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Small Farms

A Time to Act

A 30-member National Commission on Small Farms was appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture in July 1997 to examine the status of small farms in the United States and to determine a course of action for USDA to recognize, respect, and respond to their needs. Four regional public hearings and three smaller regional meetings were held in 1997.

The Commission's work in capturing and analyzing the testimony of farmers and ranchers is embodied in 146 recommendations in the January 1998 "A Time To Act: A Report of the USDA National Commission on Small Farms," which sets in motion a course of action for USDA in developing policies and programs that better met the needs of small farmers and ranchers.

The [report](#) establishes eight policy goals:

- Recognize the importance and cultivate the strengths of small farms.
- Create a framework of support and responsibility for small farms.
- Promote, develop, and enforce fair, competitive, and open markets for small farms.
- Conduct appropriate outreach through partnerships to serve small farm and ranch operators.
- Establish future generations of farmers.
- Emphasize sustainable agriculture as a profitable, ecological, and socially sound strategy for small farms.
- Dedicate budget resources to strengthen the competitive position of small farms in American agriculture.
- Provide just and humane working conditions for all people engaged in production agriculture.

To achieve these goals, the Report offered dozens of recommendations. Two key ones involved:

- An official description of small farms.
- The development of a Department-wide USDA Small Farm and Ranch Policy that encompasses the vision and guiding principles set forth by the Commission.

The Commission's recommended description of small farms—"*farms with less than \$250,000 gross receipts annually on which day-to-day labor and management are provided by the farmer and/or farm family that owns the production or owns, or leases, the productive assets*"—is a milestone in recognizing small farms' importance and uniqueness. This description set in motion a new way of thinking about small farms' contributions to American agriculture, as did the Commission's recommendation that small farm policy should recognize that small-scale as well as large-scale agriculture should be models for agricultural production in America.

The Commission recognized that small farms should be a major focus of USDA since they possess a unique potential to produce not only foodstuffs but also a variety of economic, social, and environmental goods.

On September 8, 1999, the policy of USDA regarding the importance and role of small farms, ranches, and woodlots to the United States became a [Departmental Regulation](#).

CSREES and other USDA agency representatives meet monthly to gather ideas about and share progress reports about how they are involved in meeting Commission recommendations. A progress report, called "[Building On A Time to Act: A Report by the USDA Advisory Committee on Small Farms](#)," issued in February 2003, distills progress made to date by the USDA in implementing sections of the National Commission on Small Farms Report, "A Time to Act," and responding to recommended priorities abstracted from written testimonies and public hearings from America's farmers and ranchers.