



## FOOD AND AGRICULTURE REGIONAL MEMBER POLICY COMMITTEE

### THIRD ANNUAL FORUM WITH THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Friday, April 12, 2024  
10:00 am to noon

U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Jamie L. Whitten Building  
1400 Jefferson Drive SW,  
Washington DC 20004

### MEETING NOTES

#### INTRODUCTIONS

*Alex Córdova, Deputy Director, Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships,  
Office of External and Intergovernmental Affairs, USDA*

*Fairfax Councilmember Jon Stehle, Food and Agriculture Regional Member Policy  
Committee (FARM), Chair*

*DC Councilmember Zachary Parker, FARM Vice Chair*

*Kevin Atticks, Secretary, Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA)*

*Charles Green, Deputy Commissioner, Virginia Department of Agriculture and  
Consumer Services (VDACs)*

*Caroline Howe, Food Policy Director, District of Columbia Office of Planning*

Chair Jon Stehle and Deputy Director of the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, Alex Cordova provided a brief welcome on behalf of the FARM Committee and USDA. They reemphasized the importance of partnership and collaboration for the success of their work.

Vice Chair Zachary Parker welcomed attendees and introduced Secretary Kevin Atticks and other invited speakers to provide remarks.

Secretary Atticks shared Maryland's Governor Moore's commitment to food access, strengthening the local food and agricultural economy, and to bolstering small-family farms as drivers of resilience and economic development.

Deputy Commissioner Charles Green from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACs) remarked on the close alignment of the agency's priorities with the FARM Committee and the opportunities to strengthen the food system in the state and larger region. He

shared that 37% of principal farm operators in the state are female and that 8% of Virginia producers are selling directly to consumers. For VDACS, that represents an opportunity to connect with producers that have been missed by past engagement efforts and get more producers into local marketing channels.

Caroline Howe, the District of Columbia's Food Policy Director, focused her remarks on the inequities in our local food system, including racial inequities in rates of food insecurity (52% of Hispanic and 47% of Black residents compared to 14% of White residents experience food insecurity in the District). She highlighted the District's efforts to expand access to: more adequate SNAP benefit levels; SummerEBT; school meals; locally grown foods through institutional values-based procurement; and food entrepreneurship and marketing opportunities.

COG's Executive Director, Clark Mercer, reflected on the region's agricultural history and the diversity in our regional food system. Mercer encouraged USDA to consider working with the non-profit community and regional groups, like COG, to help get important resources out to producers working in our communities.

#### **USDA WELCOME: THIRD ANNUAL COG FARM COMMITTEE FORUM WITH THE USDA**

*Rudy Soto, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of External and Intergovernmental Affairs, USDA*

Deputy Assistant Secretary Soto provided a formal welcome to USDA and a high-level overview of its mission areas, agencies, priorities, and footprint in the Metropolitan Washington region. The team at the Office of External and Intergovernmental Affairs serves as the front door of the agency and supports the needs of community members in accessing the staff, resources, and services of USDA.

#### **FEDERAL UPDATES AND INFORMATION ON FOOD SECURITY AND FARMING IN METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON**

*Dr. Patty Bennett, Regional Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), Mid-Atlantic Region, USDA*

*Joseph Parsons, Acting Administrator, National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), USDA*  
*Zachary Parker, FARM Vice-Chair*

Dr. Patty Bennett shared updates on key federal programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Services, including SNAP, Summer EBT, WIC, school meals, and farmers market nutrition programs.

Summer Programs: Recognizing the challenges that surfaced during the pandemic and long-standing barriers to summer meal participation, USDA launched two new summer meal programs this year. SUN Meals To-Go allows families to pick up several meals at one time and is available in rural areas in Maryland and Virginia. SUN Bucks provides \$120 in grocery benefits for Free and Reduced-Price Meal (FARMs)-eligible students over the course of the summer through an EBT card. Dr. Bennett commended partners in the region for their willingness and commitment to working across agencies, on a short timeline, to launch the program. As a result of this collaboration, approximately 1.3 million children in our area will receive benefits, with 164 million dollars going to them collectively.

Update on pending school meals rule: USDA is trying to better address the nutrition needs of children through increasing access to fruits and vegetables and culturally relevant foods and decreasing added sugars; changes will be slowly phased in. The rule was released on April 24th, and

can be viewed here: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-042524>.

WIC Program: WIC is fully funded this year. Secretary Vilsack announced an updated WIC package earlier in the week which offers more choices and flexibility. WIC updates are more user-friendly and offer more choices for serving packages. Only about 50% of eligible women and children use WIC; it is essential to support women and children to enroll.

SNAP: Since the pandemic there was a slight decrease in VA and DC in enrollment, and MD had a 4% increase.

Vice Chair Parker highlighted DC's Give SNAP a Raise bill and the need for increased federal support to address the gap between SNAP recipients' benefits and increased costs of food.

The discussion covered a wide range of topics, from supporting states providing supplemental SNAP benefits, SNAP acceptance on military commissaries, potential National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) funding opportunities to match new food and nutrition benefit programs and supplements, and congressional action to address benefit level adequacy.

Acting Administrator Joseph Parsons from the NASS, gave an overview of some of the new information included in the February release of data from the 2022 Census of Agriculture. He reported a decrease in the number of farms in the United States, down 6.9% from 2017, while the average farm size increased by 5 percent. In the U.S., farms account for 39% of all land, totaling 880.1 million acres. Notably, farm production expenses were up across the board in 2022—it is uncommon to see increases in all categories and means it is becoming more expensive to farm. Forthcoming NASS products include profiles for states and counties and congressional district profiles.

Data products are available here:

<https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/index.php>

Questions covered response rates across the nation and the path to get District farms counted. Acting Administration Parsons mentioned they piloted a count of urban farms but are currently unfunded to publish the results; COG's Lindsay Smith commented that a past USDA administrator encouraged exploring a special study to include the District's urban farms. Chair Stehle encouraged leveraging USDA's learning agenda to address some of the data needs the group discussed.

## **FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION: RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP RESILIENT AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS**

*Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation, USDA*

*Dr. Melissa R. Bailey, Associate Administrator, Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), USDA*

*Jon Stehle, FARM Chair*

Under Secretary Robert Bonnie provided an overview of the diverse programming and resources under his agency and provided updates on key federal investments and programs supporting resilient and climate-friendly food systems in Metropolitan Washington related to agriculture, conservation efforts, and local food aggregation, distribution, and marketing.

USDA Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Director Brian V. Guse and Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) Associate Administrator Dr. Melissa R. Bailey provided insights into key

federal investments and programs supporting resilient food systems in metropolitan Washington.

Guse highlighted competitive grants for urban farms and emphasized how federal farm programs aim to eliminate barriers for urban agricultural producers. Mr. Guse also shared that the office is beginning work on a nationwide scan of the most and least supportive municipal policies, practices, and ordinances to facilitate urban food production.

Dr. Bailey shared that after the pandemic her agency, AMS, heard from producers that they needed to right size infrastructure and equipment in the middle of the supply chain and that producers needed more technical and financial assistance. She highlighted several of the 60+ programs focused on food system transformation in AMS's portfolio, including the Local Food Purchasing Cooperative Agreement and programs to support producers transitioning to organic production.

She also shared a recently released resource guide on local and regional food systems:  
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/sites/default/files/LocalandRegionalFoodSystemResourceGuide.pdf>

Questions from participants included how USDA is working to address the time and capacity constraints farmers face in accessing USDA resources while farming and often working another job. Director Guse shared new outreach models USDA has implemented, including hosting USDA representatives for office hours on-site at urban farms.

#### **BRIEF MEMBER UPDATES AND ADJOURN FOR INFORMAL NETWORKING**

*Jon Stehle, FARM Chair*

The meeting wrapped up with a conversation regarding next steps for FARM, which include continual collaboration and information sharing as well as implementing FARM's Strategic Plan.

FARM and FARM work group members had the opportunity to continue informal discussion with USDA staff at the close of the meeting.