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House rural development hearing spotlights glaring needs

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USDA's new Under Secretary of Agriculture for Rural Development Dallas Tonsager told House Agriculture Committee members Wednesday that USDA "can and should do a better job of reaching out to underserved constituencies and devoting more energy and resources to the poorest of the poor."

Other witnesses at the Subcommittee on Rural Development, Biotechnology, Specialty Crops and Foreign Agriculture hearing reinforced Tonsager's point. Governor Chandler Sanchez, speaking for the Pueblo of Acoma and the National Congress of American Indians based in Acoma, New Mexico, pointed out that:

- "Indian Country is America's most rural population. While only 30% of America lives in rural areas, nearly 60% of Natives still live in rural America. And we are probably the rural population most in need of rural development.
- "Nine of the ten poorest counties in America are not in the South or in West Virginia, they are counties with Indian reservations.
- "And while only 1% or less of the general U.S. population doesn't have access to a phone, or to electricity, or to clean water, 30% of Natives do not have basic telephone access, 14% of us still don't have electricity, and over 13% of us don't even have access to clean water.
- "And while the U.S. is concerned with the unemployment rate rising to 9%, many of our communities have been struggling with 90% unemployment.
- "There is perhaps no area more desperately in need of the USDA Rural Development services than Indian Country.
- "Despite this desperate need, Indian Country is not getting served well by the USDA.
- "For example, of the 250 economic stimulus water projects just announced by the USDA, I could only find one that was Tribal. Yet we lack access to water at a rate 20 times greater than anyone else."

Subcommittee Chair Mike McIntyre (D-NC) made a point of telling Sanchez to meet with USDA Rural Development officials following the hearing to begin the process of solving the disparities which Sanchez listed – a process which did get started immediately after the hearing ended.

Other witnesses told stories similar to the Pueblo story. They noted that small rural communities often lack the resources to compete effectively for federal grant money – with the result that homes lack running water and sewage is in open ditches. While they welcomed the substantial additional funding provided by last year’s Farm Bill and this year’s Recovery Act, they pointed out that federal paperwork requirements are daunting and many communities are too small to pay for hundred-million-dollar water or sewer projects yet slightly larger than the population size that would qualify for needed federal grants. They asked for more flexibility in USDA programs – flexibility that can only be provided if Congress rewrites program rules. One USDA Rural Development official told *Agri-Pulse* that this need for congressional action is exactly why the testimony delivered in Wednesday’s hearing is essential to getting Congress to pay attention and act.



Witnesses testify in House Agriculture Subcommittee hearing on USDA rural development programs. L to R at table: Franklin Rivenbark, Chandler Sanchez, Doug Anderton, Tommy Duck, and Debra Martin. Photo: *Agri-Pulse*.

The other side of the picture was represented at the hearing by USDA Inspector General Phyllis Fong. She pointed out that her Office of Inspector General (OIG) “is directly responsible for continuous oversight of USDA’s vast programs and operations. In fiscal year 2008, the Department had expenditures of approximately \$95 billion and approximately 90,000 employees. USDA alone received \$28 billion in Recovery Act funding for a broad array of Department programs and operations, ranging from rural development programs, nutrition assistance, and watershed activities, to wildfire management and broadband activities.” She said OIG is taking a proactive approach to dealing with potential waste and fraud through working with USDA agencies to establish and monitor “proper internal control procedures and compliance operations, as well as reviewing whether participants in Recovery Act-related programs meet eligibility requirements.”

Subcommittee Chair McIntyre commented that “USDA rural development policies and programs are critical to the success of our small towns and communities. From key infrastructure and housing to broadband and business loans, federal funds are playing a

critical role in helping communities move forward, and it is critical that these dollars are spent wisely and appropriately. This subcommittee will continue to do all we can to support rural America and ensure that the taxpayers' dollars are being spent in the most efficient manner.”

Ranking Member Michael Conaway (R-TX) said after the hearing that “We are taking a very close look at the coordination of projects, strategic infrastructure planning, and distribution of funding obligations. Today’s testimony highlighted several critical barriers to getting funding to where it is most needed in rural America, and we hope USDA will be able to address those problems quickly.”

To read witness testimony from the rural development hearing, go to:
<http://agriculture.house.gov/hearings/statements.html>

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