

**Statement by
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Under Secretary for Rural Development
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Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today. I am honored and humbled by President Biden's nomination and Secretary Vilsack's support of me to serve as Deputy Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture. I am here today, immensely grateful for the path that brought me before you today. I am the granddaughter of farmworkers and the daughter of educators, and am supported by a wonderful husband, family, and friends in New Mexico and beyond.

When I came before this Committee in 2021 as nominee to serve as Under Secretary of Rural Development, I could not know what lay ahead—years shaped by deeply dedicated public servants, difficult decisions underscoring how fundamentally policy is tied directly to people, and the stories of rural Americans working to stay in the place they call home. We know that a thriving, vibrant agricultural and rural America is essential to the success of our country—they supply the food, fiber, energy and water that feed and power the rest of the nation. The Biden-Harris Administration knows that when rural communities thrive, the nation thrives, and we work to support the vision of rural people and places. I am proud to currently support this work as the Under Secretary of USDA's Rural Development mission area.

Rural Development provides tools to improve housing, wastewater, high-speed internet, business development, and more across rural America. I am grateful to Congress and President Biden for providing resources through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act that have expanded high-speed internet infrastructure and clean energy investments, shaping rural America for years to come. In my time as Under Secretary, I have seen firsthand what happens when you give people the tools to shape their future—producers, workers, business owners, and families can live where they choose and not sacrifice quality of life. Rural Development's core programs support this vision, particularly when we listen and carefully coordinate among federal, state, local, Tribal, and private partners.

Rural Development does not only succeed because of its programs—it succeeds because of its people. As Under Secretary, I have had the privilege of traveling across the country—to many of your home states—to hear from people on the ground, see the impact of Rural Development's work, and visit with my own staff. Rural Development—like many mission areas in USDA—is unique across the federal government. Rural Development has 47 state offices with presence in every state. We have more than 4,000 mission-driven employees across the country who work incredibly hard every day to deliver resources to rural America. These are individuals who have been discouraged by outdated IT systems and slow hiring processes, and have felt the brunt of Department reorganizations that do not prioritize people. Yet, they remain mission driven. They have shared stories of creativity, resilience, and compassion. Their stories make me hopeful too—and give me immense faith in the future of Rural Development and the USDA workforce.

If confirmed, I look forward to carrying the lessons I have learned in my time with Rural Development to the Department of Agriculture. I share Secretary Vilsack’s view that American rural life and agriculture are at a turning point, and USDA plays a pivotal role in the that future. For decades we have prioritized a “get big or get out” mentality that isn’t working. It has resulted in a highly rigid and consolidated food supply chain, and a system that rarely works for a small farmer or rancher. The relentless focus on efficiency—at the expense of all else—has undercut main streets and rural economies, forced Americans away from the rural places they call home, and made it difficult to find opportunities to come back. Our focus on equity is about addressing systemic inequities, giving everyone a fair shot, and making sure that everyone has a seat at the table. Part of modernizing USDA so that it lives up to its name as the People’s Department is about addressing the internal challenges that USDA faces. In the past two years, USDA has climbed to number 12 in the ranks among very large agencies in 2022; however, the Department continues to grapple with thin staffing levels, antiquated technology, low employee morale, and high attrition. Despite this, USDA staff is moving mountains to deliver on USDA’s mission and implement once-in-a generation legislation. The lessons I learned with Rural Development will be critical as we recalibrate—we must center equity and climate, prioritize people, listen to the folks on the ground, and cultivate partnerships that are founded in mutual trust and respect.

When I testified before you in July 2021, I told you that “growing up in New Mexico fundamentally molded who I am: a sunny woman of her word who will always fight for the underdog.” At USDA, those words have taken on new meaning for me. Fighting for the underdog means fighting for people who have a vision but often lack a voice. Keeping your word—in communities that have been let down by the federal government, to USDA employees, and to Congress—becomes paramount in building trust and hope. If confirmed, I look forward to building on this work and ensuring that I continue to build partnerships across the country and in this Committee to better serve our missions at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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