

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**NATIONAL CAMPAIGN
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE URGES
MINORITY FARMERS TO TELL THEIR STORIES
AT USDA CIVIL RIGHTS HEARING**

HEARING TO TAKE PLACE IN BELZONI ON JANUARY 24TH

The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture today urged minority farmers to attend and speak at a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Civil Rights Listening Session aimed at uncovering discrimination and neglect in program delivery to minority farmers. The session will take place on January 24th in Belzoni, Mississippi.

Lorette Picciano, a member of the Campaign and Executive Director of the Rural Coalition said, "This hearing, along with only 11 other listening sessions, has been scheduled by the USDA in response to reports of widespread discrimination against minority farmers by the USDA.

"It is critical for all minority farmers in the Mississippi region to attend this session so that they can relay their experiences with employees and representatives of USDA. It is an important first step toward eliminating discrimination within this department," she said.

Picciano noted that minorities have had a hard time securing USDA loans and other services and are severely under-represented on local agriculture governing boards.

She noted that "of the 8,378 elected Farm Services Administration County Committee members, only 20 were African American, 33 American Indian and 50 Hispanic." Ben Burkett of the Mississippi Association Of Cooperatives added, "Discrimination in obtaining loans is one of the major reasons that we are losing African-American farmers at three times the rate of farmers nationwide."

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The listening session will take place between 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Friday, January 24th, at the Humphrey County Courthouse in Belzoni, Mississippi. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, along with other USDA officials, will be present at the session.

The Rural Coalition is a national alliance of over 90 community-based organizations in rural areas engaged in promoting participatory and sustainable rural development initiated and guided by communities. The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture is a network of more than 500 groups working to strengthen family farms, protect the environment and foster a sustainable food and agriculture system.

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Remarks:

If we can't track Ben down by this afternoon, I would ~~change Ben's quote to~~ ^{change} I would use the same quote but ~~change~~ ^{mention} mention it from Lorette. I would then ~~add~~ ^{mention} Ben in the paragraph that says who will be in attendance