effects of historical barriers such as redlining can be seen in the present-day food apartheid faced by BIPOC communities. For instance, scholars have reported that zip codes serve as a better predictor of life expectancy than genetic codes meaning that residents typically have less income and face a range of financial, environmental, and discriminatory issues that adversely impacts their access to nutritional foods.

2. We recommend that USDA conduct research within ERS or NIFA to better understand the contributing factors and impact to the loss of Black-owned heirs' property which has been a major issue impacting land to grow food and create a livelihood. To reverse these devastating trends, we ask the Secretary to **establish enforceable policy and equitable programs** to: assist heirs' property owners in maintaining ownership of their land; provide access to USDA and other Federal programs; fully fund relending programs and expand support services and technical assistance, and prioritize lending organizations in states that have passed model legislation to help agricultural landowners hold onto their land.
3. Compared to 1862 land grant institutions, historically Black 1890, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions and Tribal Colleges 1994 land grant institutions have been and remain woefully underfunded. These universities are critical to providing the education, training, and research needed by marginalized farmers. Plans to invest in U.S. agriculture must include these institutions, as well as the local farm advocacy groups that are vitally important to Black and other minority farmers. We ask that the Secretary equitably fund these centers, and academic programs, provide capacity grants and formula funds, support Tribal College USDA liaisons and outreach programs, and include funding for equity, extension, research, and endowment programs.
4. We recommend that USDA make investments and strategic plan in agricultural and nutrition communication within an equity lens. Given the racist tropes and misrepresentation that have negatively impacted BIPOC communities regarding their foodways from watermelon to peanuts, the investments include funding, leadership, and collaboration resulting in a publicly available online report. Within USDA policies and programs, we recommend allocating resources and using BIPOC-led teams in



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National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board

modernizing in-house and outsourced multimedia communication (videography, photography, publications, ICT, social media, audio, and graphic designs) along with the use of terms, tones, and language and framing messages that markets to BIPOC communities and promotes their cultural foodways with an assets-based approach. For instance, historical films regarding agricultural extension outreach to Black communities document the racist undertones and deficit-based approach to communities in the South. Furthermore, terms like food apartheid should be adopted to better illustrate the diagnosis of afflicted communities that are nutritionally divested.

5. We recommend that statistical agencies such as NIFA and NASS collect and report data that allows the public to better understand the challenges for people with intersectional identities such as low-income BIPOC women farmers; therefore, factor the intersection of race, gender, class, geography, income to empower advocacy organizations with the visual data and infographics to support policy and programmatic changes. Furthermore, we recommend data be presented in a user-friendly visual illustration such as mapping data with legends that demonstrates stratified data of funding distribution across land grant institutions such as 186, 1890, 1994 by state or zip code.

6. We recommend that an **Interagency working group on Equity (part of the Justice 40 initiative)** is established to ensure coherence and coordination across USDA. Each agency shall have a designated member who coordinates, reports and monitors data, programs, and policy regarding equity. This member could be the Chief Equity Officer within each agency. This working group is charged with ensuring 40% of the agency's budgets, measures, programs, policies are allocated to address equity, establish and metrics, and produce an equity report that is available to the public online and reported to the senior-most position charged to address equity within USDA such as the Deputy Secretary or Senior Advisor to Racial Equity. The working group shall have a Subcommittee on integrating agriculture-nutrition-culture. This subcommittee would be charged with developing an agriculture, nutrition, and culture research agenda with an equitable and intersectional lens. Also, the subcommittee will address expanded databases on heritage foods such as African heritage diet, Latin heritage diet, Indigenous diet and Asian heritage diet. Furthermore, an equitable lens shall be used to address USDA intramural/extramural programming, outreach engagement, and policies such as the HHS/USDA five-year research agenda.



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National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board

7. We recommend that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) be charged with oversight by establishing an equity officer who receives the report as well. Also, the working group would incorporate in the report the continued education of equity training and equity survey among USDA staff and grantees. As part of performance evaluation, employees (especially when entering the Senior Executive Service level) and USDA grantees will receive extra points if they complete equity training, provide a work plan on how they are incorporating equity into their work, and provide evidence of taking an equity-lens in their work.
8. USDA currently is **not producing section 10708 reports** as directed in section 14006 of the 2008 Farm Bill. These annual reports and the required information are not available to the public. Moreover, the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights is **not using the information** to conduct oversight and evaluation of national civil rights compliance and should include section 10708 data in their oversight and evaluation.
9. We recommend that USDA agencies such as NIFA to use and fund a human-centered approach in building and sustaining resourced pipeline programs to recruit and retain the representation of racial/ethnic minorities in STEM fields related to **agriculture and nutrition**. We also recommend incentivizing the nutrition and agricultural agencies to collaborate regarding policy and programming as well as increased engagement with early career exposure at high school, undergraduate, graduate students, and early career professionals as scholars, fellows, interns, and student workers. Ultimately, we encourage greater efforts to mentor and fund loan repayment programs, minority assistantships, internships, and work studies, and increases in minority postdoctoral opportunities in agriculture, nutrition, dietetics, and food sciences.
10. We recommend that the USDA create, fund, and sustain a pipeline program to foster leadership opportunities for BIPOC employees to become a part of the Senior Executive Service. USDA shall produce a progress report with stratified data by race, gender, and intersectional identities which include action steps to support the pipeline program.
11. We recommend that a Subcommittee on Nutrition within the Equity Commission by ensuring an equity lens is applied to USDA nutrition-related research and extension programs such as NIFA and HNRC. The Subcommittee shall include BIPOC-led land grant institutions with nutrition departments and consumer advocacy organizations in the



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National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board

nutrition sector. Nutritional disparities have been well documented in BIPOC communities; however, the subcommittee should also commission a study on diversifying the nutrition workforce to better understand any gaps in the academic training and career development opportunities for BIPOC students. The report should include a multi-method approach with stratified data and interviews centering on the lived experiences of BIPOC students and professionals who completed USDA-funded programs like 1890 scholars along with a video compendium. Furthermore, the Subcommittee should develop a set of recommendations to address any gaps in nutrition-funded programs, evaluation metrics, and policies. The Subcommittee will also be charged with making recommendations regarding equity in nutrition security research policy and investments in BIPOC foodways and providing recommendations to inform USDA REE agencies and the 5-year HHS/USDA research agenda.

12. We suggest that, as USDA reviews its processes for diversity, equity and inclusivity, **there may be opportunity for improvement in seating the scientific and industry reviewers who serve on review panels for the agency's competitive grant programs** (and those jointly administered with other scientific agencies, like the National Science Foundation). As people of diverse backgrounds bring new ideas and perspectives to all discourse, the process by which research proposals are reviewed and selected for funding may only be enriched by building in a range of voices. Perhaps tracking and periodically reporting on the composition of review panels (while, of course, maintaining the confidentiality of panelists) would serve as a way to measure any need for action in this area. Recognizing that most are volunteers, this may entail greater effort at soliciting reviewers and panel managers who may not currently feel invited or encouraged to participate in funding programs.

While not directly part of REE activities, we encourage resolving racial discrimination and inequality that are particularly problematic for Black farmers and ranchers and Black communities.

We respectfully request the NAREEE Advisory Board be informed of progress and challenges so that the agencies are held accountable and that we may provide additional guidance for a successful future. The NAREEE Advisory Board looks forward to hearing from you regarding our continued work and collaboration on this important issue. If you have any questions or require additional information about this request, please contact Ms. Kate Lewis, Executive Director of the NAREEE Advisory Board at 202-631-1434 or kate.lewis@usda.gov.



United States Department of Agriculture

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Edmund R. Buckner".

Dr. Edmund R. Buckner
Chair, NAREEE Advisory Board

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kenrett Jefferson-Moore".

Dr. Kenrett Jefferson-Moore
Vice Chair, NAREEE Advisory Board



Footnotes:

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National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board

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