

Testimony of Terry Cosby
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Introduction

Chairwoman Plaskett, Ranking Member Baird, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss USDA's work to advance and expand support for urban agriculture. USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (the Office or OUAIP) is housed within the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), but NRCS works collaboratively across the Department to implement our responsibilities as a collaborative effort with the many USDA agencies and offices that have missions and programs that support urban producers and innovative production.

The overview of the Office's accomplishments and plans that I will share with you today provides only a high-level lens into the actions we are taking. The benefits are realized by the individuals who receive service, perhaps for the first time, that enable them to begin, expand, or enhance food production in their local community. Through the work of this Office and of urban agriculture efforts across the Department, USDA strives to uplift communities that have been previously overlooked and lacked access to many USDA resources. I know first-hand from my experiences in Cleveland, Ohio, that promoting urban agriculture can inspire youth to go to college to specialize in agricultural fields; create opportunities for entrepreneurs to start up small businesses and create jobs; provide fresh, healthy foods to communities in need; and improve the quality of life for all residents by reclaiming abandoned open spaces.

The Office coordinates urban agriculture efforts across USDA through an internal advisory committee. The internal advisory committee allows employees from all USDA agencies to engage directly on matters important to urban agriculture and innovative production and to guide the work of the Office. Members work collaboratively on outreach products, training efforts, funding announcements, project selections, metrics to measure success, and supported the

selection of the new director for the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production. The Office also holds regular discussion with other Federal agencies, like Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency, to discuss opportunities for collaboration.

Funding

The 2018 Farm Bill included an authorization of appropriations for each of Fiscal Years (FY) 2019 through 2023 of \$25 million a year to carry out the responsibilities of the Office and the Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Advisory Committee. In FY20 Congress provided an appropriation of \$5 million for this work, then \$7 million in FY21, and \$8.5 million in FY22. Last year, approximately 90% of the Office's appropriated funding went directly to the public via the Office's two funding opportunities: Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (UAIP) competitive grants, which expand opportunities for urban and innovative production in areas lacking access to fresh healthy food, and Composting and Food Waste Reduction (CFWR) cooperative agreements, which funds local governments pilot projects to promote composting and food waste reduction.

USDA has also used appropriated funds to support the establishment of the Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Federal Advisory Committee and the pilot Urban County Committees that are being established through the Farm Service Agency's County Committee authorities. In addition, the Office is developing outreach materials to help local producers and local staff better understand USDA programs that can assist urban and innovative producers, and we are also developing internal training for USDA staff to prepare them to work with these new producers.

Federal Advisory Committee

The inaugural meeting of the Federal Advisory Committee recently took place with a virtual meeting on March 23rd and 24th. We introduced the new committee members to the public and provided the public an opportunity to provide feedback to the committee. This public feedback will be instrumental in shaping USDA's continued investment and support for urban agriculture. In all we had 1,240 persons register to attend the session and 132 registered to provide feedback

to the committee during the public forum. This public feedback, in addition to the experiences of the committee members, will help form USDA's future priorities for the Office.

Urban County Committees

For nearly 100 years, county committees have provided a direct link between the farm community and USDA, allowing grassroots input and local administration of USDA programs. Each year, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) holds elections where local farmers can run for, or vote for, county committee membership. County committee members have a say in what kinds of FSA programs their county will offer, ensuring local FSA agricultural programs serve the unique needs of local producers. As of March 7th, the Office and FSA have established 11 Urban County Committees (UCOC) in Albuquerque, NM; Atlanta, GA; Cleveland, OH; Dallas, TX; Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN; New Orleans, LA; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Portland, OR; Richmond, VA; and St. Louis, MO.

These UCOCs will focus exclusively on urban production and will provide feedback on how USDA programs can encourage and promote urban, indoor, and other emerging agricultural production practices in the local area. Additionally, UCOCs may address issues such as food access, community engagement, support of local activities to promote and encourage community compost and food waste reduction.

The UCOC locations were selected based on a number of factors, including levels of economic distress, diversity, proximity to tribal nations, the number of students receiving free or reduced-price school lunch, as well the number of farm-to-table projects, urban farms, community and residential gardens, and green infrastructure projects within metropolitan and suburban areas.

Urban Service Centers

To demonstrate USDA's commitment to serving urban and innovative producers, FSA and NRCS have jointly committed to opening brick and mortar urban service centers and having a mobile presence in each city selected for the pilot program. FSA and NRCS are working with local stakeholders and local USDA staff to identify locations for service centers within each city that will be accessible and welcoming to local urban and innovative producers. These urban

service centers will offer urban and innovative producers the full suite of applicable USDA programs and services, including farm loans and conservation program assistance, as well as serving as a way to connect urban and innovative producers to the local and regional market initiatives that Under Secretary Moffit discussed earlier. FSA and NRCS anticipate having staff on the ground in all locations serving urban and innovative producers in the fall of 2022.

While our teams will be working to build out physical urban service centers in the identified cities, we are working with all of our states to ensure that field staff are trained and committed to reaching out to and serving urban producers and communities and connecting them to local and regional market opportunities. This continued effort will include training and additional resources to ensure that urban outreach and service is available and expanded in every state across the country.

Community Based Organizations

To support the launch of these urban service centers, FSA and NRCS are developing a strategy to engage trusted community based organizations (CBOs) in each location to conduct outreach and raise awareness of USDA services available to urban producers. CBOs will be critical for building trust to ensure that local urban and innovative producers feel comfortable providing the personal information required to enroll in USDA programs. The arrangements with CBOs in each city will be modeled on the role of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in the Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative. In Cleveland, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives encouraged local youth to become trained to install NRCS hoop houses, leading to a group of local high school students forming a business installing hoop houses. This provided enough income to allow some of these young people to attend college, which they otherwise could not afford. Similar community engagement and job training opportunities will be a priority for CBOs engaged to work in each city getting an urban service center.

Competitive Grants – Implementation and Planning Projects:

The Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (UAIP) competitive grants program supports a wide range of activities through two types of grant types – Planning and Implementation. Eligible activities include operating community gardens and nonprofit farms, increasing food

production and access in economically distressed communities, providing job training and education, and developing business plans and zoning. Priority was given to projects with positive impact in areas with limited access to healthy affordable food as listed in the USDA Food Access Research Atlas. In FY20 and FY21, NRCS made 31 awards totaling just over \$7.9 million to recipients across the country.

Cooperative Agreements – Community Compost and Food Waste Reduction (CFWR) Pilot:

In FY20 and FY21, NRCS made 37 awards totaling just over \$3 million to local governments to develop and test strategies for planning and implementing municipal compost plans and food waste reduction efforts. Priority was given to projects that anticipate or demonstrate economic benefits, incorporate plans to make compost easily accessible to farmers, including community gardeners, integrate other food waste strategies, including food recovery efforts, and collaborate with multiple partners.

We will continue to build on these investments and hope to soon announce the availability of UAIP competitive grants and CFWR cooperative agreements for FY22, totaling approximately \$6 million in available funds.

Outreach Activities

Although each individual USDA agency is working to conduct outreach for their programs that are available to urban producers, the Office is collaborating with our USDA agencies to create an outreach toolkit, which will be an efficient mechanism for customers and stakeholders to identify resources and services available across USDA. We anticipate it will be released later this year after we ensure it is well-vetted. Our goal is for this to be a product that builds over time as we learn more of what the urban and innovative customers need. In addition, we are working to expand our presence on social media to ensure we reach communities that are not connected to our traditional outreach efforts. The UCOC, described above, will also be helpful in amplifying services available to their communities. This Office is working to provide training across USDA as well as within each of our agencies to improve our employee's knowledge about the needs of urban customer.

Organic

We are also working to ensure the support available through USDA programs and services for organic production and organic transition, including conservation assistance, is available for urban producers. NRCS offers support for organic and transitioning producers through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). NRCS has continued to invest in targeted improvements to financial and technical assistance to better serve organic producers, including actively recruiting more Technical Service providers (TSPs), improving outreach efforts, and updating our conservation practice standards and payments to better serve organic producers. The demand for conservation assistance to support organic and transitioning producers exists in both rural and urban communities and we are continuing to tailor these tools and programs to expand investments in organic conservation. We are also expanding training and support for NRCS field staff, and this will include within urban communities, to support organic and transitioning producers.

Removing Barriers and Other Efforts to Improve Services

Within NRCS, we are undergoing a thorough review of all our guidance and technical documents, practice standards, and payment rates to ensure they do not present barriers to participation for urban and small-scale producers. We also want to ensure the payment rates are reflective of the costs of producing food in urban locations. For example, we are looking at the units of measurement within our practice scenarios, features of conservation practices when working on smaller scales, and labor and transport issues that appropriately represent producer costs. We have already undertaken adjustments to high and low tunnel standards and are looking now at practices needed to improve soil health, address storm water runoff, water conservation, and pollinator habitat in urban communities.

Conclusion

USDA is committed to advancing urban agriculture in communities across the country and the OUIAP will continue to play a critical role in working across USDA to provide financial assistance to individual producers, invest in community projects, support agricultural education, spur innovation, and give urban producers a voice in USDA at both the local and national levels.

We will ensure that the continued growth of the Office and urban agriculture investments at USDA is driven by community and public input, including through the feedback received at the inaugural Federal Advisory Committee meeting and the future work of the committee.

These actions are a significant step forward, however we know there is more work to be done to ensure we can build trust and provide quality service in the urban communities we are working to serve. USDA is committed to providing tangible results for urban and innovation agriculture through partnerships with communities, stakeholders, and individuals that are made possible through the authorities provided to the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production and through a variety of other Farm Bill programs.