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From: BERTHA TORRES [<mailto:Bert9436@msn.com>]

Sent: Friday, March 26, 2004 11:22 AM

To: CIG

Subject: Comments to be included in Federal Register on Distribution of \$15 Million for Conservation Grants

Dear Cig:

The opportunity to provide comments to proposed regulations on the expenditure procedures for the recent \$15 appropriated for Conservation Grants. The following information is submitted to you in hopes USDA will find the opportunity to review the comments and address these concerns. It is my hope the suggestions provided herein will be seriously addressed thereby eliminating the need for these views to be expressed in the federal register.

The comments submitted herein are still in draft, however, due to the urgency of time I felt the opportunity to review should be afforded the Secretary of Agriculture. I would appreciate being kept informed on this matter.

The Honorable Secretary of Agriculture Anne Venneman in a press statement issued several years ago indicated her intent to prioritize funding availability for women minorities. Shortly after reading the Secretary's press statement available on the internet I began contacting personnel at the various state, county and federal offices to learn when in fact the policies would be implemented. To my display comments ranged from "I read about her statement but I haven't seen anything come down the pipeline" or "I don't know".

For the record, a policy prioritizing funding for women minority farmers was actually signed and in effect at the time of my telephone and personal visits to office inquiring about policies and or directive regarding minority women farmers. To my knowledge unless it was "revoked" in the past year the policy exists and already establishes "priority" for women minority farmers and further directs "innovative ways of funding" should be considered.

I am a women minority farmer. I am still considered a "new" farmer, however, the regulations used by USDA in determining whether a person is "new" or not expire after seven years. Thus, the longer it takes USDA to assist a female minority farmer the more likely we will not receive funding or we will only be eligible for these grants for a few years compared to the availability of funds to other farmers.

As a woman farmer and a "new" farmer I do not have the "expertise" or "hands on knowledge of farming" that many have. I am certain there are women who have farmed or been raised around farming and have basic knowledge of agriculture. At the same time these same women may be lacking expertise in the area of marketing, sales, etc. I on the other hand I have expertise in marketing, sales, etc. And, then we have minority women farmers who may have experience as a housewife and have simply been thrown into "agriculture" production for whatever reason.

In order to allow women equal opportunity in the work place and market, the "seven" year period should be extended to an additional seven

years. Specifically, I am referring to Spanish/latina women farming food product for human consumption. I am a female Hispanic/latina woman and my experience with access to funding or technical assistance is limited. A directive from Congress and the Administration specifying dollar amounts be set aside for women Hispanic/latina farmers and expended within a specific time frame would help level the playing field. Native Americans and Black farmers have set aside funding. Hispanic/latino farmers do not. Funding availability, funding appropriations and technical assistance to Hispanic/latin farmers continues to fall below the national standards.

The categories established for farmers is confusing. There are agricultural producers or farmers that produce "food" for "human consumption" and then there are farmers who produce "food" or "feed" for animal consumption. Although funding may be intended for agricultural producers who produce "food" for "human consumption" the funds are melted together in a manner difficult for taxpayers to understand. A directive to the Department of Agriculture specifying reporting and expenditures of funds must be shown in reports within specific categories clearly defining federal dollars available and expended for agricultural producers farming "food" product for "human consumption" versus food produced for animals. Additionally, we recommend Congress implement a priority system for minority, Hispanic/latina farmers and to provide or establish specific levels of funding for farmers growing food for human consumption and for farmers growing food for animal consumption.

Congress may wish to further consider the definition of water conservation. It is difficult for me as an average American citizen to understand how drilling new and additional water wells for use by animals can be considered conserving water. If funding is intended to conserve land and water it would seem efforts would be to directed at preserving or maintain what we have rather than to devise ways and justifications for drilling additional water wells and systems. And for the record my father has cattle and horses. He is recognized in New Mexico's Farm and Ranch Museum as one of the early ranchers in the region. So please understand I am not against ranching. Recently, he drilled a new water well to get water for his animals but it wasn't paid for by tax dollars. He also drives his truck daily to the ranch with plastic tanks to get water to his animals. And, the government doesn't pay for his efforts. My dad has maintained his farms and ranches without federal help and on a teacher's salary with six children. Are tax dollars reaching those farmers and ranchers they are intended to help? Or, are we as taxpayers providing financial assistance for those that have the ability and resources to borrow funds at a bank or to tighten one's belt a bit. If we look at the 50% match required in most agriculture programs it appears the programs are meant to support the "rich" or "well-to-do" group of individuals. For example, review the list of Value Added Grants issued several years ago. The funding appears to reach companies well-established with the ability to provide up front several hundred thousand dollars in matching funds. A small farmer does not have those resources available to him or her. We do not have resources available to hire consultants to prepare the proposals. There is a financial risk involved in hiring a consultant based on "hopes" of acquiring funding. Small farmers cannot afford the risk, therefore, funding opportunities are in reality limited to those who have financial ability. Recently, USDA increased

the match requirements on the land and water conservation program funding thereby limiting access to those funds by minority groups. Is this the intent of Congress and the administration. We understand the intent is to serve a larger base but extending the dollars in this manner means the program is one for the "rich" and will not reach the needy. There are no requirements specifying specific dollar amounts must be expended to various income levels and minority groups other than Native Americans and Blacks. Women are in fact left out of the equation and, if included, based on a 50% match may still be left out of the equation.

Reports by USDA indicate "increases" in assistance to Hispanic/latin farmers, however, these statistics do not indicate how many are women. Taxpayers want to know if their tax dollars are helping food farmers, feed growers or the cattle industry. Taxpayers want to know are the funds helping low income farmers and ranchers. Taxpayers also want to know are we helping U.S. citizens or are we prioritizing "grant" funding to assist foreign investment groups and individuals. There appears to be a lack of interest in ensuring U.S. citizens receive priority in acquiring funding assistance from the tax dollars they have paid all their lives. Yes, there are many foreign investors in the United States that may create jobs for U.S. residents. We urge a study of the type of jobs created indicating the pay levels as well as the nationality. And, we, the taxpayers offer zero interest loans, bonding opportunities and many other benefits to attract foreign investors. We provide help to foreign entities that citizens in the U.S. do not have the ability to access. Do we really need to provide more "grant" monies to "foreign owned entities" who made the decision to locate to the U.S. for purposes of gaining profit? If they are here to invest, the foreign investor has determined there is an exceptional ability to gain a higher profit or return for their invested dollars. In private enterprise this is the incentive. As a taxpayer and lifelong U.S. citizen I do not want tax dollars utilized to support foreign investors in competing with my product. We urge Congress to consider limiting grant funds to American citizens.

It would be further advantageous to request quarterly reports from USDA on its progress addressing these issues which also should include reports on actual expenditures to Hispanic/latino farmers and in particular latina farmers as categorized above. Thank you for the many hours you expend in addressing the concerns of the American public. This voter does appreciate your effort and recognizes your life is spent working for the public. Again, thank you for your service.

Bertha Sisneros-Torres
Bert9436@msn.com
P. O. Box 193
Sabinal, New Mexico 87006
(505) 861-3802