

News Release
4-16-14

AG PROGRAMS AIMING TO TACKLE RURAL POVERTY IN WEST VIRGINIA

A new U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) initiative in West Virginia will leverage federal resources and local enterprise to help fight poverty in 29 West Virginia counties. While the “StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity” has been active in other states, this is the first time it has been implemented in the Mountain State, according to USDA officials who visited Morgantown and Romney March 14 to officially roll out the program.

“The StrikeForce strategy of partnering public resources with local expertise is helping to grow rural economies and create jobs in persistent poverty communities,” said Dr. Gregory L. Parham, USDA Assistant Secretary for Administration.

State USDA offices in West Virginia – including the Farm Service Agency (FSA), the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Rural Development (RD) – will pool their programs’ resources to place extra focus on StrikeForce counties, according to USDA administrators.

“We have an enormous opportunity to create jobs and keep more of our food dollars at home if we can help farmers become more entrepreneurial in their outlook,” said West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. “Agriculture is the biggest economic opportunity that currently exists in West Virginia. We consume more than \$7 billion in food each year, and we produce less than \$1 billion. And well over half of that value is in the commercial poultry and beef industries, not in fresh fruits and vegetables, nearly all of which are imported from elsewhere.”

An integral part of boosting West Virginia’s agricultural production is the implementation of high-efficiency farming methods. As part of the Strikeforce effort, NRCS anticipates additional funds for building and maintaining seasonal high tunnels – inexpensive, unheated and environmentally friendly structures that can extend growing seasons and dramatically boost production of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Commissioner Helmick noted that the structures are an integral tool for putting West Virginians to work while providing consumers with fresh and healthy fruits and vegetables.

“Having the StrikeForce initiative kick-off here is another example of USDA’s commitment to providing support and targeted technical assistance to local communities ... to find positive solutions for the 29 counties in West Virginia most in need of support and services,” said Kevin Wickey, NRCS State Conservationist.

West Virginia Rural Development Director Bobby Lewis also noted that \$410 million in federal money was spent in West Virginia last year on Rural Development programs that include a wide

variety of low-interest loan programs for housing, infrastructure, business and community facilities.

USDA Food and Nutrition Service Administrator Audrey Rowe pointed out the rising number of working families that receive food assistance. One area of emphasis in the program, she said, would be to encourage awareness of eligibility for food security programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infant and Children (WIC) nutrition program, and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), which is administered by the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA).

According to figures provided by USDA, 85 percent of America's persistent poverty communities are in rural America. StrikeForce has partnered with more than 400 community organizations to support 80,000 projects that have brought nearly \$10 billion in investments to economically depressed areas of rural America.

In West Virginia nearly 20 percent of rural residents and 25 percent of children live at or below the poverty line. Nearly 130,000 children are on the (SNAP), 194,000 children receive free or reduced-cost school lunches, and 46,000 participate in WIC.

West Virginia Strikeforce counties are: Hampshire, Barbour, Randolph, Upshur, Webster, Lewis, Braxton, Nicholas, Clay, Doddridge, Gilmer, Tyler, Pleasants, Ritchie, Calhoun, Wirt, Roane, Fayette, Summers, Mercer, Mason, Cabell, Wayne, Lincoln, Boone, Logan, Mingo, McDowell and Wyoming.