

STATEMENT OF NAOMI C. EARP

**HOUSE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE
Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations**

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Madam Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide you an update on the activities and programs of the United States Department of Agriculture's Office of Civil Rights. It is an honor to sit before you today.

Almost one year has gone by since I shared with Congress my commitment to advance Secretary Perdue's vision for USDA to "Do Right and Feed Everyone." My role at the Office of Civil Rights is to expand on this vision by ensuring USDA is a department that does right by all people, at all times, and in all locations.

Since being appointed as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, I have worked to enhance the Department's emphasis on civil rights including strategic partnerships across missions, accountability, and prevention. During my short time here, I have already undertaken several initiatives and set many more in motion that are designed to further weave civil rights into the fabric of the department's activities.

The mission of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) is to mitigate and eliminate barriers to equal opportunity and equal access by implementing outreach and prevention programs, processing civil rights complaints of discrimination from employees and customers, and advising other mission areas on policies that may have a disparate impact on certain groups. My office serves a leadership role on civil rights at the Department, ensuring a OneUSDA approach to managing civil rights programs throughout the USDA's mission areas and subcomponent agencies.

Educating and highlighting civil rights topics to all USDA employees is critical. This summer, I developed and implemented USDA's first American Diversity Month. This was an innovative approach highlighting the intersection between civil rights and the agricultural mission of the Department. We held programs illustrating effective methods for conducting outreach at the State Director-level, Native American Influences on American Agriculture, Women in Fire, a mentoring event, and a student intern symposium. These efforts were well received by staff and we look forward to enhancing their impact again next year.

The Office of Civil Rights also leads USDA's consideration of employee civil rights complaints. Less than one year ago today, it took an average of 595 days to investigate a claim. This prolonged justice and resolution created uncertainty for our customers and employees. Since coming to USDA, I have reduced average investigations to an average of 420 days. While our team has worked hard to achieve this 30% reduction in processing time, clearly there is more to be done and I am committed to achieving more moving forward. I am working with the Office of the Chief

Information Officer to improve our complaint management system that will allow us to be more efficient and continue to improve performance.

Further, I have also engaged and advised USDA State Directors in complaint resolution and compliance and outreach to improve customer service and equal access to farm programs. I completed engagements in Alabama, Oklahoma and Georgia that resulted in State Director commitment to strengthening both of these areas.

Additionally, OASCR devotes significant time to conducting civil rights impact analysis (CRIA). Congress has affirmed the importance of this work in the 2018 Farm Bill. The CRIA process is a useful tool to understanding, and when necessary, mitigating impact of the organization's proposed or planned activities. I am hopeful this process will enhance CRIA's usefulness as a tool in each Mission's work.

Another area of work to highlight, is our strengthened partnerships with Mission Areas through the establishment of the Mission Area Liaison Office. Thus far, the establishment of the Mission Area Liaison Office has led to productive collaboration across our subcomponent organizations and resulted in streamlined efforts.

For example, the new strategic model has allowed me to work closely and regularly with the Forest Service to address harassment allegations in the workplace. The Forest Service Office of Work Environment and Performance is coordinating efforts, instilling best practices for prevention and employee support, and investigating work environment claims. Employees are being held accountable for their actions through removals, demotions, suspensions and other employee actions. In prevention efforts, the Forest Service has added employee training, banned alcohol in agency-owned employee quarters, and has added additional safeguards to the hiring process. OASCR will continue to work with Forest Service teams to ensure continued progress.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about my staff. Our plate is full of challenging but critical work. Their daily commitment to our employees and our customers is seen by our shared efforts to improve performance and compliance. I look forward to continuing our progress.

My thanks to you Madam Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee for holding a hearing on a topic of such importance. I look forward to answering your questions.