



May 3, 2024

Rudy Soto
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Office of External and Intergovernmental Affairs
U.S Department of Agriculture
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Soto:

On behalf of the [Food and Regional Agriculture Member Policy Committee \(FARM\)](#) of the [Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments \(COG\)](#), we thank you and your colleagues at the USDA for hosting FARM's 3rd Annual Forum at headquarters on April 12th.

The event was a huge success, and we received positive feedback from our participating committee members and state partners.

We appreciate the opportunity to exchange information with leaders such as yourself, and the time your team spent with us to thoughtfully develop the agenda and host the forum. We're also grateful for the number of USDA staff from multiple offices who lent their time and expertise,

As we discussed last month, we are committed to strengthening our relationship with USDA in mission-aligned ways to address food insecurity, support producers, and increase food system resilience.

To that end, we propose working with your team to coordinate a follow-up conversation(s) to identify strategic opportunities for increased collaboration and what resources can collectively be brought to implementation.

In preparation for this, below are some *outcomes* from the future collaboration we propose. We have suggested concrete actions to achieve these. Not all are included here, but we would be pleased to also share these for your consideration. Finally, we see opportunities to reach several of these outcomes around the end of the calendar year.

1. *Extend the reach of USDA's food and nutrition programs in our region.*

A high number of our residents are food insecure. We know that much of what is needed to institutionalize key lessons from the pandemic, like the positive impact of adequate funding for critical safety net programs, relies on Congress.

For your information, FARM's letter outlining our Farm Bill priorities will be sent to House and Senate leaders and our region's Congressional delegation first thing Monday. We will share a copy with you then.¹

¹ FARM does outreach to our state's elected leaders on select, proposed measures to increase food security and [also provides information on local policies to do the same](#).

2. *Address farmland loss and increase farmland access.*

Given the on-going and significant loss of farmland in our region and the country, we're interested in how USDA may be thinking about confronting this challenge in new ways.

In the past, increases in farm productivity may have alleviated *some* concern about farmland loss, however, water-related issues, climate change, and supporting new generations of farmers necessitate stabilizing farmland and increasing access to it. It's important to increase food production and distribution in our region to increase resiliency and as matters of regional and national security.

As a foundation for collaborative action, could USDA review COG's [2019 What Our Region Grows report](#) for comment as we begin scoping our next report? (The next report will include a more expansive look at the region's supply chain and the lifecycle of food.)

3. *Connect USDA's urban agriculture expertise and resources to support the development of this fast-evolving sector in our region.*

As a first next step, we have invited Brian Guse, Director of USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (UAIP), to speak at FARM's next meeting on June 14th.

This will be a terrific opportunity to share more about OUAIP's resources, including its work to identify supportive changes to municipal policies and codes. We will provide an update after this virtual only, public meeting.

4. *Streamline USDA application requirements and develop common applications.*

We appreciate USDA's demonstrated commitment to increasing outreach to farmers and communities. This came through clearly in the forum.

We must all continue to build awareness, trust, capacity, and partnerships to improve access to USDA financing and funding for our producers. As an immediate next step, COG will help convene a meeting in suburban Maryland that USDA staff and a FARM Work Group member discussed at the forum.

Notwithstanding, basic barriers to entry must be lowered to advance farm viability and equity.

5. *Explore how COG's and USDA's annual forum model can serve as a template to support regional food systems development across the country.*

Given the diversity of local, state, and regional partners convened by councils of government, and other associations of local elected officials, our annual forum model could serve as a template for deepening USDA's reach and impact further.

At the forum, we discussed a potential opportunity to test replicating this approach in another part of the country. We will reach out to your team directly to follow-up.

6. *Support USDA's Learning Agenda.*

We believe USDA's agenda can be leveraged further to bring federal focus to unique local and regional opportunities and challenges, and to raise awareness among local policymakers and other stakeholders about USDA's priorities.

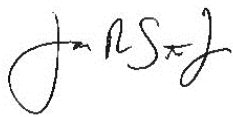
We see synergy between our proposed collaborative outcomes and several priority questions in USDA's learning agenda. We look forward to sharing more information on this.

Please share our appreciation and this letter with all your colleagues at USDA who contributed to the success of the forum.

Don't hesitate to contact Lindsay Smith, COG's Regional Food Systems Planner at (202) 962-3309 or lsmith@mwcog.org and Regional Food Systems Consultant Sydney Daigle at sydney.daigle@gmail.com with for any questions or comments.

Thank you again for hosting such a dynamic and productive event. We look forward to your feedback on our proposed objectives and to speaking again soon.

Sincerely,



Jon Stehle
Chair, FARM Committee
Councilmember
City of Fairfax, Virginia



Zachary Parker
Vice Chair, FARM Committee
Councilmember
District of Columbia



Andrew Friedson
Vice Chair, FARM Committee
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C: Heather Garcia, Deputy Director, Office of External and Intergovernmental Affairs
Alex Córdoba, Deputy Director, Center for Faith Based & Neighborhood Partnerships, Office of External and Intergovernmental Affairs
Brian Guse, Director, Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production
Secretary Kevin Atticks, Maryland Department of Agriculture
Deputy Commissioner Charles Green, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Food Policy Director, Caroline Howe, District of Columbia
FARM Committee Members and Meeting Attendees
Monica Beyrouti Nuñez, Government Relations Manager, COG
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