

## Opening Statement of Thomas J. Vilsack Before the House Committee on Agriculture – Remarks as Prepared

**March 25, 2021:**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of this Committee.

When I testified in front of the Senate for my confirmation hearing a few months ago, I said the world and our nation are different today than when I served as Agriculture Secretary in a previous administration. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed all our lives and will continue to do so until enough of us are vaccinated to put COVID behind us. Some things, however, have not changed. The horrific shootings in Atlanta last week remind us that hatred and bigotry toward non-white Americans and gender-based violence are real, are threats, and must end.

I am here today to discuss with you something not unrelated—the systemic racism and discrimination perpetuated against Black Farmers, and the history of discrimination against Black Farmers by USDA that has prevented numerous African-Americans, among other people of color, from fully realizing the same level of prosperity and success as their white counterparts. Unfortunately, the racism that resulted in the precipitous decline of Black Farmers over the last century has also been evidenced among other groups of socially disadvantaged farmers.

The Congress and the Department have attempted to address the systemic racism and discrimination that has been repeatedly documented and found to plague the programs at USDA, especially in the Farm Loan Programs. In the late 1990's, Congress took the unprecedented step of waiving the statute of limitations to enable socially disadvantaged producers to have the chance to be heard and receive some remedy for the harm they suffered. Congress on several occasions provided funding to support the settlement of these cases, which was accomplished while I was previously in this position. During this time, Congress also acknowledged through support of outreach and other efforts the need to address the systemic discrimination these producers encountered. USDA also undertook efforts of self-examination and reform including through the work of the Civil Rights Action Team and an independent assessment and identification of barriers to USDA programs.

The history of systemic discrimination against Black farmers has been well-documented, including a 2003 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report which found that Black farm loan applications took 220 days to process as compared to their white counterparts, or a more recent study finding that although Black farmers are disproportionately underrepresented among farmers, were foreclosed on at a higher rate than any other race.

Despite all that has been done, clearly more needs to be done to drive our efforts deeper. Here are two steps we must take. First, we must redress the discrimination that has proven to be systemic, evidently reflecting the way we have designed or implemented our programs, laws and regulations. By focusing on determining whether producers can prove specific, individualized discrimination, our past actions have failed to do the necessary work tailored to addressing the systemic discrimination socially disadvantaged producers face. Second, we must establish the support systems to enable socially disadvantaged producers to have the opportunity to succeed. Only with the establishment of such systems, will we be able to finally address the cumulative effect of discrimination and break the cycles that are holding these producers back.

When I testified in front of the Senate, I committed to bold action to address discrimination in all its forms across USDA agencies, offices and programs. I pledged to ensure all

programming is equitable and works to root out systemic racism. And I promised to build one of the most capable and diverse teams in the federal government, one that looks like the America we serve.

Within the first two months of this Administration, USDA has appointed and nominated an incredibly talented cadre of appointees, reflective of a commitment to build a team that looks like America. USDA field and state offices are often the front door of USDA for producers and other stakeholders seeking support. From loan officers to County Committees to State Directors, it is essential that we build a pipeline and identify leaders for positions that represent the diversity of America and share this Administration's commitment to equity.

Additionally, in response to President Biden's Equity Executive Order, EO 13985, USDA is examining opportunities to increase equity for all underserved populations, ensuring access to healthy meals to tackle nutrition insecurity, putting greater emphasis on our nation-to-nation consultation practices with Tribal nations, and bringing an equity lens to all strategic priorities, especially tackling the climate crisis and improving the rural economy.

In short, we are building a USDA that represents and serves all of America. Many of the new leaders who have joined our team have a background working with producers. They share personal stories about farmers of color being rejected for a farm loan or getting a loan too late in planting season. Those farmers—some of whom you will hear from today—will tell you that they never forget the sting or consequences of that rejection, which can be long-lasting and even generational. In addition, creating more equitable opportunities for Black farmers is a rising tide that can lift all boats. As one study found, closing racial gaps in wages, housing credit, lending opportunities, and access to higher education would amount to an additional \$5 trillion in gross domestic product and six million jobs to the American economy over the next five years.

I am here today to say that racism and discrimination have no place at the Department of Agriculture. I will not tolerate it, and I am committed to rooting it out and establishing a relationship with producers that is built on a commitment to equity, trust and customer service. One of the most important steps I took in my previous tenure as Agriculture Secretary was to use authority granted under the 2002 Farm Bill to appoint voting members to over 385 Farm Service Agency County Committees, addressing a longstanding inequity due to the underrepresentation of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. We must ensure these important appointments continue and that these individuals have privileges equal to the elected members.

I was pleased when the socially disadvantaged farmer provisions in the American Rescue Plan began to come together. I'm grateful to you, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership, alongside Chairman Bishop, and of course Senators Booker, Warnock, and Chairwoman Stabenow.

From the beginning, these provisions recognized that on top of the economic pain caused by the pandemic's impact on the economy and agriculture, socially disadvantaged farmers are also dealing with a disproportionate share of COVID infection rates, hospitalizations, death and economic hurt.

The law provides funding to address longstanding racial equity issues within the Department and across agriculture. It provides debt relief for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers to respond to the cumulative impacts of systemic discrimination and barriers to access that have created a cycle of debt.

The new law also provides approximately \$1 billion in additional funding for assistance and support to socially disadvantaged producers and groups. USDA is in the process of

standing up a Racial Equity Commission to identify and address barriers across USDA. The law also directs USDA to invest in programs to facilitate land access, strengthen outreach and education, business development, and more.

USDA is now engaged in a process of outreach and seeking feedback directly from socially disadvantaged producers as we implement the law. This will be a collaborative, inclusive process.

Before I close, I want to say that all of us here should want successful farmers. We should want more farmers. We should want farmers who can pass their land down to the next generation—who are role models including for young people of color to take up farming and ranching. We should want farming to be associated with equity and opportunity and entrepreneurship—not racism and barriers and intimidation. We should want farmers of color to have equal opportunity to contribute to the diverse fabric of American agriculture. We should make clear that prosperous farmers of color means a prosperous agricultural sector and a prosperous America. And we should do everything we can to make that possible. You have my commitment that I will do just that.

Thank you for your time today.