

INCLUSION COUNCIL UPDATE

Blog featuring:
Jennie Stephens, Ph.D.

HIGHLIGHTS
FROM THE USDA'S
EQUITY COMMISSION
FINAL REPORT



**Dr. Jennie Stephens, Chief Executive
Officer of the Center for Heirs'
Property Preservation and member of
the US Forest and Wood Products
Sector Inclusion Council**



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INTRODUCTION

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Equity Commission recently released its [Final Report](#), complete with 66 recommendations to advance equity at USDA. The report, which is the summation of two years of work from the Commission and its Agriculture and Rural Community Economic Development Subcommittees, highlights opportunities available to the USDA to address historical inequities and improve the services provided by the USDA for all Americans.

Recommendations within the report cover 10 topic areas:

- advancing department-wide equity,
- working with farmers and ranchers,
- supporting farmworkers and their families,
- strengthening research and extension programs,
- ensuring equitable nutrition access,
- recognizing immigrants and their families,
- enhancing rural development operations,
- supporting rural communities, and
- strengthening rural economies.

As stated in the report, the recommendations reflect an opportunity to both improve the contemporary practices of the Department and to account for “the collective impact and compounding harm of inequitable past practices”. Many of these recommendations are of significance to forests and forest landowners and to the work of the US Inclusion Council.

Dr. Jennie Stephens, Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Heirs’ Property Preservation and member of the US Forest and Wood Products Sector Inclusion Council (Inclusion Council), served on the Agriculture Subcommittee of the Commission, contributing her expertise around land access and retention issues. Dr. Stephens is a highly respected industry leader with more than 30 years of nonprofit experience. She has been the leader of the [Center for Heirs’ Property Preservation](#) since its inception in 2005, chairing the organization’s work to protect heirs’ property and promote sustainability and wealth building amongst historically underserved landowners.

The Inclusion Council is thrilled to celebrate Dr. Stephens’ work and contribution to the Equity Commission and to highlight the importance of five key recommendations from the Report:

RECOMMENDATION 13: HEIRS' PROPERTY AND FRACTIONATED LAND

Provide non-loan options for producers to prevent the creation of heirs' property and fractionated land that would reduce the barriers this type of land ownership encounters when accessing USDA programs.

Currently, as a result of heirs' property, many forest landowners are unable to access USDA programs because they don't have a clear title and are unable to use the land as collateral. This recommendation suggests granting additional funds to nonprofit organizations, like the Center for Heirs' Property and others, to provide legal assistance to remedy heirs' property and prevent future creation of heirs' property. As stated in the report, "Currently, the only USDA option for heirs' property owners/producers to resolve their title issues to access USDA programs is the use of the loans through the FSA Heirs' Property Relending Program (HPRP)". Providing no-cost options for landowners to resolve heirs' property would allow more people to access USDA programs and use their resources to work on their land, instead of paying costly legal fees and repaying loans.

Crucially, the Equity Commission also recommends requiring that "all state Natural Resources Conservationists establish separate allocated funding of 10-15 percent of [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP) cost-share funds for heirs' property owners and socially disadvantaged producers". A dedicated EQIP pool would mean that heirs' property and socially disadvantaged landowners would not have to compete with better resourced, more experienced landowners for access to EQIP cost-share funds and would more easily be able to access conservation resources.



RECOMMENDATION 14: LAND ACCESS

Ensure equitable funding to community-led land access and transition projects.

Recommendation 14, and its 11 sub recommendations, call for more funding to programs and initiatives that enable land access for historically unserved populations. Sub-recommendations include increasing funding and assistance available to address fractionation of Indigenous held lands, improving data collection around demographic and land ownership to gain a clearer picture of who is benefiting from USDA programs, and continuing direct funding to community-led land access projects. Sub-recommendations also suggest increasing investment in the Heirs' Property Relending Program and providing direct family loans to close heirs' property estates to help clear titles and provide for some of the upfront cost of moving through the legal process.

While additional funding into programs that help resolve heirs' property issues and increase land access and retention is needed, the Inclusion Council promotes the use of grants and other non-repayable funding over options like loans, as loans present additional barriers to underserved communities and reduce the ability of landowners to build wealth and improve the sustainability of their land in comparison with grants. Future initiatives at USDA can prioritize those other types of funding that directly respond to the need for reparation and equity of land access.

RECOMMENDATION 15: CONSERVATION

Include equitable climate actions in USDA conservation programs to address environmental justice (EJ).

Recommendation 15 brings environmental justice to the forefront of the USDA's climate and conservation initiatives, by calling for better integration of Indigenous knowledge and land stewardship practices into the EQIP and Conservation Reserve Program standards, automatically providing EQIP advance payments for historically underserved producers, and better integrating traditional and cultural land management practices within climate definitions and programs. Recognition of Traditional Ecological Knowledge has been rising within forestry, and it is positive to see actionable ways the USDA can uplift traditional practices across their climate programs. This recommendation, as well as Recommendation 46: Environmental Justice, highlight the importance of institutionalizing EJ principles across the Department and across Administrations, continuing the practices and policies that have been implemented as part of the White House's [Justice40 Initiative](#).

RECOMMENDATION 16: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND OUTREACH

Establish and/or ensure USDA's external engagement office has the necessary capacity, resources, and skillsets to operate in a robust and centralized manner that will enhance the Department's role and financial investment in organizations (nonprofit, non-governmental, community-based) to provide technical assistance.

Completing program applications and tracking complicated reporting requirements can be a significant barrier for many who most need the services and resources that the USDA provides. This recommendation aims to reduce challenges associated with navigating the USDA bureaucracy, by increasing coordination, communication and centralization across USDA program offices. It also calls for increasing the capacity of nonprofit partner organizations to assist underserved communities in completing grant applications for USDA programs by providing dedicated funding and training to the nonprofits. Some similar programs exist, like the new [Community Navigators program](#) of the US Forest Service, but this recommendation calls for a Department-wide approach to technical assistance investment that would permanently establish these types of initiatives going forward.

RECOMMENDATION 61: MATCHING WAIVERS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT (RD) PROGRAMS AND GRANTS

Develop eligibility requirements and waivers of matching requirements that prioritize rural economically distressed communities and historically underserved communities, including Federally Recognized Tribes, and enhance access to USDA programs and services.

Match requirements often present a significant barrier to small, rural, and/or historically underserved communities and organizations seeking USDA funding. They require an access to capital that many organizations most in need of grant support do not have, thus funneling financial support to those who already have established connections and financial resources. Here, the Equity Commission recommends removing match requirements from the scoring rubric which assesses grant eligibility, clarifying the process for requesting match waivers, and prioritizing rural economically distressed communities and historically underserved communities in selection processes for funding.

The Inclusion Council supports the recommendation to limit match requirements for RD programs and encourages the USDA to consider removing match requirements more broadly, including within Forest Service grant programs.



WHAT'S NEXT?

The work of the Equity Commission is an important first step towards implementing systemic, long lasting change at USDA and increasing equity across the Department and its programs. The establishment and accomplishments of the Equity Commission are a clear sign that positive momentum is growing.

“I am pleased to have worked with such a great group of people to develop these recommendations and to see that Secretary Vilsak and his team have begun to implement them to improve USDA’s service to all people, but especially to those who have been historically underserved.” – Dr. Jennie Stephens

As stated in the report, the recommendations reflect an opportunity to both improve the contemporary practices of the Department and to account for “the collective impact and compounding harm of inequitable past practices”. Many of these recommendations are of significance to forests and forest landowners and to the work of the US Inclusion Council.

To promote the report and highlight the recommendations within it, the Equity Commission is hosting a series of Regional Equity Convenings. These convenings are a chance to hear directly from Equity Commission members about their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities presented in the report.

The Center’s regional equity convening is planned for August 1 2024. Stay tuned to [<https://www.heirsproperty.org/events/>] for more information about the event as it is released.

The Inclusion Council congratulates Dr. Stephens, and all who served on the Equity Commission for their efforts and leadership in moving the Department forward.

