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USDA Ombudsperson Office Expands to Help Women and Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers Resolve Access Issues to USDA Programs

WASHINGTON, Jan. 5, 2016 - The U.S. Department of Agriculture today announced that the Office of the Ombudsperson is helping women and Hispanic farmers and ranchers with accessing Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Rural Development (RD) programs. The Ombudsperson seeks a fair process for everyone involved and helps USDA identify and address issues relating to program access by women and Hispanic producers, focused strategically on FSA, NRCS, and RD programs in California, Missouri, New Mexico and Texas.

“I strongly support this office and its functions in ensuring civil rights at USDA and continuing to improve service delivery to our stakeholders,” said Vilsack. “The Ombudsperson is another avenue for producers to highlight their shared concerns, while also allowing key issues to be brought to USDA’s leaders as early as possible and to help identify solutions to these shared concerns.”

The office was created as part of the *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* settlement to serve Native American farmers and ranchers before directing efforts to serve women and Hispanic farmers. The Ombudsperson serves as an independent, neutral, confidential and informal resource and advocates within USDA for changes when the process, supporting information and data demonstrate a need. However, the Ombudsperson will not advocate for individuals, groups or entities or take sides in an issue or advocate for a particular outcome.

During his tenure, Secretary Vilsack built a new era for civil rights at USDA to ensure that all customers and employees are treated fairly, no matter their race, color, sex, national origin, religion, disability, or age and consistently supported efficient delivery and coordination across all of USDA’s programs. The Ombudsperson:

- listens to concerns as a confidential neutral person with no agenda or bias;
- facilitates early calls with USDA program staff and managers;
- makes the connections with the right individuals who can answer the questions or address the concerns raised;
- shares systemic issues with the USDA managers and senior leaders; and
- helps identify recommendations on shared concerns.

More information about the Office of the Ombudsperson is available at www.usda.gov/ombudsperson. The Ombudsperson, Joanne Dea, can be reached by phone at (202) 205-1000 or via email at ombudsperson@usda.gov.

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