

**Farm Service Agency  
Administrator James R. Little  
Talking Points**

National Hispanic Farmers & Ranchers Conference  
(1<sup>st</sup> Annual)  
February 23, 2004  
San Antonio, Texas

**Introduction**

Thank you Omar Garza for that warm introduction. Bienvenidos. Welcome to the first National Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers Conference. This meeting promises to be outstanding. Mr. Garza, the Texas Mexico Border Coalition has come a long way since its formation five years ago. On behalf of Secretary Veneman and all of us at USDA, I commend you and all the members of your organization for the important work you are doing. I must also say that I am humbled by the fact that I am the first speaker of the conference – on the first day of the first ever National conference for your organization. I am honored that you would ask me.

I greatly value this opportunity to speak here today. As Administrator of the USDA's Farm Service Agency, I am proud of the accomplishments of the Hispanic American community and honored to work in partnership with you to help realize your many dreams and aspirations.

While the total number of farms in the United States has steadily declined by nearly 15 percent, (Note; I delete figures as the new NASS number revises total farms up to 2.1 million in 2002, down from 2.2 in 1997—though the trend is still valid), between 1982 and 1997, the number of Hispanic farms during the same period increased by more than 70 percent, from more than 16,000 to nearly 28,000 farms.

According to preliminary data from the 2002 Census of Agriculture, producers of Latino origin increased by more than 50 percent in the five year period from 1997 to 2002. That is an amazing statistic and a powerful trend for the future of agriculture. It also shows that Hispanic farmers are no longer found only in the southwestern U.S., but are now establishing themselves across the country.

Now – it is **our** responsibility to respond to this increase and work to engage and assist all these new farmers wherever possible. President Bush and Secretary Veneman have made it very clear that we must engage all Americans in the community life of the nation, as it secures our prosperity, our form of government, and our values for ourselves and our children. It is simply the right thing to do.

**FSA Programs**

The Farm Service Agency provides many opportunities for Hispanic producers. For example, we provide:

- Support for traditional commodity crops, including direct and counter-cyclical payments for cotton, corn, rice, peanuts, rice, sorghum, soybeans, oats, barley, and wheat;
- A new peanut marketing loan program like the other marketing loans for the traditional commodity crops;
- An insurance program for crops not covered by Risk Management Agency's traditional insurance programs. This program increases every year and covers many specialty crops grown here in the Southwest.)
- We also have A new Milk Income Loss Contract program for dairy farmers that kicks in when milk prices are low;
- And the Conservation Reserve Program, as well as several other conservation programs.

- And we offer loans and guarantees for farm ownership, farm operations, and Boll Weevil eradication totaling about \$4 billion annually. With our loan programs, I'd like to also mention our Rural Youth Loan Program, which many may not be aware of. This program can help a young person get started in farming or ranching by helping them purchase a cow and start a dairy herd, or even get them started in a lawn maintenance business. And I'd also like to mention that we target some of our funds for beginning farmers, minority farmers, and socially disadvantaged farmers.

I urge you to stop by our booth or one of our service center offices to learn more about our programs.

## **Outreach**

At FSA we work hard to ensure the well being of all of America's farmers and ranchers, regardless of their race, religion, gender or other protected basis. And FSA is committed to helping farmers and ranchers build and maintain successful operations by providing equal access to all of our programs. This is a priority for me and for Secretary Veneman.

FSA's Outreach Program is making great strides in helping limited-resource and underserved farmers and ranchers. Our Outreach efforts are aimed at assisting in bridging any gaps between the services we provide and the participation of minority communities in these programs.

For example, I'm especially proud of the Farm Service Agency's role in two key Outreach partnerships that were formed on behalf of Hispanic small farm and ranching communities in the Southwest and Puerto Rico.

## **Hispanic Farm & Ranch Management Project (HiFarm)**

First, is the Hispanic Farm & Ranch Management project – or HiFarm.

The traditions of farming and ranching are influenced by global markets, the exchange rate, and the weather and environmental concerns. It isn't easy to develop, maintain, and keep a strong, viable foothold in agriculture.

HiFarm is a partnership between FSA and the University of Texas Pan American (UTPA) in cooperation with New Mexico State University's Cooperative Extension Service.

HiFarm aims to increase awareness of FSA's benefits throughout the Southwest Border Region by providing small farmers and ranchers the same opportunities afforded to others to participate in our programs. Our partnerships with these universities help us to expand our knowledge of our clients' specific needs and, in turn, provide producers better access to FSA's resources.

By working in the local communities and in partnerships with colleges and community based organizations, our county offices can provide outreach, training, and technical assistance to small farmers and ranchers. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved.

For the purposes of the HiFarm project, we are concentrating on the regions where the greatest concentrations of Hispanic producers live. There are more than 11,000 Hispanic producers in Texas and New Mexico. More than 7,000 people live in the 56-county Border Region. This region includes 67 percent of the Hispanic operators in Texas and New Mexico, and 27 percent of the Hispanic producers in the United States.

## **Puerto Rico Farm Management Project**

The second project I'd like to mention is the Puerto Rico Farm Management project, which was implemented in 1997, and implemented in cooperation with the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

There are approximately 20,000 Hispanic farmers in Puerto Rico and most are considered small, limited resource farmers. The project is offering technical assistance as well as information about farm management.

Annually, FSA Outreach conducts a Small Farmer Outreach Training and Technical Assistance Program in Puerto Rico that provides beginning farmers with financial analysis and other management tools.

Between the HiFarm Project and the similar Puerto Rico Farm Management Project, we are serving two-thirds of Hispanic producers in the United States. This is an impressive statistic.

### **Technology**

We recognize that Hispanic producers may not be aware of all FSA programs. And I urge you to stop at our booth to learn more, as I mentioned earlier. But we're also trying to get the word out through the Internet and the Web. But we realize that not everyone has ready access to the Web.

FSA is working on making our Web presence more user friendly. Our newly designed site will provide key information about loans, program payments, acres enrolled, and other individual data. Already we have made great strides in technology.

NETMobile, the 38-foot mobile unit you see outside, is available throughout remote areas of the Southwest. NETMobile, which is funded through UTPA's Project FORGE, or the Farm Ownership & Rural Growers Empowerment, is equipped with a nine-computer lab that uses a satellite link to provide high-speed Internet access from most locations.

In many cases we believe that producers may hear about some of the FSA services and farm credit opportunities for the first time ever. Through NETMobile, the strong relationships that UTPA has developed with both the residents and state FSA offices will help our services become more easily available and acceptable to producers. At the same time, we are making advances on other fronts.

We have identified a total of 250 FSA program forms, and we intend to translate all of these into Spanish to enhance access to our programs and services for Hispanic producers. As of mid February, we have contracted to have 38 FSA forms translated. This group includes the primary forms for the Direct Loan Program and the Guaranteed Loan Program Application, among others. All of these forms will be available on the Web and at our county and state offices. The translators have already completed 18 forms and instructions. Assisting the translators is a volunteer review group, consisting of seven bilingual field employees, who are reviewing the final translation.

### **County Committees**

Another arena where we are working hard is minority representation on County Committees. Last year we had a total of 234 Hispanics, elected or appointed to County Office Committees. We are proud and honored to have their service and contributions. But we want to do even better.

- FSA has worked aggressively to ensure that County Committees include minorities and females on the slate of nominees for elections, as we want all of America's farmers and ranchers to have a voice in FSA programs.
- The data for the recent elections held in November and December last year are still being tabulated. But the initial results are encouraging – we're already seeing increases in the numbers of minorities being elected to the county committees. We're counting on our Outreach efforts to result in a more

diverse representation on all of our county committees across the Nation. I believe this representation can and needs to be much larger, so I strongly urge all of you to take part in this democratic process.

You, too, can make a difference on the County Committees. Oscar Vizcarra is a good example of an active participant. His story serves as a role-model for the results we can achieve by working in partnership.

With more birthdays behind him than he'd care to count, Oscar came to America from Peru in 1968 at the age of 16. After learning English, putting himself through high school and college, and marrying a farmer's daughter, Oscar took over his wife's family farm.

He turned a struggling orchard into one of the first direct-marketing operations in New York State. Today, Vizcarra serves on the New York State FSA Committee and still utilizes FSA programs to protect his farm's natural resources as he operates one of the most successful Agri-businesses in New York State. (Oscar and his wife offer visitors a farm experience along with a bakery, a cider mill, hay rides, animals to pet, harvest festivals, and crops to pick in a clean, comfortable environment.)

Oscar's success didn't come without tremendous effort. He is a hardworking entrepreneur. Like so many of your friends and family, he came to this country not knowing the language, culture or people--only seeking an opportunity to provide a better life for himself and his family.

FSA's Outreach Programs work to ensure equal access to USDA programs and services for all constituents -- like Oscar -- and assist them in their efforts to become successful. FSA's Outreach staff works in cooperation with many community-based organizations and non-profit groups that work directly to assist small farm operators in local communities, land grant universities, and Hispanic Serving institutions to achieve these results.

### **Hispanic Serving Institutions National Program**

According to the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, only 10 percent of Hispanics graduate from four-year colleges and universities. To help address the educational challenges faced by Hispanics, USDA has established internship, scholarship, fellowship, and grant programs that work in collaboration with Hispanic-Serving Institutions to improve the educational achievement of Hispanic students and prepare them for successful, rewarding careers.

When the Hispanic Serving Institutions National Program, or HACU, was founded in 1986, it was with 18 institutions located mostly in a handful of southwestern states. Today, HACU campuses are located in 26 states and Puerto Rico. Membership ranges from small community colleges to the massive campuses of the Universities of Michigan and Texas, Penn State and UCLA. Collectively, these diverse institutions serve more than two-thirds of all U.S. Hispanic students seeking higher education. Together, they share a common mission to open more doors to a college education for a population that also makes up the fastest-growing component of the U.S. labor force.

Each summer USDA sponsors a 10-week paid HACU Internship Program. Since 1998, HACU has recruited a total of 152 interns to work at FSA, and even more, USDA-wide. This successful program provides Hispanic college students with the opportunity to explore a potential Federal Service career, while receiving the education they need. In 2002, USDA invested more than \$34 million in educational programs targeting Hispanic students and institutions.

On the loan front, there's also good news. During Fiscal Year 2002, FSA made 463 direct and guaranteed loans to Hispanic farmers and ranchers in the United States. In Fiscal Year 2003, that number jumped by 14 percent, to 530 and \$49 million. We will continue to reach out to Hispanic producers, urging greater participation in all FSA programs. The average direct loan processing time for all applicants is 17 days, whatever the ethnicity, race or gender. And we're working hard to reduce this number even further;

through training of our employees and a stronger collaboration and partnership with our 1890 partners and community based organizations.

In addition to the programs I've mentioned today, there are several other USDA programs that focus on assisting Hispanic producers; Colline Heffren, of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, will share several of these with you.

## **Conclusion**

Although the cultures, geography, and agriculture may differ tremendously across the United States, a common thread ties us all together. That common tie is our dedication to and caring about the land and agriculture as a way of life. Your voice is important to us at FSA. I urge you to participate and vote in the County Committee elections.

Collaboration is a way we can accomplish more with limited resources. What we are doing here today, exchanging ideas and resources, is good for the land, good for business, and good for people all around the world who care about the future of American agriculture.

At FSA, we're placing significant resources towards improving program delivery through information technology. We're in the process of enabling program participation and payment processing from producer's homes or place of business, bringing FSA's delivery system to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a matter of fact, in the not too distant future, USDA will be making available program participation and financial data available on line to customers who sign up for a highly secure login credentials. This will be a tremendous advancement in the President's management agenda.

Helping eligible Hispanic producers understand and take part in all of the farm bill programs and utilize all of our resources, whether they be online or in the office, is a key focus in USDA Service Centers. At FSA, we look forward to increased youthful participation in our internships focused toward Hispanic students. At this critical time, education and outreach is essential, and we look forward to working with you to get the word out on how to best utilize the programs and tools we're providing.

I also want you to know that my door is always open to you, whether to hear about your concerns or success. We want to serve you better and welcome any suggestions you may have on how we could improve our performance. And if we have any shortcomings, I want to know about them so we can take the appropriate action to correct them.

In closing, I simply say thank you for all that you've accomplished in the past and that I know you will continue to strive for excellence in the future. I'd like to thank those of you who put a lot of hard work into making this conference possible.

I've heard a Spanish phrase that I would like to leave you with that I believe describes the point at which we have arrived. *Orgullosa, pero in satisfecho.* "Proud but not satisfied." I am proud of all that we have accomplished together but not satisfied, as there is so much more we can achieve. That is the challenge we face together. I trust that the ideas and information shared at this conference will help us to meet that challenge.

Thanks – to all of you – for your willingness to participate in the National Hispanic Farmers & Ranchers Conference and your contributions to American agriculture. You are making tremendous contributions toward the advancement of Hispanics in American agriculture and the continued growth and prosperity of our economy. I look forward to working with all of you as we continue this exciting partnership.