

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

Location: Virtual via Zoom

Contact: Thea Rittenhouse, Farm Equity
Advisor

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MEETING MINUTES OF SEPTEMBER 16, 2025

Item
No.

(1) WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse welcomed all participants.

(2) ROLL CALL

Present

Qi Zhou

Hung K Doan

Arshdeep Singh

Kenneth Sparks

Minkah Taharkah

Tania Zuñiga Moreno

Mireya Gomez-Contreras

Lena Ortega

Emily Burgueno

Dennis Hutson (11:20 AM)

Absent

Don Sherman

Javier Cruz

CDFA Members Present

Christine Birdsong, Undersecretary

Thea Rittenhouse, Farm Equity Advisor

Carmen Carrasco- F2S Regional Network Lead

Christina Harrington - Farm to Fork Grant Admin & Outreach Specialist

Carney King – Legislative Manager

Tawny Mata- OARS Director

Carolyn Cook- OARS Program Manager

Scott Weeks- Senior Environmental Scientist

Lydia Maranga – Staff Services Analyst

Public Attendance

None

(3) CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 10:08 a.m. by Hung Doan.

CDFA's Undersecretary of Agriculture Christine Birdsong welcomed all to the meeting and thanked committee members for working through the issues together.

Thea Rittenhouse introduced Carney King, CDFA's new Legislative Manager. Carney King introduced himself and said he has been with CDFA for over 3 months.

(4) CDFA DEPARTMENTAL UPDATES

Legislative Office- There were no updates provided by the Legislative Office.

CDFA Budget Update- Arima Kozina, Deputy Secretary of Administration & Finance Arima.

Arima gave an overview of the budget process and steps involved before the budget reaches the Governors' office for approval. Budget items that were not part of the signed budget act are reintroduced through trailer bills. CDFA is tracking trailer bill SB105 that went through the Senate on September 12 for funding appropriations under Proposition 4, and the Cap and Invest program reauthorization through 2045.

Arima said that in June, CDFA had several proposals for the Governor's office including a \$169.4 million Budget Change Proposal (BCP) for Proposition 4. CDFA also included an Administration wide BCP for the staffing positions to administer Prop 4 funds. These BCPs were not approved in the signed budget act but there were other CDFA programs like Farm to School and Sustainable Pest Management that were. BCPs for funding reappropriations to help CDFA administer funds that are needed for next year or extend encumbrance or liquidation dates also moved through the budget.

Arima reviewed CDFA's Proposition 4 trailer bill budget proposal which includes funding for 5 existing programs (Urban Agriculture, Healthy Soils Program, State Water Efficiency and Enhancement Program, the Invasive Species Council project, and upgrades for the Fair & Expositions' Community Resilience Centers). Prop 4 will also fund 4 new Programs including 2 certified farmer's market programs, Tribal Food Sovereignty Program and Regional Farm Equipment Sharing Program. Arima mentioned guidance from stakeholders and the BIPOC Committee members will be appreciated for the development of these programs. As of today, the Prop 4 trailer bill has not been signed by the Governor.

On the Cap and Invest program, Arima said that AB 1207 and SB 840 would extend the program and reauthorize it through 2045. Cap and Invest defines the requirements for gas emission compliance offset, continuing the California Climate Credit. Through reauthorization, 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.

Committee Chair Hung K. Doan asked if Arima knows when the trailer bill for Proposition 4 will be signed. Arima stated that the process is complicated but given that the bill passed the Senate on Sept. 12th, there is an obligation for the Governor to act soon. Legislative Manager Carney King added that October 12 is the deadline for the Governor to act on bills.

Arima further stated that CDFA cannot spend any funds or begin program development until Proposition 4 is signed. While an RFP can be developed, CDFA cannot charge any costs until the appropriation is signed. She noted that because an Administrative Procedure Act (APA) exemption to develop an RFP and publish it without developing program regulation was not granted by the Senate, emergency regulations could be introduced as outlined in the trailer bill to put programs through the Office of Administrative Law faster, but this will take at least 30 days, which can also further delay program implementation. CDFA also wants to consider farming seasons when developing grant application cycles.

Hung K Doan asked for an estimate on the program implementation pushback, Arima said it is around 5-6 months.

Public Comment- None

Farm to Community Food Hubs Grant Program- Outreach Specialist, Office of Farm to Fork

Christina Harrington provided an update on the Farm to Community Food Community Hubs Program, which awarded \$13.75 million in grant funds to 12 projects between Track 1 Planning and Track 2, Infrastructure and Operations. Christina said that among grant recipients were agricultural food producers, Native American Tribes and Tribal led non-profits, and applicants operating for five years or less. Christina shared a regional breakdown of the grantees' service areas.

Based on application information, Track 2 awardees will serve at least 159 producers, of which almost 100% are using climate smart or regenerative ag practices, operate on 500 acres or less, and 71% are Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFRs).

Christina said she is currently developing grant agreements with recipients, and she hopes projects can start in early December. She has also been meeting with recipients that were not selected to provide them with feedback.

Committee member Arshdeep Singh asked what type of feedback applicants who were not selected will receive. Christina explained that she will share application scores and comments from reviewers including strengths and areas of improvement. Christina will offer to share the score sheets, and inform applicants about other funding opportunities, and technical resources.

Member Singh asked if the program shares the selection criteria with the public and award amounts. Christina explained that project summaries and award amounts are publicly available, and that the selection was guided by established criteria in the grant

program, including technical score and geographic distribution. There was also funding allocation for some categories like tribal-led nonprofits and Tribes.

Committee member Minkah Taharkah asked how geographical regions were considered in the awards, and the regional breakdown. Christina explained that the selection was based on four program criteria layers. Christina said they tried to find a balance between the scores and geographic distribution, and that priority areas like underserved communities or food insecurity density were not assigned additional points as this was not in the language of the legislation.

Minkah asked what could be done to reduce local and regional issues that affect underserved communities. Member Kenneth Sparks, followed with a question on whether demographic information and equity had been taken into consideration and collected. Christina responded that it had not but suggested a survey to gather data can be sent out from the Office of Farm to Fork. Thea said that CDFA is working on standardizing information collection, with a focus on prioritizing support for disadvantaged communities and hopes she can discuss those efforts during the Committee's December meeting. Thea added that Proposition 4 dollars specify prioritization of projects supporting disadvantaged communities and historically underserved groups. Minkah emphasized the importance of sharing information and creating space for connection. Arshdeep expressed concern about many awards that seemed to be concentrated in Northern California, which he felt was unbalanced in comparison to the San Joaquin Valley.

Small-Scale Producer Advisory Committee Chair Justin Miller commented that he felt awards were given to various diverse communities. Christina said a survey can provide more specific data and mentioned that although scoring points based on demographics were not part of the scoring rubric, these priorities are reflected in the populations and groups some of the Farm to Community Food Hubs awardees are serving within the networks.

Farm Equity Program Updates- Thea Rittenhouse, Farm Equity Advisor

Thea Rittenhouse gave an update on the Southwest Regional Food Business Center project, which was cancelled by the USDA as of September 15th. This project aimed to support small food and farm businesses across 4 partner states including California through technical assistance and a business builder grant program. 100% of Carmen's time was on that program and Carmen has been transferred to CDFA's Farm to School Program as the Greater Los Angeles Regional Network Lead. This is a loss for the Farm Equity Program, and 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 the members for allowing her to serve them.

Hung asked how much the Equity program is affected by the cut in federal funding, and if this will affect the travel budget for future in person meetings of the BIPOC Advisory Committee. Thea stated that the Farm Equity Program has a separate budget that includes travel and is not affected by Federal cuts, although it has been reduced.

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

Small-Scale Producer Advisory Committee (SSPAC) Update- Chair Justin Miller

Justin presented the final framework of emergency definitions for small-scale farmers developed by the SSPAC subcommittee. Revisions to the framework included pest quarantines, as they are considered natural, but they will be reviewed in the future for better categorization. Other items on the list of emergencies are biological outbreaks of pests and disease, water contamination, extreme weather impacts like storms, floods, tornadoes, fire, smoke, severe wind damaging crops, and policy implications, as they affect small farms significantly, and SGMA regulations.

Justin said that SSPAC is preparing to work on a CA State definition of small farms that will serve as a foundation to better serve small farms. Justin said small farmers California have diverse market and sales structures, different scales, farm equipment, labor and maintenance costs and that all these characteristics should be considered in the definition. The SSPAC would also like to include feedback from livestock producers.

A survey will be sent out to the BIPOC committee to provide their input on the characteristics of small farms, and the SSPAC will bring back the definition to the BIPOC Committee for additional feedback once they have a draft.

Committee member Arshdeep Singh asked if the emergency definitions framework will be shared with CDFA for review, or consideration in program development. Justin said the report has already been shared with Secretary Ross.

Arshdeep suggested that when these items are realigned, growers should be informed and their feedback considered. Justin emphasized the importance of supporting small-scale producers in their growth toward becoming larger farms. He highlighted the need for both the committee and the public to participate in defining what "small-scale" means to better serve those farmers and that producers also need recognition for their sustainability efforts.

Hung K Doan asked if predictable events like Santa Ana winds in the Coachella Valley are considered emergency events, and if there are guidelines to follow to justify them as out of the norm. Justin responded that events like strong summer winds that damage a farmer's structure or crops are not considered normal and should be included in the emergencies.

SSPAC Subcommittee Chair Josefina Lara Chavez provided examples of extreme weather events in different regions that were historical occurrences. BIPOC Committee member Kenneth Sparks mentioned tropical storms in Riverside County that were unexpected.

For the next steps for the emergency definitions, Thea highlighted the importance of being prepared for emergencies. The goal is to ensure local agencies are aware of these emergencies so they can respond more effectively. This information has been shared with Christine Birdsong, the Undersecretary and Secretary Ross, and will be shared across CDFA and other state agencies.

Public comment: None

SGC Agricultural Land Equity Taskforce Update- Qi Zhou, ALEFT Liaison

Qi Zhou gave an overview of the goal of the Agricultural Land Equity Task Force (ALEFT), which is to develop policy recommendations to the Governor's office to increase land access for underserved producers and landowners and Tribal nations. Qi provided an update on the draft recommendations and the outreach, community engagement and site visits that the taskforce has been doing in different regions. ALEFT has also hosted experienced professionals working on equity issues and underserved communities as guest speakers and collected public feedback via surveys.

ALEFT has been working closely with the Strategic Growth Council (SGC) staff and in the last 3 months they have been doing research and created 6 working groups to focus on different goals of the draft recommendations.

The first draft of the recommendations came out in August, and the taskforce is still collecting public input. The draft is available on the SGC's website and Qi Zhou asked BIPOC Committee members to submit questions or comments to SGC staff via email. The public is also welcome to attend any taskforce meetings in person or virtually to submit their comments. The next meeting will be on Oct 15-16 in Ventura County, and the November meeting will be in Oakland.

Thea said there are many topics on the draft recommendations that align with this committee, such as SGMA regulations and land access for Tribes. The ALEFT recommendations report will be finalized in December, around the time the BIPOC Committee meets again. The working groups are meeting weekly until their October meeting, and BIPOC Committee members are welcome to join to make comments.

BIPOC member Emily Burgueno who is an ALEFT member, commented that they have received invaluable feedback during in-person engagement sessions with Tribal communities. At these sessions, Emily provides a synopsis of the draft recommendations and shares updates on specific points of interest for Tribal members and farm workers.

Public Comment- None

CDFA Block-Grant Model Program Recommendations Response- Tawny Mata, OARS Director, Tawny Mata

Tawny thanked the BIPOC Committee for developing the recommendations for enhancing block-grant programs of CDFA's Office of Agricultural Resilience and Sustainability (OARS). Tawny said she presented the recommendations to the Environmental Farming Act- Scientific Advisory Panel (EFA SAP) at their August quarterly meeting.

Tawny shared that CDFA is in the process of receiving funding from Proposition 4 that will fund some of OARS block grant programs like Healthy Soils and SWEEP. OARS plans to continue to administer these programs as block grants. Tawny acknowledged receiving the recommendations framework noting that most -but not all- of the feedback applies to OARS block grant programs. Tawny said that she organized the list of recommendations into four categories: Solicitation process for block grantees, standardization of requirements for block grantees, program assessment, and managing complaints. Tawny explained that some points can be addressed through a program's Request for Proposal (RFP), and some through the Grant Award Procedures (GAP) Manual, which she referenced in the detailed response letter she sent to the BIPOC Committee.

Tawny said that when the EFA SAP last reviewed OARS block grant programs, there was no funding available, but as of last Friday, new funding has been allocated, which allows OARS to look at ways of incorporating some of the feedback received from this committee into the draft RFPs for different programs. Additionally, the draft RFPs will go out for public comment as part of the process, which can be another opportunity for Committee members and the broader public to provide more input. Tawny asked the Committee if they wanted to address the recommended points one by one or if they wanted to focus on specific points.

Member Arshdeep Singh commented that one of the areas of complaints from farmers is on the standardization of the requirements for program implementation and asked about the type of changes that are expected in this area.

Tawny Mata said that she understands the need for CDFA to provide block-grant organizations with more technical assistance and treat agreements as grants and not contracts to offer more flexibility to grantees and provide them with technical assistance to guide and mentor them as well as regular check-ins. Tawny said that she's reluctant to full standardization of program implementation to allow block grantees to bring innovative ways for program administration but instead, OARS could offer more proactive support. Tawny said that it is important for CDFA to intervene in areas like the application selection process to make sure it is fair and transparent, publicized broadly and accessible online, but said some standards can be set. Tawny said OARS will still allow block grantees to run and administer their own programs in a way that makes sense for their region, but considering the feedback about setting expectations for payment turnaround times for farmers. Some of the issues with payments in the past have been with CDFA and how strict the Agency can get about reimbursing block grantees, and that's why it's important to move away from the contract management mindset into a grant management mindset where the Agency is more generous, supportive and flexible with block grantees.

Arshdeep Singh agreed and said that CDFA should not monitor block grantees to the minute level and suggested CDFA provides them with a program implementation

framework or timeline that growers can use for planning purposes and give block grantees an opportunity to review and adjust those timelines as they move through their programs.

Tawny said OARS has created a framework both for the application and assessment of progress that outlines objectives and metrics. CDFA will also ask block grantees to specify the project execution timeline and objectives in their full application, and OARS staff will provide technical assistance during the application process to review the tasks and guide applicants through realistic timelines and make 1:1 technical assistance available for applicants. In the past, CDFA has been punitive both with growers and block grantees and OARS wants to step away from that as these are grant programs not contracts, so there should be a balance between having good standards and the ability to be flexible.

Arshdeep Singh inquired about the timeline for applications. Tawny said it is under discussion as there are pending clarifications about the bond funding. CDFA did not get an APA exemption from the standards that will draw the timeline, but CDFA could resort to emergency regulations to get through the process faster. Thea added that for Prop 4 funded programs, CDFA will allow enough time for program discussion, flexible timelines and advance notices for solicitation periods for farmers and block-grant organizations, especially considering the upcoming holidays.

Tawny Mata asked the Committee for clarification on the confidential complaint mechanism outlined in the recommendations.

Hung K Doan commented that because block grant organizations have different application and documentation requirements, producers feel some organizations overstep boundaries; like asking for unnecessary information. Hung mentioned that CDFA Program staff running the program might also have biases over an organization or applicant, thus the producers would not feel comfortable submitting a complaint to CDFA programs' staff out of fear their application will be rejected or face retaliation. Hung suggested CDFA create a public flow of command with contact information or anonymous email address. Tawny asked if the complaint about block grantee behavior would be directed to OARS staff anonymously. Hung said yes, but also to Tawny as Director if there are issues with OARS staff.

Tawny said that the program could require block grantees to have websites and include contact information for the general OARS inbox, where people can submit complaints to, and include language about confidentiality. Regarding general complaints about CDFA staff, Tawny said that is something that CDFA needs to work on a Departmental scale, beyond programs.

Hung asked whether the names of those who reviewed block grant applications could be shared publicly after the grants have been awarded. Tawny said there's no issue letting people know who was on the review committee since this is public information, but the reviews themselves must remain anonymous. Tawny emphasized having a more diverse technical review committee that includes producers for this round of block grants.

Hung asked if CDFA considers the public reputation of an organization before awarding a large award. Tawny said that it would be concerning to allow the public to try to interfere with a grant before an agreement is signed, but OARS may consider requiring letters of support from local organizations to garner local community support.

Hung said that some growers are also concerned about block grant organizations requesting more personal data, as many are undocumented. Tawny said she understands the concern and clarified that tracking the amount of funding that went into Disadvantaged Communities (DAC's), severely vulnerable, and vulnerable populations including SDFRs, small farmers and veteran farmers is a Prop 4 funding obligation for CDFA but hopes this will be at a basic level and anonymous. The requirement will be included in the GAP manual and training for grantees, so they are aware they need to collect data but also protect it. CDFA also has a program publicity policy, specifying that photos of program recipients are optional.

Tawny said that OARS is planning to conduct grower surveys as part of their program assessment plan, and some of the questions included in the recommendations will be helpful to gather more direct feedback.

Arshdeep mentioned that the complaints he has heard from growers have been 100% with block grant organizations, not CDFA staff.

Tawny said all the feedback provided is invaluable on the training and technical assistance for block grantees and in-depth orientation on how to manage their grants, privacy concerns for growers and what information is optional to provide including photos, and how to protect data.

On a question from Hung about how regularly CDFA staff meet with block grantees, Tawny said OARS holds monthly office hours, but HSP and SWEEP meet regularly with grantees. She said that the first round was missing a more rigorous framework for organizations and check-in meetings. Moving forward, OARS will set specific objectives and metrics for block grantees, and they can set their own regional service goals.

Tawny asked the Committee about suggestions on doing outreach to new potential block grant organizations, especially those serving BIPOC producers, and welcomed suggestions for direct outreach to specific organizations.

Ideas shared by Arshdeep included commodity group organizations, local radio shows that focus on agriculture, booths at public events, and direct engagement with growers and their communities. Hung suggested local UCANR Farm Advisors and organizations doing similar work in the area.

Committee member Emily Burgueno asked about Tribal outreach, and Tawny said OARS is planning a Healthy Soils Program funding set aside for Tribes and will be doing separate outreach with Tribal nations, including feedback on the practices.

Thea emphasized that Proposition 4 funding will require government to government consultation, and she envisions these sessions to be combined with other smaller events

like the ALEFT regional engagement sessions. Thea will help Tawny's team organize similar sessions to inform programs like Healthy Soils. Thea emphasized the importance of a separate HSP funding allocation and to guide the implementation of Tribal-centered practices.

Emily added that it is important to make programs accessible to non-federally recognized Tribes and the discussion of agricultural practices.

Tawny said that program details are under development and they will have to go through a consultation process, but the scope of practices will focus on things that can be done in 1-2 years like cultural burning and perennial planting due to the limited timeline OARS has to spend down the funding but hopes the list of practices can be expanded in future funding cycles.

Tawny asked the Committee if the large size of block-grants made it less accessible for smaller organizations to apply, and they should be offering smaller block-grants for organizations with limited staff capacity, and to help address geographical gaps.

Arshdeep Singh said that some organizations in the Central Valley would be encouraged to apply to and manage smaller block grants due to their capacity so perhaps it is a good idea to offer \$2M block grants instead of \$5M.

Tania Zuniga Moreno stated that the right amount of funding for administration is important for smaller organizations and access technical assistance.

Tawny agreed and said that Prop 4 creates even more space for technical assistance for DACs and vulnerable populations.

(7) TOPICS FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

Thea asked the BIPOC Accountability subcommittee members within the BIPOC Advisory Committee about next steps for the subcommittee, if they want to go back to the full meetings, reassemble as needed, or continue to meet regularly.

Hung replied that the subcommittee should reassemble if needed once they can see what the next round of grants looks like. Arshdeep agreed and said the subcommittee should reassemble if they have actionable items but for now, they can pause for 3 months. Emily Burgueno agreed to the pause.

Tawny suggested the Subcommittee can reconvene when OARS puts out the RFA in case there are any items they want to address during the public comment period.

Member Qi Zhou inquired about the timeline for the RFA. Tawny explained that OARS won't be able to put out an RFA until they get the funding, possibly after the holidays but she will keep Thea informed. Qi asked how long the RFA application period will be open for, Tawny said there will be a minimum of 30 days for public comment once the RFA is made public.

Hung asked Committee members to submit topics of interest via email to Hung or Thea.

NEXT MEETING: Dec 9th, at 10 AM.

(8) PUBLIC COMMENT

There were public comments.

(9) CLOSING COMMENTS AND ADJOURNMENT

BIPOC Committee Chair Hung K Doan adjourned at 12:26pm