

**Statement by  
Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
Before the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies**

**Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate  
June 15, 2021**

Thank you, Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Hoeven, and members of this Subcommittee, for inviting me here today to discuss the Administration's priorities for the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and to provide you an overview of the President's fiscal year (FY) 2022 budget for USDA.

Under the President's leadership, America is getting back on track. We have begun to turn the tide on the pandemic. Our economy is growing and creating jobs. Students are getting back into classrooms. For all the progress we've already made, we cannot simply return to the way things were before the pandemic and economic downturn. We must seize this moment to reimagine and rebuild a new American economy that invests in the promise and potential of every American and makes it easier for families to break into and stay in the middle class. In rural America—which holds a special claim to USDA's mission—we must build back better, stronger, and more resilient and equitably than ever before.

The Budget details the President's proposals to advance that agenda this year. It includes the two historic plans the President has already put forward — the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan – and reinvests in education, research, public health, and other foundations of our country's strength. It proposes historic investments to spur new job creation and opportunities in rural America; helps restore America's advantage in agriculture; leverages all of USDA's expertise to address climate change; and supports a stronger nutrition safety net.

The President's Budget for 2022 for USDA programs within this Subcommittee is \$192 billion, of which approximately \$168 billion is mandatory funding and \$23.2 billion is net discretionary funding. Its gives USDA a new set of tools, and builds on our existing capabilities, to address the urgent challenges of our time—containing the pandemic, responding to the

nutrition insecurity crisis, investing in research, rebuilding the rural economy, strengthening and building markets for farmers and producers, and addressing the impacts of climate change. This is not a list of things we would like to do—it is a plan for what we need to do to get USDA back on track and to help the U.S. outcompete the rest of the world.

### ***Supporting Nutrition for the Nation***

The pandemic underscored how critical USDA’s nutrition assistance programs are for millions of American families. At the peak last December, nearly one in seven households and more than one in six households with children reported they did not have enough to eat, with disproportionate impacts on communities of color. Fortunately, the collective efforts of Congress and the Administration—including measures enacted in the American Rescue Plan—have delivered help to struggling Americans and yielded meaningful reductions in food hardship since December. But even the latest reports tell us that about one in eight American households with children are still struggling with food hardship. It is not enough to return to where we were; as we build back better, we must tackle not only food insecurity, but also nutrition insecurity.

USDA’s core nutrition programs are the most far-reaching, powerful tools available to ensure that all Americans, regardless of race, ethnicity, or background, have access to healthy, affordable food. Building on these programs, the Budget makes strategic investments to ensure those in need can access nutrition programs that are run efficiently and effectively; to advance nutrition security through education and evidence-based interventions; and to support the purchase of nutritious and local foods. I want to highlight just a few other key priorities.

We know that WIC drives better health for infants and more nutritious diets for children, and it is a key tool to address disparities in maternal and child health outcomes. The Budget requests \$6.7 billion for WIC to serve an estimated 6.4 million moms, infants, and young children in FY22, continuing the bipartisan commitment to full funding. It also extends the temporary increase in WIC Cash Value Benefits, which provide benefits to WIC participants to buy fruits and vegetables, increases funding for the WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program, and bolsters the WIC Contingency Fund to ensure that services continue even in unforeseen circumstances.

And the Budget reflects the bold \$45 billion investment through American Families Plan to provide direct nutrition support to children and families. We proposed a permanent nationwide

Summer EBT program to provide food dollars to low-income families when school is out, a proven approach to improve low-income children's food security and diet quality; expanding access to healthy school meals in high needs schools, with a focus on starting off strong in elementary schools, establishing a healthy foods incentive pilot in schools, and facilitating re-entry for formerly incarcerated individuals through SNAP eligibility.

The Budget also invests in the vital functions of the Food and Nutrition Service to deliver on this ambitious agenda. While federal funds managed by FNS have increased dramatically, as much as 70 percent in recent years, staffing levels have decreased. The Budget proposes significant investments in FNS to ensure the agency can provide appropriate oversight and stewardship, pursue its crucial mission to address food and nutrition security, and innovate and modernize to best serve those in need.

### ***Supporting Research***

To advance USDA's priorities in a meaningful way, we must also deepen our support for the science that underpins them. American investment in research and development has fallen behind, a decision that, left uncorrected, will impact the clothes we wear, food we eat, and air we breathe.

That's why I am pleased that the President's Budget course-corrects and positions the United States to be a leader in agricultural research. This budget proposes an increase of over \$700 million for a total of \$4.1 billion for USDA's research, education, and outreach programs, an investment that will help USDA put science and data-driven tools and technologies in the hands of farmers. Advancing agricultural research will spur innovation and increase accessibility of climate-smart agricultural tools. The Budget includes almost \$2 billion to research a wide range of critical problems facing American agriculture, ranging from animal and crop protection and production, new product development, environmental stewardship, food safety, and human nutrition. This includes increasing the Agriculture Food Research Initiative (AFRI) to \$700 million, an increase of \$265 million to include broad emphasis throughout the AFRI program on climate-smart agriculture and application of clean energy.

These investments complement what the President has called for as part of the American Jobs Plan, which includes a \$10 billion R&D investment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions and \$15 billion in creating up to 200 centers of excellence that serve as research incubators.

Finally, the Budget will also help USDA's research agencies rebuild both capacity and credibility after years of staff losses. We are setting big, bold research goals, and to meet those needs we must ensure that our staff is supported, inspired, and reflective of diverse communities across our country.

### *Combating Climate Change*

Tackling climate change at home and abroad is one of the greatest challenges and opportunities of this century. This budget underscores the Biden-Harris Administration's commitment to address the impacts of climate change with a comprehensive approach that's inclusive of science and on-the-ground investments. It seeks to repair the broken link between our science and natural resource experts and our land and agriculture management mission areas.

This budget puts USDA science agencies back in a leadership position among global competitors, like China. Our investments in climate research will put better tools, data and predictive technologies into the hands of producers and forest managers as they deal with hotter, drier, and more extreme weather.

Our investments to advance innovation and application of science-based and data driven tools on the ground, will do the important extension and advisory work alongside farmers, ranchers, producers and foresters to support American agriculture and maintain our competitive edge in the world markets. The NRCS force on the ground, for example, has been hobbled and we need a conscious effort to rebuild.

The USDA approach to tackling the climate crisis will focus on science driven technological climate science advancement, creating or maintaining resilient landscapes on all lands, increasing the work at our climate change hubs, and implementing innovative science and

evidence driven programs by investing over \$914 million of new discretionary investments in climate smart agriculture and forestry activities, as well as \$564 million of new investments for clean energy activities across USDA. This funding will support effective land management decisions and partnerships with local communities and Tribal Nations to address climate adaptation, conservation, and ecological resilience.

The budget also provides seed funding to fulfill the President's promise to create an Advanced Research Projects Agency for Climate (ARPA-C) that will support transformative solutions to address the climate crisis. It will be initially created in DOE to build on the experience and capabilities of ARPA-Energy (ARPA-E), but it will coordinate programs to address adaptation, resilience, and mitigation challenges with multiple agencies. We are requesting \$95 million for ARPA-C that will enable us to work with ARPA-C and support the critical climate technologies that an ARPA approach could most rapidly provide solutions.

These investments complement what the President has proposed as part of the American Jobs Plan, which calls on Congress to invest \$45 billion in the full range of solutions needed to achieve technology breakthroughs that address the climate crisis and position America as the global leader in clean energy technology and clean energy jobs, led by renewable fuel, renewable energy, and a host of biobased products grown and manufactured here in the United States by rural Americans.

### ***Rebuilding Rural America***

United States' prosperity and well-being are intrinsically tied to rural America's ability to thrive in the new global economy. The President's budget proposal enables USDA to closely examine the systemic issues facing rural America and empower communities to take the reins as they rebuild their economies, workforces, and infrastructure.

Our rural communities share an impressive diversity and resilience, and they face unique challenges that deserve unique solutions. When well resourced, Rural Development provides support that is critical to improving quality of life in rural America – whether it is through increased access to broadband service, affordable housing in underserved communities, or

resilient wastewater infrastructure. USDA is committed to taking a locally focused approach to addressing these challenges because I know that when these communities have a seat at the table, we have the best shot at achieving a long-lasting inclusive prosperity.

To bring these outcomes into reality, the budget proposal increases funding for Rural Development by \$741 million, including an increase of \$446 million for electric and telecommunication programs, \$15 million for the Rural Housing Service, and more than \$100 million for Rural Development to increase its staff and technological capacity. It's difficult to innovate when you are overextended, so these capacity-building resources will be critical to better serving our rural customers.

The budget increases USDA's investment in expanding rural broadband service to put rural America on a long-term path to economic success. The budget includes \$700 million for ReConnect, an increase of \$65 million over the 2021 enacted level, to provide flexible loans and grants to deploy broadband to unserved areas. This investment also builds on the \$100 billion of funding proposed in the American Jobs Plan, which aims to connect every American. COVID-19 has underscored how critical access to broadband is to all Americans, and rural Americans are more than 10 times likelier than urban residents to lack access to quality broadband. The Administration's plan to connect Americans is innovative, ambitious and creates a blueprint to carry rural American into the future.

The President's budget proposes \$717 million in investments for Rural Water and Wastewater Grants and Loans, an increase of \$100 million over the 2021 enacted level. That funding includes \$25 million for grants targeted to Colonias, Native Americans, and Alaska Native Villages and \$75 million for grants targeted to rural, poor communities. Safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal systems are vital to achieving a high quality of life and are essential to rural residents. The proposed increase would create good-paying jobs and help thousands of communities across rural America gain access to clean drinking water.

When I last served as the Secretary of Agriculture, USDA implemented a public-private partnership initiative known as "StrikeForce" to provide targeted economic development resources to rural counties with persistent poverty, including communities that are economically dependent on energy resources. Through this effort, USDA collaborated, leveraged, and

increased investments to rural communities through cooperation and partnerships with other Federal agencies, State and local governments, and public and private entities. The StrikeForce initiative was very successful, but with the experience of time we can further improve on this critical program. With \$32 million of proposed funding in the FY 2022 budget, USDA will build upon the lessons learned from past efforts and scale a more holistic all of government approach to improving economic mobility and community development outcomes in rural, urban, and tribal areas alike. USDA is committed to ensuring that communities have the tools and support to identify, access, and effectively leverage federal resources to rebuild rural America.

The FY 2022 budget lays out a plan for USDA to address critical issues within the food supply chain, the impacts of climate change, and the pressures on our public and private lands – each of which will require the requested budget levels to address. As I stated at the beginning of my testimony, the Budget is not a list of things we would like to do, it is a list of things we must do. I look forward to working with this Subcommittee and to answering any questions you may have about our budget proposals.