

House Agriculture Committee

USDA Rural Development: Delivering Vital Programs and Services to Rural America

18 September 2025

Highlights: No specific Tribal food and agriculture mentions. This hearing focused on the urgent need to reauthorize and modernize federal programs that support rural infrastructure, health care, broadband, and economic development. Lawmakers and witnesses emphasized the need for support in streamlining access, increasing funding, and preserving USDA's field staff to ensure rural communities are not left behind.

Witnesses:

- Bette Brand – President and CEO, Strategic Consulting LLC, Former Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Paul Heimel, Commissioner, Potter County, on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo).
- Lynne Keller Forbes, President and CEO, Southeastern Council of Governments, on behalf of the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO).
- Xochitl Torres Small, Former Deputy Secretary and Under Secretary for Rural Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Key Points:

- USDA Rural Development Programs Are Essential to Rural America
 - The hearing emphasized the critical role USDA Rural Development (RD) plays in supporting rural communities through programs that fund infrastructure, broadband, health care, housing, and small business development.
- Programs Highlighted Include:
 - Community Facilities Loan and Grant Program
 - Value-Added Producer Grant Program
 - Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program
 - Rural Business Investment Program
 - Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program
- Farm Bill Reauthorization Is Urgent
 - Many RD programs were reauthorized in the 2024 Farm Food and National Security Act and are set to expire. Witnesses and members stressed the importance of reauthorizing and modernizing these programs to meet current rural needs.
- Access and Equity Challenges Persist
 - Rural communities often lack the staff and technical capacity to navigate complex federal grant applications. Witnesses called for simplified processes, fast-track pathways for small-dollar projects, and better online tools.

- Staffing Shortages Threaten Program Delivery
 - Severe staffing cuts, especially in states like Mississippi, have left USDA RD offices under-resourced. Witnesses warned that this undermines the agency's ability to serve rural communities and implement new Farm Bill provisions.
- Broadband and Digital Infrastructure Are Critical
 - The [ReConnect Program](#) was praised for its speed and flexibility in expanding broadband access. However, concerns were raised about proposed budget cuts and the need to maintain technology-neutral approaches.
- Rural Health Care Is in Crisis
 - Multiple members and witnesses described rural hospital closures, maternity care deserts, and staffing shortages. USDA RD programs like [Community Facilities and B&I](#) guarantees were cited as vital tools to support rural health infrastructure.
- Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Needs Investment
 - Some rural areas still lack access to running water or modern wastewater systems. Witnesses called for increased federal grants and regional collaboration to address these basic needs.
- Child Care Access Is a Growing Concern
 - The lack of affordable and available childcare in rural areas is affecting workforce recruitment and retention. USDA RD's Community Facilities program includes funding for childcare centers, but more support is needed.
- Calls for Modernization and Flexibility
 - Witnesses urged Congress to:
 - De-federalize [Intermediary Relending Program funds](#) to reduce administrative burdens
 - Increase loan limits and grant flexibility
 - Invest in regional planning and technical assistance
 - Preserve USDA's field office network and local partnerships