

**Chairman Andy Harris, M.D.**  
**Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies**  
**Subcommittee**  
**Farm Production and Conservation FY25 Budget Hearing**  
**Opening Statement**  
**May 1, 2024**

Thank you all for being here today to discuss the Farm Production and Conservation fiscal year 2025 budget request and priorities for the upcoming year. I'd like to welcome and introduce today's witnesses. Robert Bonnie is the Under Secretary for the Farm Production and Conservation mission area at USDA. While we will only hear testimony from Under Secretary Bonnie, I want to thank the Farm Service Agency Administrator Ducheneaux, Risk Management Agency Administrator Bunger, and Natural Resources and Conservation Service Chief Cosby for being here to answer questions from the Subcommittee Members. I am hopeful we can have an informative and productive conversation.

In the Fiscal Year 2025 President's Budget, the FPAC mission area requested a total of \$2.63 billion, a \$156 million or 6.3% increase over enacted levels.

The agencies under FPAC – the Farm Service Agency, Risk Management Agency, and Natural Resource Conservation Service – are the Department of Agriculture's primary customer-service oriented agencies for producers.

With offices located in nearly every county in America, the field staff for FSA and NRCS are tasked with delivering critical farm, loan, and conservation programs directly to farmers. RMA oversees the Federal Crop Insurance Program, one of the most important risk management tools available to producers. Each year, farmers in Maryland depend on your agencies to deliver these programs in a manner that is timely, effective, and fair.

I appreciate the work of the thousands of on-the-ground county and regional office staff working directly with producers to administer farm programs. However, I am concerned about decisions being made here in Washington D.C. at the top of these agencies. Rather than focusing on the agencies' respective core missions, this Administration's social and political agenda continues to be injected into programs under your jurisdiction.

On disaster assistance, USDA decided – without direction from Congress – to waive the crop insurance premiums only for “socially disadvantaged” farmers under the 2022 Emergency Relief Program. It should go without saying – when natural disasters strike, Mother Nature doesn't discriminate based on a farmer's race or gender. Neither should our federal disaster response.

As a result of USDA basing disaster assistance on factors such as race and gender, USDA is once again being sued by farmers in federal court for violating the Equal Protection Clause under the Constitution.

Under the Biden Administration, USDA has also spent millions of taxpayer dollars to support NRCS equity agreements, FSA has cancelled farm loans for select “distressed” borrowers, and the Department has employed third-party entities to disburse payments to any producer who claims he or she has been discriminated against.

Each of these initiatives departs from the agencies' core missions of delivering Farm Bill programs and disaster assistance in a fair and non-partisan manner.

As you know, the average age of a U.S. farmer has risen to 58. Less than 2% of the population chooses to go into farming or ranching as their occupation. Ninety-seven percent of farms are family farms, and 12 percent of farms are responsible for over 80 percent of our

agricultural production. We are blessed in this country that we can enjoy the fruits of their labor with a safe and abundant food supply. We can also have other careers, thanks to the American farmer. But being a producer is a minority occupation in this country so USDA should be focused on helping *all* producers because this country depends on all producers – regardless of race, gender, big, small, organic, conventional – all farmers feed America. That is why so many find it frustrating when this Administration is picking and choosing winners and losers when we need all producers to be successful unless we want to depend on China and other countries for our food.

I am also concerned about the use of the Commodity Credit Corporation as a slush fund to create new, unauthorized programs. Under the agencies here today, the \$3.5 billion spent on Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities stands out as an egregious misuse of the CCC. It is the role of the legislative branch to enact laws that establish new programs, not the executive branch to use the CCC to fund pet projects.

I expect to hear about staffing challenges across each of the agencies today. So, I want to say upfront, if staff shortages are a problem, it stands to reason that the current staff should be solely focused on the core mission of serving farmers instead of being asked to implement unauthorized programs under the CCC or to advance the Administration's political agenda.

In other words, USDA should simply carry out programs authorized by Congress and in a manner intended by Congress.

Once again, thank you all for being here today and I look forward to today's discussion.