

**Statement By
Dr. Basil I. Gooden
Director of State Operations, USDA Rural Development
Before the Senate Agriculture Committee
November 30, 2023**

Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman and members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today and for your consideration of my nomination. I also want to thank my lovely wife of more than 30 years, Susan, who is here with me today and our daughter, Caper, who is cheering for me from her home in Kuwait City. I want to acknowledge and thank my six siblings for their support and encouragement, and I want to acknowledge my parents, Allen and Christine Gooden. Both of my parents were educators, my mother a home economics teacher and my father, an elementary school principal. Their influence has had a profound impact on my life and continues to guide me personally and professionally today.

I am honored and humbled to have been nominated by President Biden to the position of United States Department of Agriculture Under Secretary of Rural Development. I sincerely appreciate the support of Secretary Vilsack, and the support and friendship of Deputy Secretary Xochitl Torres Small, and former Deputy Secretary Dr. Jewel Bronaugh. I also want to thank the many farmers, ranchers, and landowners that I've worked with over the years and who continue to provide insight and advice to this day.

I am a proud product of rural America. My family and I own and operate a beef cattle farm in Buckingham County, Virginia. On our family farm, I learned the lessons of hard work, responsibility, and being a grateful steward of the land and our environment. Down the road from our family's farm, my grandparents owned and operated a small country store that served our rural community for nearly five decades. Spending time there as a kid, I saw first-hand how the country store nurtured a sense of community—where people shared news, gave advice, and supported community members. Looking back, I realize that this was far more than a store; it was a vital institution in sustaining the health, social and economic well-being of our rural community.

When my parents took me to college to attend Virginia Tech several decades ago, my father gave me some profound advice. He told me to “study hard”, “get good grades”, and “don't plan to come back to the country when you graduate.” He said “there are no opportunities for you in the country, so focus on going to the places where there are good jobs.” His words really

stunned me and they stick with me to this very day. Throughout my career I have worked to level the playing field for rural America so that rural parents and their children have the same opportunities and quality of life as people in non-rural areas.

I had the honor of serving as the 3rd Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry for the Commonwealth of Virginia. There I worked with farmers, ranchers, and landowners across Virginia and across the country to advocate for and promote agriculture and rural businesses. In this work, I saw first-hand the rich diversity of rural America. I got the opportunity to travel the back roads of Appalachia, visit many small towns of the Black Belt, and many Tribal communities of the Midwest. Here, I recognized and appreciated that rural America is not monolithic. Rural communities have their own unique strengths, needs, and assets.

I have had the privilege of working at USDA Rural Development in two different capacities. I've served as the State Director in Virginia and now I currently serve as Director of State Operations. I want to acknowledge that Rural Development has an outstanding, very knowledgeable workforce that is very dedicated to our mission in rural America.

If I have the honor of being confirmed, I will work with my Rural Development colleagues to implement the priorities of: ensuring our program applications are easier for our customers to access and complete; modernizing Rural Development to better use technology to streamline our work; supporting and investing in our extraordinary workforce; and strengthening our partnerships to better deliver and leverage resources throughout rural America. Through these priorities, we'll continue our work in advancing racial justice, equity, and rural prosperity; strengthening the food supply chain; advancing our clean energy programs; and creating more, and better markets for farmers, ranchers and rural business.

Across America, in every state, very successful people in every career field imaginable were raised in rural communities. I am committed to making sure that rural communities don't just produce talent that is invested in cities, but that they are also able to directly reap the benefit from the values, work-ethic, and community spirit that rural communities have so very well-cultivated. Like my grandparents and their country store, I am committed to promoting community connections that both matter and have a vital impact on the betterment of the society that we envision.

Again, thank you for your time today and I look forward to answering any and all questions that you might have.