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**OVER 80 ORGANIZATIONS URGE CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR NRCS
CONSERVATION EQUITY AGREEMENTS IN FY25 APPROPRIATIONS**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, April 10, 2024

Today, Rural Coalition, in partnership with 84 equity and conservation-focused organizations, sent a [joint letter](#) to leaders of the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Agriculture urging Congressional support for Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation equity agreements in FY 2025 Agriculture Appropriations.

On March 9th, 2024, Congress passed funding for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other agencies via H.R. 4366, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024. Language included in the bill's Joint Explanatory Statement specifically requested that NRCS not use Conservation Operations (CO) funding for Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements.

Rural Coalition, National Wildlife Federation and our many partners and allies across the United States oppose the inclusion of this language and request that Fiscal Year 2025 appropriations bills or congressional directives do not include any language that restricts or excludes funding for conservation equity agreements.

“Conservation equity agreements help ensure access to technical assistance for all producers, helping to build resilient communities, secure our food supply and ensure wildlife thrive,” said Lekha Knuffman, Senior Specialist Agriculture Program, National Wildlife Federation. These agreements allow NRCS to partner with community-based organizations to reach producers and land stewards who are not historically served by USDA, ensuring fair access to NRCS opportunities, and providing significant benefits to local natural resource concerns, communities, and underserved farmers and ranchers.

NRCS programs are in high demand from farmers, ranchers, and private landowners across the country but are not always accessible to those who want to participate due to limited funding and existing barriers for historically underserved individuals, including Veteran, Beginning, Socially

Disadvantaged, and Limited Resource farmers and ranchers.¹ Through cooperative agreements, NCRS developed an innovative solution to address this problem by enabling locally led partnerships to reach underserved customers.

“These cooperative equity agreements expand access to NRCS opportunities for producers that are repeatedly left out of our food and agriculture systems. The language included in the Joint Explanatory statement represents yet another attempt to exclude historically underserved producers,” reflected Willard Tillman, Executive Director of Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project, Inc. “Historically underserved farmers and ranchers are vital to the health and resilience of our rural communities and rural economies and play a critical role in the U.S. food and agriculture system. Their full inclusion benefits us all in the end.”

According to USDA, 139 Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements benefited 75,000 farmers through 1,165 local events with over 25,000 attendees and 700 workshops in 2023. Through these agreements, partners provided Technical Assistance to 9,000 individuals, and brought 2,000 new customers into USDA, resulting in more than 1,000 new program signups, across every state and territory. Ensuring all farmers have access to NRCS’ critical resources enhances their efforts to address water quality and quantity, soil health, and financial stability to improve operations and the environment.

“Oklahoma ranks 2nd in the nation for the number of Native American producers and 4th in the nation overall for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran producers”, said Sarah Blaney, Executive Director of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts. “The proper funding of technical assistance is critical to the important conservation work being done - especially in the context of equity.”

"Technical Assistance is critical for any farmer to gain access to USDA programs, “said John Zippert, Rural Coalition Chairperson and Director of Programs Emeritus of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. “Our outreach experience has shown that many small scale African-American farmers in the South did not know they were eligible for or could effectively utilize EQIP and other NRCS programs to increase the productivity, environmental stability, and income potential of their farms."

USDA’s ability to reach historically underserved farmers and ranchers is paramount to a successful agricultural economy that meets the conservation needs of the country. Ensuring the necessary funding for Conservation Operations and Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreements would recognize their value and confirm the importance of locally led and culturally appropriate outreach to address on-farm natural resource needs.

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¹ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers>