

Remarks by Rural Development Deputy Under Secretary Vernita Dore for the Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon

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Thank you so much-

I am so pleased to be here during this historic and celebratory event.

Or more accurately, events. Because right now we've got two historic events going on at the same time.

The first is the 125th anniversary of the founding of North Carolina A&T State University. North Carolina A&T was the nation's second college created in 1891 under the Morrill Land-Grant Acts. A historically black college, it offered instruction in Agriculture, English, Horticulture, and Mathematics to people of color.

Over the years, it has built on that curriculum. Today, with more than 10,000 students, it is the second largest, historically black university in the nation. It ranks 9th among the country's 107 historically black educational institutions.

I'm proud to say that my employer, the US Department of Agriculture has long been a research and funding partner with North Carolina A&T. Currently, the USDA plays a role in nearly \$20 million in funding received by the university's School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences.

And enrollment in that school has increased by 75% since 1990. Future farmers and those pursuing careers in the industry study biotechnology, agricultural and biosystems engineering, natural resources management, waste management, food microbiology and other subjects.

This is certainly something to celebrate, 125 years! We at the USDA are justifiably proud of the institution. We're also proud of the second historic event I mentioned: the 30th anniversary of Small Farms Week here.

This event was created in 1986 by the university's Cooperative Extension Program, which itself dates back to 1914. That's when the Smith-Lever Act under President Woodrow Wilson enabled the USDA to partner with land-grant colleges to help farmers. The idea was to take the research and expertise of the colleges and provide training and assistance to local farmers.

Today, Cooperative Extension continues that work with programs like 4-H and Youth Development, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Community and Rural Development and Family and Consumer Sciences.

So you see, that's quite a bit of farming history and tradition in this one location in North Carolina! And today we're looking to the future with the theme of Small Farms Week, "Our Pride, Our Future: North Carolina Small Farmers."

You know, North Carolinians have a right to be proud of the state's small farmers. Farmers overall contribute \$79 billion to the state's economy and most of North Carolina's farmers are small farmers.

Nearly 70% of all the state's farmers operate on less than 100 acres of land. Nearly 87% are sole proprietors and family-run farms – not giant farming corporations! And nearly 80% earn less than \$49,000 yearly. Those are our own USDA figures from our last agricultural census four years ago.

Hardworking small farmers often are innovators in farm techniques, sustainers of the land and preservers of our historic, rural traditions and communities. As a small farmer going about your



daily chores, you may not see yourself in this heroic light but believe me, we at the USDA do see you as heroes on the land.

That's why I am so proud to represent the U.S. Department of Agriculture on these two anniversaries. You know, North Carolina A&T, the Cooperative Extension and the USDA share many of the same goals. We all are dedicated to helping small farmers. We are all committed to your success and prosperity.

Let me take a moment here to outline some of the ways USDA has focused on small farmers.

In 2013, USDA launched a micro-loan program provides farmers as much as \$50,000. Nearly 6,000 start-up farmers have received these loans. Larger loans are also available and in 2015 more than 20,000 of these loans were given to beginning farmers and more than 9,000 to women and minority farmers. Plus, USDA has helped 16,000 small farmers obtain operating credit.

USDA also provides direction information with our crop insurance education and outreach program in 48 states to help small farmers manage risk.

We have increased the number of coordinators who work the Farm to School Program. This program encourages schools to purchase from local and regional farmers and food producers.

We've also improved our National Farmers Market Directory, used by more than 2 million consumers. It now lists CSAs, on-farm stores and food hubs to help small and mid-sized producers find new customers for their products and new places to sell.

Over the next two years, programs like these and others will total \$5.6 billion in aid to small, mid-size, beginning and minority farmers.



Now, the agency I oversee – Rural Development – has a slightly different focus. Our work helps the farming community itself. As a farmer working and living on the land, you know how important the health of your community is to your ability to make a healthy living from farming. You aren't farming all alone by yourself on the land. You depend on others. USDA Rural Development tries to make sure there's a supportive community around you.

That's why we offer loans, grants and loan guarantees to support essential services, like housing, economic development, health care, first-responder services and equipment, plus the water, electric and communications infrastructure. We help support small farming towns with economic development efforts like business loans through banks, credit unions and community-managed lending pools.

We take that same business approach and apply it to small-farm operations as well. We provide technical assistance and information to help farmers and cooperatives get started and improve their operations. We also provide something we call "Value Added Producer Grants." These are grants of up to \$75,000 for planning and up to \$250,000 for working capital to help farmers and ranchers develop new products or expand their market. Since 2009, USDA has awarded 853 Value Added Producer Grants totaling \$104.5 million.

We also provide technical assistance like market research, feasibility studies and business planning through a network of cooperatives and cooperative development centers.

Finally, our Strike Force for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative helps small and mid-sized farmers and ranchers in rural areas with high persistent poverty. We've partnered with other entities to work on nearly 190,000 projects with \$23.5 billion worth of investments since 2005.

So you see, the work of my specific agency, as well as much of USDA's efforts, focuses on small and local farmers. It's a commitment we have in common with North Carolina A&T and



its Cooperative Extension. That's because our rural communities and farmers have long been the backbone of this country.

Small farmers like you are entrepreneurs dedicated to our nation's rural communities and the land itself. Small farmers often develop and use innovative methods, take measures to preserve and care for the land, provide the economic lifeblood of rural communities, and hold values that are part of our nation's traditions.

Our rural communities are essential to this country's wellbeing, not only in terms of goods and products actually produced, but in terms of history and the legacy we leave others. Farmers and the products they grow and produce help define the very nature and culture of a region or even a nation.

That's why improving the health and welfare of our farmers and the communities in which they live strengthens our country. It improves the health and welfare, not only of farmers themselves, but all of us. I truly believe that if our nation's small farmers prosper, we all prosper.

And that goal of prosperity is shared by USDA, my own agency, North Carolina A&T and its Cooperative Extension. We all today take a moment to salute and celebrate the contributions and work of North Carolina's and our nation's small farmers.