Adams, Booker, Strickland, McGovern Introduce Bicameral Legislation to Ensure Equitable Access to **USDA Programs for Small Farms**

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Hello Sarah,

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (June 8, 2023) – Congresswoman Alma Adams (NC-12), U.S. Senator Cory Booker (D-N.J.) and U.S. Representatives Marilyn Strickland (WA-10), and Jim McGovern (MA-02) introduced the bicameral Office of Small Farms Establishment Act, legislation to create a new Office of Small Farms at the US Department of Agriculture. The Office would directly serve small farmers with grants and technical assistance and ensure that all USDA programs are designed to meet the needs of small farmers.

Small acreage farms—those with fewer than 180 acres—make up 70 percent of all farms in the US and are vital to rural economic growth, food security, and local food supply chains. They also produce more value per acre than large farms. Despite their substantial contributions to the U.S. economy, they only receive 12 percent of federal payments to farms. USDA programs should serve all farmers equally, but they often favor large-scale operations. This can be traced to staff shortages, program design, and resource gaps that disadvantage small farms.

For instance, only 7 percent of small farms currently utilize crop insurance, demonstrating the program's limitations for these operations. Additionally, programs such as the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) fail to account for the higher prices small farms receive for selling directly to consumers or producing specialized products. These barriers, along with a lack of financial resources and limited time, make it difficult for farms conducting smaller-acreage operations to access essential USDA support.

To address these issues and ensure equitable access to USDA programs for small farms, the *Office of Small Farms Establishment Act* proposes the creation of an Office of Small Farms within the USDA. This office would serve as a central hub for small farms, ranches, and forest operations, providing them with comprehensive support and enabling them to benefit from available USDA programs. The Office would issue grants to small farmers, provide technical assistance, recommend improvements to service delivery to small farmers in programs throughout the USDA, and provide a hotline for farmers to report issues with accessing USDA programs. This proposal would make USDA programs more accessible and beneficial to small farms, which would help the Department fulfill its mission, help small farmers thrive, and strengthen the food system for everyone.

"Almost 2 million farms and ranches in the United States are operated by small family farmers," **said Representative Adams, a senior member of the House Agriculture Committee.** "The Office of Small Farms Establishment Act would empower these famers with the tools they need to make the most of USDA's grant and assistance programs. Small family farms often lack the resources to apply for the very programs that could help them the most, and historically underserved farmers are more likely to operate their farms at a smaller scale. I'm proud to join my colleagues in sponsoring the Office of Small Farms Establishment Act to preserve our shrinking family farmland, and preserve our sources of food, nourishment, and agriculture far into the future. All North Carolina farmers – rural and urban; small, medium, and large – deserve better than a one-size-fitsall approach."

"Small farms are the heart and soul of our agricultural landscape, contributing to our economy, food security, and the resilience of our local food supply chains," **said Senator Booker**. "It's time we do more to ensure that all farmers, regardless of the size of their farms, have equitable access to the support they need to flourish. This bill will create an office dedicated to serving the needs of small farmers and helping them access USDA services including loans, technical assistance, and critical conservation programs. We must build a future where even the smallest farm has equal opportunities to succeed and contribute to a sustainable and thriving food system." "Nearly 90% of all farms in Washington state and the vast majority of farms in the U.S. are operated by small, family farmers, but too often they lack the operational support to take full advantage of the grants and assistance programs offered by USDA," **said Representative Strickland**. "The *Office of Small Farms Establishment Act* would ensure the resilience of the country's food systems, invest in minority-owned farms that are often left behind, and recognize the challenges facing small farms today."

"Massachusetts is home to over 7,000 farms—and small farms are our agricultural backbone," **said Representative McGovern.** "Every farm ought to have access to the same resources and support no matter their scale. The Office of Small Farms would partner closely with small farmers to help them learn about USDA programs and apply for grants. When every farm is given what they need to succeed, we grow closer to building more resilient local food systems for all Americans."

Key functions of the Office of Small Farms would include assessing the specific needs of small operations, evaluating the effectiveness of the USDA at serving small farms, and recommending improvements to USDA program policies, design, and delivery. The office would also facilitate direct technical assistance and grants of up to \$25,000 for equipment, uninsured losses, business planning assistance, conservation practice adoption, and down payments for land. In addition, an anonymous hotline would be established to enable smallscale operations to report challenges they face in accessing USDA assistance.

The legislation proposes an annual budget of \$25 million to carry out these essential functions, with \$15 million allocated for the operation of the Office and \$10 million dedicated to technical assistance and grants for small-scale operations.

"Small farms play an outsized role in increasing the resilience of our food systems and our nation's food security, but they do not always receive the support they need from the federal government," **said Tim Fink, Policy Director for American Farmland Trust**. "This bill is about ensuring equitable access to the full range of essential support that Congress and USDA already provide to producers through Farm Bill programs. An Office of Small Farms would empower USDA to better examine its programs and delivery systems through the lens of those too often left out. We applaud Senator Booker and Representatives Strickland, Adams, and McGovern for working to level the playing field and ensure that this critical taxpayer support reaches all farmers."

"Small farms are the drivers of our rural economy," **said Darin Von Ruden, Wisconsin Farmers Union President and 50 cow organic dairy farmer**. "Wisconsin's local and regional supply chains contribute greatly to US food security. Small-scale farms face unique pressures and stressors trying to compete in this consolidated industry. This bill would provide the much needed support to help the USDA achieve their goal of providing the essential support to helping producers of all sizes succeed."

"It's high-time that small farms have the same access to USDA funding and programs as their large-scale counterparts," **said Hannah Tremblay, Farm Aid's Policy & Advocacy Manager**. "Farm Aid strongly endorses the Office of Small Farms Establishment Act of 2023, which would enable a wider range of producers access to USDA research, direct technical assistance, and resources. Small, family-run farms are the backbone of rural America and an essential component of our food system; they deserve to be supported in the same way as large-scale, industrial agriculture and this bill is a good first step in that direction."

The list of endorsing organizations can be found here.

The full text of the bill can be found here.

Congresswoman Alma S. Adams, Ph.D. represents North Carolina's 12th Congressional District (Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, Cabarrus County) and serves on the House Committee on Agriculture and the House Committee on Education & the Workforce, where she serves as ranking member of the Workforce Protections Subcommittee. In 2015, she founded the Adams Hunger Initiative to address food insecurity across Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, and the 12th Congressional District.





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