

MEETING OF THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
SSPAC PRODUCER ADVISORY COMMITTEE
(ALL MEETINGS ARE OPEN TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC)

Location: Virtual via Zoom

Contact: Thea Rittenhouse, Farm Equity
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MEETING MINUTES OF SEPTEMBER 16, 2025

Item
No.

(1) WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

(2) ROLL CALL

Present

Justin Miller

Patrick Mitchell

Kerry McGrath

Veronica Mazariegos Anastassiou

Josefina Lara Chavez

Anna Nakamura Knight

Wendy Kornberg

Luis Elizondo

Lovepreet Kaur

Absent- None

CDFA Staff Present

Arima Kozina, Deputy Secretary for Finance and Administration

Thea Rittenhouse, Farm Equity Advisor

Carmen Carrasco- Farm to School Regional Network Lead

Christina Harrington - Farm to Fork Grant Admin & Outreach Specialist

Carney King – Legislative Manager

Lydia Maranga – Staff Services Analyst

(3) CALL TO ORDER

SSPAC Committee Chair Justin Miller called the meeting to order at 1:03 p.m.

(4) CDFA DEPARTMENTAL UPDATES

- Legislative Office

Thea Rittenhouse introduced Carney King, the new CDFA Legislative Manager. Carney introduced himself and said he has been with CDFA for over 3 months, coming from the Legislature. There were no additional updates from the Legislative Office.

- CDFA Budget Update

Arima Kozina, Deputy Secretary of Administration & Finance, gave an overview of the budget process and the steps it goes through before reaching the Governor's Office for approval through a signed budget act. CDFA introduced trailer bill SB105 that amends the original budget to include funding appropriations for Proposition 4, and the Cap and Invest Program reauthorization. SB105 went through the Senate on September 12.

The Budget Change Proposal (BCP) for Proposition 4 totaling \$169.4 million is for supporting the existing Healthy Soils and the State Water Efficiency and Enhancement (SWEET) Programs and four new programs including a Certified Mobile Farmer's Market program, Year-round Certified Farmer's Market, Tribal Food Sovereignty grant program, and Regional Farm Equipment sharing program. For the farmer's markets programs, CDFA proposed \$9.6M per year over 2 years, and \$200,000 for Tribal Sovereignty and Equipment sharing programs in the 1st year to cover administrative staffing needs. The Senate did not approve an Administrative Procedure Act (APA) exemption to exempt the Agency from going through a regulatory process for program development as with past bonds, but the compromise was that emergency regulations could be introduced as outlined in the trailer bill to put programs through the Office of Administrative Law faster. All else proposed in the Governor's budget moved forward.

On the Cap and Invest program, Arima said CDFA appropriated \$7 million from years 25/26 from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction (GHG) fund for the Alternative Manure Management Program and the Dairy Digester Research and Development Program. This funding was already intended for GHG reduction fund and it's not new funding, but money from a previous budget bill that CDFA asked to be shifted to this year.

Committee member Luis Elizondo asked how CDFA is planning to prepare in terms of staffing needs to accommodate grantees, given the new programs and existing programs. Arima said CDFA is working on addressing internal resource challenges and explained that Proposition 4 funding has a 5% maximum allocation for administrative overhead and because these grants will be longer term, CDFA will have to stretch these dollars over 3 years. This puts the Agency in a difficult position in trying to balance its bandwidth, while getting the funding out the door as quickly as possible.

Luis Elizondo asked if CDFA plans on developing mechanisms to make access to advance payments easier for farmers, as guidelines seem to vary from program to program and many farmers depend on advance payments for program implementation. Arima responded that funding that comes from a bond has stricter rules and oversight than funds that come from General Fund so CDFA will have to review guidance on the bond as a whole to see what is allowed for advance payments and be as upfront as they can.

Thea Rittenhouse added that Prop 4 includes provisions for programs to include technical assistance, so if farmers need help with the advance payment process, they can get the support they need. CDFA will evaluate how to maximize staff and resources for technical

assistance either directly or through block grant organizations. Longer application periods will also help.

Public comment- None

- Farm to Community Food Hubs Grant Program

Christina Harrington, Outreach Specialist with Farm to Fork, recapped the Farm to Community Food Hubs grant program's timeline and presented on the 12 awarded projects receiving a total of \$13.7M in grant funds for planning projects under Track 1 and infrastructure and operations under Track 2. One third of awardees are food producers, 17% are either a Tribe or Tribal non-profit, and most awardees have been in operation for less than 5 years. Christina mentioned that Track 2 recipients will be directly serving and sourcing from 159 farmers and ranchers.

Of the producers that will be supported, almost 100% are using sustainable climate smart or regenerative agriculture practices, almost 100% are operating on 500 acres or less, and over 70% are Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFRs).

Christina said that this was a highly competitive grant program, receiving 165 applications requesting \$140M, which is 11 times more than funding that is available. Christina shared a breakdown map of the awardees' service areas.

Public Comment- None

- Farm Equity Program Updates

Thea informed the committee of the USDA cancellation of the Southwest Regional Food Business Center project effective September 15. CDFA was a partner in the UCANR-led, multi-state effort funded that supported a range of activities, including direct grants and technical assistance for food and farm businesses.

Thea said that unfortunately, Carmen Carrasco's time was 100% funded by this grant. Due to time constraint, it was not feasible to find other sources of funding for Carmen to stay in the Farm Equity Office, so she will be transferring to the Farm to School Program as the Greater Los Angeles Regional Network Lead. Thea will continue to search for permanent funding for staffing and expansion of the Farm Equity Office and continue to support small-scale producers.

Committee members thanked Carmen for unwavering support and the impact she made on supporting the committees. Carmen thanked Committee members and said she's available for any questions or support.

Public Comment- None

(5) ACTION ITEM - Approval of May 22, 2025, Meeting Minutes

Committee members present unanimously approved the May 2025 Meeting Minutes.

(6) DISCUSSION ITEMS

- BIPOC Advisory Committee Update

Hung Doan, BIPOC Advisory Committee Chair said that the BIPOC Advisory Committee met earlier this week to discuss similar agenda items and updates as in this meeting. One of BIPOC discussion items was the recommendations framework developed by the BIPOC Subcommittee for enhancing CDFA block-grant model programs including Office of Agricultural Resilience and Sustainability (OARS) programs, The BIPOC committee discussed different processes within the block-grant model, how to strengthen them and add more accountability.

Recommendations included application periods in alignment with planting cycles, prioritizing regions, stronger data management, and more transparency across processes to improve equity and accountability. Key points included were risk assessment of block-grant applicants, organizational capacity, payment timeline for applicants, and funding allocations for SDFRs. The BIPOC Advisory Committee submitted the recommendations to the Environmental Farming Act Science Advisory Panel (EFA SAP) and OARS Division Director Tawny Mata attended the meeting to address the recommendations and next steps for their implementation within OARS block-grant programs.

Thea Rittenhouse said that the recommendations framework be shared with the SSPAC Committee via email to share them as needed.

Hung K Doan said that the CDFA small farms survey for defining small scale farmers that the Farm Equity Office developed for the SSPAC Advisory Committee members was also shared with the BIPOC Committee, and members will be submitting their responses. SSPAC Chair Justin Miller reminded members of this committee to complete the form if they have not done so.

Public comment: None

- SGC Agricultural Land Equity Taskforce (ALEFT) Update

Thea Rittenhouse reiterated that the ALEFT was created two years ago through legislation and is overseen by the Strategic Growth Council. The ALEFT has been moving through a public process of developing a draft recommendations report for the Governor and the legislature to address land equity for underserve producers and Tribal land stewards in California. ALEFT has assigned different topics in the recommendations to internal working groups, which have been hosting separate meetings on their topics. ALEFT has received interagency feedback from state partners and there are still opportunities to get involved. The group will host their next meeting in Ventura on October 14 & 15, and they will welcome all public comments. The report is due in December thus if SSPAC Committee members want to provide feedback, now is the time.

- SSPAC Subcommittee Update

SSPAC Chair Justin Miller thanked SSPAC Subcommittee Chair Josefina Lara Chavez and other members for their work in drafting the emergency definitions for small scale farmers. Josefina shared a copy of the final emergency definitions document and said that Thea presented it at CDFA Directors' meeting, and it will be posted on the Farm Equity Office's website. Thea said that CDFA will be sharing it with staff and other State agencies to be

used as a resource. Josefina asked if the Office of Public Affairs could issue a press release and Thea confirmed they can.

Josefina mentioned the importance of the emergency definitions document and how it can be used to influence programs that will impact small farms across the State and asked SSPAC members to share with other organizations.

Public Comment- None

(7) DISCUSSION ITEM- California Definition of Small-scale Agriculture

Thea reiterated the importance of hearing perspectives from different experts on small scale operations in California to help inform the direction of the definition and next steps. Thea also asked committee members to give suggestions on what other type of information will be needed or speakers.

The panelists invited provided an overview on the definition of small-scale farms. The presenters indicated that while the committee endeavors to define this term, there are many other significant factors that need to be considered given the diverse agricultural activities in California. Below is a summary of each presentation.

Ruth Dahlquist-Willard, Interim Director of UC SAREP

The presentation defines small farms in California as operations that are typically small in acreage, produce niche or culturally significant crops, and use alternative marketing strategies such as direct sales, farmers markets, CSAs, and agritourism. These farms often lack access to traditional commodity-based support systems and may be operated by beginning, immigrant, or historically underserved farmers. Definitions vary by program, but common criteria include acreage (e.g., under 80 or 200 acres), farming practices, gross sales thresholds (e.g., under \$500,000), crop diversity, and direct-to-consumer sales. The definition is purpose-driven, meaning it may shift depending on regulatory, economic, or support program goals. Ruth said that it is important to define small farms for regulatory programs because often, smaller farms have a lower risk for certain regulatory issues that might be affecting them disproportionately. Economies of scale might allow larger farms with more staff and resources to comply with regulation or absorb the costs of compliance. Another reason for defining small farms is to make sure that we don't lose the societal benefits that small farms bring, like locally grown produce available to communities that support local and regional economies. Food security is often connected with small farms in local communities, on-farm biodiversity might be higher, both crop and non-crop, and there's also the question of whether we want farming to remain available in this State and country as an entry level profession. Ensuring that small farms have equitable access to resources may require different criteria for incentive programs, grant programs, loans, crop insurance designed to support a diversity of farm sizes, marketing strategies and crops.

Committee member Luis Elizondo asked about how beekeepers are defined in this context, or which category do they fit. Ruth, the presenter responded that in terms of operation, it depends on the sales. It was further discussed that the definition of small farms may depend on the purpose of the program. In addition, different criteria might be needed to achieve different goals.

John Stephens, Deputy Regional Director, USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA NASS)

John Stephens provided a history of the Census of Agriculture, which is conducted every 5 years and covers every aspect of US agriculture, and it includes farms, ranches, and people who operate them. The Ag Census looks at the land use, production practices, expenditures, and other factors that affect the way farmers do businesses. The power of the census is its ability to visualize and understand what changes in agriculture are at US state county levels. The average farm size in California is 383 acres, which is 100 acres smaller than the average American farm. A large component of the Census of Ag data is summarized by the value of production or total sales. This farm typology release shifts the definition and reports to farms based on the gross cash farm income, or GCFI, which includes the producer sales of crops and livestock, bees for delivering commodities under protection production contracts, government payments and farm related income. The USDA's definition of farming is a place where \$1,000 or more of agricultural products are produced or sold during the census year. The current definition was established in 1974. While there has been ongoing debate in Congress about revising this definition, challenges remain, especially since some individuals may not consider themselves farmers. For example, someone receiving zero or minimal COP payments, or a person growing Christmas trees without selling anything that year, may still qualify as a small farm. USDA uses GCFI to group farms—such as small, moderate, midsize, large, very large, and non-family farms. Among these, 74% of small farms are family-owned, with most reporting low sales. USDA data helps inform how small farms are defined, often based on value of production.

Stephens let the members know that if they have questions, they can write them through NASDA and those will be routed to him. Stephens can also set up a zoom call for any questions regarding how to pull out data.

Luis Elizondo asked how much information is available on beekeepers to help inform programs. John Stephens responded that the USDA conducts several surveys, typically distinguishing between beekeeping farms and regular small farms. The data collection is national in scope, and they do not break it down to the state level due to cost constraints. USDA often collaborates with other agencies, such as CDFA. In general, data collection is expensive and often, the industry gets the information quicker to be able to set prices and for farmers to plan more effectively.

Shermain Hardesty - Professor of Cooperative Extension-Emerita Agricultural & Resource Economics, University of California, Davis

Shermain Hardesty began her presentation by stating that small farms in California are important due to the historical varieties that get lost when a small farm turns into a large operation that starts to sell across the country and exporting, thus they are forced to look at the shelf life of a product and yet, smaller farms are still growing these varieties.

Shermain presented small farms as a definition relating to land development in California, and how often, they are seen as a piece of land that can be taken for housing development.

Shermain said that in her research, small farms in California have a \$500,000 GCFI instead of the \$350,000 that the USDA uses, and those small farms generate 5% of California's agricultural revenues, and 11% do direct sales. Small farms have also diversified into selling to food hubs and institutions, and retail markets. Shermain presented other statistics related to small farms, and reiterated John's comments about how California is so different from other states in terms of crop diversity.

Thea Rittenhouse acknowledged Shermain's work as the initial Director of the UCABR Small Farms Program, and her experience and research on challenges that small farms face in California.

Ruth Dahlquist-Willard introduced the new Assistant Director for the UC Small Farms Program Carrie Teiken to the Committee.

Josefina Lara Chavez asked about the next steps on the definition of small farms. Justin Miller said that SSPAC members should complete the small-scale farms survey to put all insights together and be able to decide next steps. Justin added that the topic is large enough for the full committee to discuss instead of forming a subcommittee and asked for ideas on how to share the survey with more groups. Justin suggested Committee member Luis Elizondo take the survey to the Apiary Commission, and reiterated small farms in California are unique in areas such as labor costs, high number of organic farmers and the cost of inputs, sales venues, and that is important to examine other data.

Thea Rittenhouse informed the committee members of different materials that were shared prior to the meeting including a summary of what exists in terms of definitions of small farms at different levels. Thea asked committee members on the speakers they would like to hear from, and the group took time during the meeting to fill out the small-scale farm survey.

Justin Miller said that he feels the definition needs more pieces, and his motivation behind a California definition is to ensure the overall growth of agriculture in the State. Justin said there are other areas that must be considered, such as the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) regulations, sustainability, farm tenure, and fair representation of farmers.

Josefina Lara Chavez suggested that members should also focus on defining family farms.

Patrick Mitchell, committee member, urged members to take seriously the things they heard or learned today and the importance of having a clear definition.

Committee member Wendy Kornberg pointed out that California's statistics on small farms don't match the national demographics so a state definition is necessary, and although she can see how this might be an issue with federal grants, she thinks that overall, this could be beneficial for California farmers.

Committee member Anna Nakamura Knight commented that her takeaway from the presentations is that having a model with certain criteria such as acreage or GCFI, followed by check boxes where a small farmer checks 2 or X number of boxes might be a good fit, considering the big variation that exists in California agriculture. Anna said that based on John's presentation, she understood that if the USDA definition of small farms does not work for California, the importance of data collection at the state level cannot be understated.

Wendy Kornberg agreed on a model that uses some type of formula, such as the number of employees times the amount of acreage divided by the farm's GCFI.

Anna suggested leaning in and leverage robust data that's already being collected, given the cost of data gathering. On the small-scale farm survey, Anna commented that she feels ill qualified to answer some of the questions.

Justin Miller said he examined the data that John shared and he feels it contains good information to help the group develop a state definition, and likes the idea to build a checklist, or formula.

John Stephens told members that it might be super expensive to conduct their own survey, but that the USDA has a team that can do specialty tabulations by looking at the census data and might be able to cut data in a specific way for a minimal fee.

John reiterated that USDA's quick stats program is not easy to navigate through but there are opportunities to tap into. For instance, if you are looking for a certain operation, you will be able to see details such as number of people in the operation and operation cost.

Veronica pointed out that she also does not feel confident in answering some of the questions in the survey, especially those pertaining to ranging. Veronica said that it also depends on the crop type. Some farmers are doing annual crops and rotation, and the one that is managing the amount of acreage might not be necessarily growing all the acreage. Veronica wondered how that could be captured in the data collection. Also, some counties like hers do not count farmers that don't sell in farmers' markets or don't apply pesticides, and those are the only two ways they collect data, so farmers like her are not found in the system/data bases. Justin echoed Veronica's concern.

Thea Rittenhouse acknowledged the gaps that exist in the SSPAC Committee in terms of representation of livestock operations and ranching and suggested bringing a guest speaker for the December meeting to provide that perspective. Wendy Kornberg agreed and suggested the survey gets tailored and shared with ranchers to get their perspective.

Thea clarified that the survey was originally intended for members of the SSPAC Committee and said the questions might have to be changed if the survey will be serving a larger audience or different sectors, or the group can review the questions at the December meeting.

Wendy said she could reach out to the Cattleman's Association to get ideas on the questions they would feel comfortable answering to get their feedback, and having

someone present at the next meeting would be important. Member Patrick Mitchell suggested including the perspective of a dairy farmer, urban agriculture farmer, and micro farms.

Justin Miller asked committee members to take time to talk to their communities, think about the presenters they would like to see at the next meeting, and their own definition of a small farm to brainstorm collectively. Thea suggested that a speaker on agritourism is also available at the committee's request. Justin welcomed the idea.

Public Comment- None

(8/9) TOPICS FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

The following speakers were suggested for the December meeting:

- a. Ranching
- b. Dairy perspective
- c. Urban perspective and micro farms
- d. Agritourism

The next meeting will be Tuesday December 2, 2025

(10) PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment

(11) CLOSING COMMENTS AND ADJOURNMENT

Thea stated that the data from the small-scale farm survey will be shared with the Committee before the next meeting in December.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:55 pm