



July 13, 2023

Chairwoman Stabenow  
419 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Ranking Member Boozman  
555 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Chairman Thompson  
400 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515-3815

Ranking Member Scott  
468 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515-1013

## Recommendations for Modernizing Technical Assistance

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Boozman, & Ranking Member Scott,

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation programs have provided valuable voluntary funding to farmers since the Dust Bowl era. Unfortunately, many potential applicants can't access these programs because the application process is overly complex and current Technical Assistance (TA) resources are insufficient. TA should provide all of our nation's farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners with the knowledge, tools, and resources they need to successfully participate in USDA-NRCS programs and access financial resources. Particular focus should be on small, socially disadvantaged black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), and beginning farmers who have historically been underserved.

In addition to expanding access to all farmers, technical assistance should also be designed and delivered in a manner that creates rural development benefits, forming a pipeline of well-paying jobs and generating an ecosystem of rural employment opportunities for farmers, workers, recent graduates, and veterans.

We recommend several key opportunities to improve TA:

### a) **Modernize, Expertize, and Expand Technical Assistance**

Develop standards for all providers that are consistent with our farmers' current needs, certify third-party providers, and assign the necessary staff to create and execute the program.

Many "climate-smart" practices are new skill sets for farmers and the industries that serve them. As we ask farmers to adapt to the changing climate, technical assistance providers must help farmers address and manage multiple ecosystem services. The challenge is enormous: to help farmers identify and implement systems that simultaneously deliver benefits for water, climate, and biodiversity rather than managing singular resource concerns.

- i. A certification program for third-party TA providers could be practice-specific, focusing on distinct regions and highly impactful underutilized practices, including agroforestry and rotational grazing.<sup>1</sup>

It is imperative to add and leverage outside resources — and certify them as technical assistance providers. External resources can come from:

- i. Peer-to-peer/experienced farmers.
  - i. Create a reimbursement program for successful farmers to share valuable knowledge with other farmers. These providers should include early adopters of regenerative and organic agriculture.
- ii. Universities and community colleges, including extension programs.
  - i. Educational providers can assist in offering expertise on appropriate practices and help organize and distribute important data.

<sup>1</sup> For example, a third party provider could be certified as a specialist in Pacific Northwest agroforestry practices.

- iii. Professional agronomic individuals and organizations.
- iv. Civilian Climate Corps.

Additionally, farmers must be able to find and access the relevant TA they need in any state. NRCS needs to continue developing a network of TA providers to support organic farms and transition. This type of support should be readily accessible and available in every state. Program opportunities must be communicated to farmers in a practical and straightforward manner.

- i. Make the website more user-friendly and provide comparisons of different programs. Provide more relevant and actionable information, including return on investment (ROI) data and many examples of successful adoption of regenerative agriculture practices.
- ii. Create a support hotline to take calls and answer specific requests for information.

#### **b) Address the Needs of Disadvantaged Communities**

Reach underserved and BIPOC farmers through education programs specifically designed for and by underserved and BIPOC farmers with extensive peer outreach.

- i. The education programs must be administered by peers and experts knowledgeable about the necessary resources and tools to succeed in conservation programs.
- ii. Expand the efforts provided by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to partner with qualified trades and NGOs to tailor and promote TA to underserved farmers.
- iii. All materials must be available in languages appropriate for each farming community.
  - i. Hire multilingual and multicultural human translators for both written and oral communications.

#### **c) The Application Process**

NRCS must simplify the application process and provide farmers with streamlined data management so past results can be used for future application processes to build on proven results.

- i. Fast Pass: Add an EZ application process for certain well-established practices which would lessen the burden of both applying for and reporting on progress while providing both results and additional data sources.
- ii. Facilitate access to expert or providers who understand local farmers' needs as resources for application support, including grant writers for complex projects with multiple stakeholders.
- iii. Provide a simple route for creating multi-state programs.
- iv. Make farmer data portable and interoperable so information collected once can be used wherever needed. ,

#### **d) Public-Private Partnerships**

Companies also have a role to play in helping farmers access TA. USDA should create a private-sector liaison to help companies navigate USDA programs, support the USDA with tracking available company and foundation matching funds, and leverage private investment. The role could:

- i. Offer comprehensive information online outlining different public-private conservation programs.

- ii. Provide outreach to the private sector and build a robust online presence, including informational webinars and an online contact form.
- iii. Track and publicly share the private sector’s investments to address climate change through agriculture.

Signed,



- 
- 2. For example, the data entered into an EQIP contract or Organic System Plan should be able to be used in running COMET or another model to track farm emissions.
  - 3. Outside the jurisdiction but complementary to the NRCS’ technical assistance efforts, the farm-relevant practices’ data must be linked with successful target outcomes, including GHG emissions, carbon sequestration, water quality, water retention, air quality biodiversity, and ROI. Furthermore, there should be a standardized process by which varied and qualified external sources of data can be submitted to NRCS for more accurate and precise projections.
  - 4. For example, the differences between the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) and Conservation Innovation Grant program, or where a cooperative agreement might be appropriate.