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USDA POLICY AND PROGRAM INITIATIVES TO REDUCE BARRIERS AFFECTING ACCESS TO RESOURCES FOR OWNERS OF SMALL FARMS

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Before addressing policies and programs to reduce barriers affecting access to resources for owners of small farms, I believe we first need to identify and understand those barriers, barriers as diverse as the owners and operators of small farms themselves. Some of the diverse types of small farm operators we find include:

- Families trying to get started in full-time farming. Some have a farm background and experience, some do not. Those who do not include many new rural migrants — sometimes referred to as members of the “rural renaissance.”
- Families with one or more members employed full or part time off the farm, whose farming may be more recreation than vocation (giving the children that unique experience of helping to raise and nurture plants and animals).
- Families temporarily relying on off-farm income and employment to help generate the capital needed to enlarge their small farm operation into a full-time, commercial farm.
- Older farmers — those more than 50 or 55 years of age — whose planning horizon keeps them from making major expansions.
- Minority farmers who have sometimes been lacking in educational programs, knowledge of public and private agency lending practices, and, in general, access to other resources and assistance.

This list is certainly not complete and many small farm families may have several of the characteristics mentioned. Barriers faced are just as many and varied as the families on the farms. Broad groups of barriers might include:

- Limited access to credit.
- Limited awareness of, or time and ability to obtain, the latest technical information.
- Limited opportunity to obtain off-farm employment due to either a

lack of basic skills or the unavailability of off-farm jobs in the local economy.

- Limited opportunity to participate in federal farm income support programs (tobacco programs excepted), or receipt of limited benefits because of their small-scale program base.
- Limited opportunities to apply the latest management and marketing principles.

In whatever manner we may decide to classify the small farm family population and describe the barriers to gaining access to resources, one basic element seems common to all of the barriers. That is the availability and accessibility of the scientific knowledge base needed to improve the income producing potential of the small farm operation.

USDA's Small Farm Policy

As in the past, USDA is committed to engage and obligate, within the constraints of available resources, the full force of our energies to help secure socioeconomic security for this segment of the agricultural industry and the rural community. This commitment reaffirms the historical policy of the U.S. to foster and encourage the family farm system.

The primary missions of USDA are concerned with the production and marketing of food and fiber, rural development, conservation of natural resources, and food programs. Each of these departmental missions relates to the needs of small farm families.

To assure the nation an adequate supply of food and fiber products, USDA must:

- Be concerned with the economic health of the farm sector, including the ability of small farms to compete in the marketplace;
- Support research and development to improve productivity and reduce production costs;
- Assure the orderly functioning of agricultural markets;
- Provide broad scale protection against plant and animal pests and diseases; and
- Assure that the nation's vast natural resource base is maintained.

The Department's rural development mission consists of activities that will assure quality of life for rural people, farm and non-farm. There are now new strategy plans to assist the creation or expansion of farm-related business ventures and off-farm rural enterprises. To support the development of off-farm employment and entrepreneurship in rural communities, a greater effort will be made to ensure that government-sponsored technical and management assistance programs serve rural enterprises.

With the exception of feeding programs and farm and housing loan

programs, most of USDA's programs in research, extension, technical and cost-share assistance, marketing, and protection services are available without regard to farm size. However, the economic and social environment in which knowledge and assistance are put to use, education methods, or ability to obtain access to program information and assistance may indeed contribute to concentrating production in large-scale units.

USDA Small Farm Program Initiatives

To the extent that segments of the rural and family farm populations have unique needs, the USDA agencies have the obligation to do a better job of packaging our various programs such as technical assistance and education and information activities. We then need to unify these programs into a single thrust or Department initiative to assist the small farm segment of agriculture. This assistance would assure that population subgroups — small farm operators, minority landowners, rural youth, etc. — have access to USDA programs and activities.

To promote the departmental commitment to initiatives benefiting small farm families, creation of a USDA Small Farm Resources Development Working Group (SFRDWG) was announced by Assistant Secretary for Science and Education Orville Bentley last March 28. Members invited to join included representatives of the five Science and Education Agencies — Agricultural Research Service, Extension Service, the Cooperative State Research Service, the National Agricultural Library, and my agency — the Office of Grants and Program Systems — along with others who have expressed an interest in small farm programs.

Howard (Bud) Kerr of the Agricultural Research Service, who for the past five years has coordinated the ARS Northeast Small Farms Program, was designated as the Executive Director of the SFRDWG. I have been designated by Dr. Bentley to provide administrative oversight of the Working Group.

Very briefly, the responsibilities of the Working Group are these:

- To provide program and policy leadership and facilitate communications for USDA on small farm resources development;
- To identify existing programs and activities to determine what steps should be taken to strengthen support for small farm operators;
- To establish an orderly method for providing technical assistance and information to small farm operators;
- To recommend steps USDA should take to further address this national concern; and
- To review and, as feasible, implement the pertinent recommendations filed by the Task Force on Black Farm Ownership, the Task Force on Handicapped Farmers, the New Full-Time Family Farmer

and Rancher Development Project, and other relevant USDA studies that are deemed appropriate.

As we have noted, the ability of small farm operators to overcome barriers affecting access to resources is largely dependent on their ability to communicate with sources of information on research and technology. Among the factors that the Working Group is considering as it addresses the needs of small farm operators are these:

- Application or adaptation of existing or new technology to small scale operators, including relevant technology used outside the United States.
- Special focus on emerging opportunities, such as specialty crops, added-value crops, targeted markets, rural family recreation for profit, etc. — Packaging and delivery of information and assistance by way of new technological delivery systems.
- Allocation of time as a critical small farm family resource.
- Natural resource husbandry.
- Special emphasis on human resource development.
- Applications of alternative farming methods.

USDA's Science and Education agencies have a record of assisting small-scale farm operations. In 1976 the House Agriculture Committee issued a directive for USDA to redirect certain efforts to take into consideration small farms programs. In 1979 the executive budget set aside \$3 million for small farms research.

The Agricultural Research Service has an ongoing small farm research project at Booneville, Arkansas, which began in 1981. Currently, the budget for small farms research at this location and elsewhere totals \$4 million. The Extension Service supports specific projects to develop resource materials and educational programs for small farm operators.

A program to address the black farmer land loss issue, the Land Ownership Information Project, has been funded through North Carolina. Promotion and development of catfish farming has been successfully demonstrated in Texas.

The National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, Maryland, has a collection of publications for small farms. These include a bibliography published in July listing 173 citations on small farms, family, and part-time farming in the United States from 1982 to 1984.

Another reference — one that has been very popular — is the USDA Miscellaneous Publication No. 1422, "Research for Small Farms: Proceedings of the Special Symposium," held in November 1981 in Beltsville, Maryland. It is for sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, for \$7.50 a copy.

Other agencies in the Department have carried out a variety of

initiatives, such as demonstration projects to develop marketing cooperatives and vegetable marketing information systems, soil and water conservation and management, and distribution of timely information on a variety of topics for improving management of small farms.

The Department recognizes that much remains to be done. While the SFRDWG has functioned only a few months, substantial progress has been achieved. It is too soon to count our accomplishments. But be assured, you will hear, see, and be able to count them in the future.