



Do we Support USDA's StrikeForce Initiative?

BACKGROUND

The 2008 Farm Bill directed USDA to establish the Office of Advocacy and Outreach with the goal of helping small farms and ranches, beginning farmers and ranchers, and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers by improving access to the department's programs.

ISSUE

Under this authority, the Secretary of Agriculture created the StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity to target USDA assistance to poverty-stricken and predominately minority areas. High poverty counties are those identified by the U.S. Census Bureau with poverty rates of 20 percent or more. USDA estimates 85 percent of our nation's persistent poverty counties are in rural America.

The program was piloted in Arkansas, Georgia, and Mississippi in 2010 and has grown to encompass 970 counties in 25 states and Puerto Rico. States included are Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.

The initiatives are led by Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency and Rural Development personnel in the designated states. One USDA employee serves as the local coordinator. The agencies also coordinate with community organizations and public entities to further USDA's reach. Since the program's launch in 2010, USDA has partnered with more than 1,500 groups or entities. In 2015, 62,000 projects were carried out in StrikeForce counties for an investment of \$7.5 billion.

The following are questions to consider as Congress reviews the next Farm Bill:

- 1) Has StrikeForce proven successful in counties where assistance has been received by farmers and/or communities? What has and hasn't worked?
- 2) Should the program be expanded to high poverty counties in all states?

Aside from the StrikeForce Initiative, a bipartisan proposal is under discussion in Congress that would direct federal agencies to target at least 10 percent of the funds they receive during the annual appropriations process to counties that have experienced 20 percent or greater poverty rates for 30 years. The "10-20-30" method was used for distributing funds for three USDA rural development programs (i.e. housing, utilities/infrastructure, and business development) in 2009. More than 4600 projects totaling nearly \$1.7 billion were funded in persistent poverty counties. This approach may be expanded to USDA's broadband/telecommunications, telemedicine, and distance learning programs this year, but could eventually include economic development programs across all agencies

OPTION #1

Should Farm Bureau support the "10-20-30" concept for prioritization where existing economic development-related funding will be spent?

OPTION #2

Should Farm Bureau help set priorities for the funding?