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**Statement on the Meeting of Ms. Shirley Sherrod with Agriculture
Secretary Tom Vilsack**

August 24, 2010

On behalf of the Rural Coalition, we express our full support for our friend and colleague, Ms. Shirley Sherrod, in her decision to continue addressing the issues of inequities at the US Department of Agriculture, but not as full-time employee of USDA. We welcome her openness to assist USDA in the future when it receives and begins to implement the findings of the Jackson-Lewis Civil Rights Assessment the Department contracted a year ago.

We thank USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack for affording Ms. Sherrod basic justice through his apologies, his commitment to assure USDA systems are altered to prevent a similar injustice in the future, and most of all for also offering in justice and fairness to restore her to her previous position as Georgia Rural Development State Director among other options.

On behalf of the dozens of organizations who have worked fervently and directly with Ms. Sherrod and many other leaders for decades to bring eradicate structural injustice from the Department of Agriculture, we seek to assure that this time, the tide really does turn for the thousands of diverse families seeking to remain on their land, or to secure access to land.

Over the years, we have seen, and frequently written, scores of reports, letters, and appeals for action to root out discrimination. We strongly affirm the joint call by Secretary Vilsack and Ms. Sherrod for the restoration of justice through the full and fair settlement of all the class action lawsuits and unresolved discrimination claims against USDA. We also know that nothing can restore the lives that have been lost and the livelihoods and land that have been unjustly stolen away from our communities.

We have worked hard to secure protection for families under the laws of our land, and have provide hundreds of recommendations over the years and of late to USDA leaders, including Secretary Vilsack. We have worked with Congress to secure the establishment of the Office of Advocacy and Outreach, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, the Outreach and Technical Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, the Transparency and Accountability Requirements in the 2008 Farm Bill, and many other policy provisions that have provided tools to the

Department to long ago do what we hope Secretary Vilsack and President Obama will work with us to assure happens now.

The Rural Coalition and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives a year ago presented Secretary Vilsack with a detail of the status of these provisions and more than 100 specific recommendations on what needs to be done and what success would look like, made in the course of the 5-year USDA-CBO partners process by more than 500 of our members and colleagues from organizations and institution that serve socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers and farmworkers every day. While more reports can give us additional documentation and recommendations, the time to do much more is now, without any more delay. We are weary of waiting and willing to work immediately with Secretary Vilsack, as well as our long-time colleague, Ms Sherrod, who was central to the process of developing these recommendations.

In closing, we share the following excerpt from this unpublished and not yet released report by the Rural Coalition and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives on the findings of this 5-year process, entitled “*A Time To Change: A Report By the Assessment Conversations Team (ACT Report)*”

“In order to fully address these long-term USDA inequities, our tools must include both statutory and regulatory change. The Community Based Organizations (CBOs) have benefited greatly from the insight provided by our CBO and USDA colleagues in the Partners’ Process on USDA policies, procedures and systems. We recognize and honor their efforts. Our ability to propose legislation to solve problems expanded through the dialogue and interchange we have developed with them.

The many sections of the 2008 Farm Bill that can be employed to increase equity grew from our work over the past five years...The trust and respect we developed as we constructed a shared knowledge of problems and solutions made possible the legislative victories and the emerging regulatory changes now being completed.

However, the circle of injustice continues that will not be solved by improved data or set-asides or any other method than truly holding local staff, their supervisors, managers, and state and national leaders accountable to demonstrate with results that they have fairly served all producers.

Beyond everything that is written here, we stress once more that achieving change in rural areas requires the understanding and addressing of the social context that underlies the conditions faced by SDFRs and farmworkers.

The ACT report summarizes the conditions in place when we began this phase of our work in January 2009. We have worked as hard as we are able to be fair and productive in our comments and we thank the Secretary and his staff for their openness to our role as partners in this work and pledge to work with them in implementing these many changes as we prepare for the next Farm Bill debate.



We believe the value of this report and partnership process rests in its ability to achieve our goal of developing strategic working relationships within all agencies and mission areas of USDA to recommend standards and build support to ensure equitable access to USDA programs and resources. Success will also depend on the equitable allocation by USDA of financial resources for socially disadvantaged producers and farmworkers, to make them full participants in agriculture and to acquire, retain and develop land and become part of rural communities.

In Secretary Vilsack’s words, *“This is a new day for equal employment opportunity, program delivery, and civil rights at USDA. I intend to lead the Department in correcting its past errors, learning from its mistakes, and moving forward to a new era of equitable service and access for all.”*

Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural has worked for 32 years on behalf of its diverse “grassiest of the grassroots” producers and community based members to promote civil and human rights, justice and sustainability in agriculture.

