

119TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 3685

To enhance civil rights accountability and enforcement in the Department of Agriculture, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JUNE 3, 2025

Mr. JACKSON of Illinois (for himself and Mr. THOMPSON of Mississippi) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Agriculture

A BILL

To enhance civil rights accountability and enforcement in the Department of Agriculture, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Just USDA Standards
5 and Transparency Act of 2025” or the “JUST Act of
6 2025”.

7 **SEC. 2. CIVIL RIGHTS ACCOUNTABILITY FOR USDA EM-**
8 **PLOYEES.**

9 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Agriculture shall
10 ensure that appropriate corrective action is taken with re-

1 spect to any official or employee of the Department of Ag-
2 riculture who has been found to have engaged in any of
3 the actions, violations, or misconduct referred to in sub-
4 section (b) while in the course of such official's or employ-
5 ee's employment or in administering a Department of Ag-
6 riculture program or service—

7 (1) in any administrative finding by the Depart-
8 ment of Agriculture, including any final agency deci-
9 sion issued by the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture
10 for Civil Rights and any civil rights compliance re-
11 view or misconduct investigation conducted by the
12 Department of Agriculture;

13 (2) in any Federal administrative or judicial
14 proceeding;

15 (3) in any settlement with respect to civil
16 rights;

17 (4) in any audit or investigation conducted by
18 the Office of the Inspector General of the Depart-
19 ment of Agriculture; or

20 (5) in any investigation conducted by the Office
21 of the Special Counsel.

22 (b) COVERED ACTIONS, VIOLATIONS, OR MIS-
23 CONDUCT.—The actions, violations, or misconduct re-
24 ferred to in this subsection are discriminatory actions, re-

1 taliatory actions, harassment, civil rights violations, or re-
2 lated misconduct, including the following:

3 (1) Failure to provide a receipt for service in
4 accordance with section 2501A(e) of the Food, Agri-
5 culture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 (7
6 U.S.C. 2279–1(e)) to any current or prospective ap-
7 plicants of, or participants in, Department of Agri-
8 culture programs.

9 (2) Providing an inaccurate receipt for service
10 under such section 2501A(e) to any such current or
11 prospective applicants or participants.

12 (3) Failure to provide appropriate information
13 regarding relevant programs and services at the De-
14 partment of Agriculture, when requested by any
15 such current or prospective applicants or partici-
16 pants.

17 (4) Failure to timely process applications or
18 otherwise delaying program services to any such cur-
19 rent or prospective applicants or participants.

20 (c) CORRECTIVE ACTION DEFINED.—In this section,
21 the term “corrective action” means any action taken to
22 respond to any of the actions, violations, or misconduct
23 referred to in subsection (b) that—

24 (1) would enhance civil rights at the Depart-
25 ment of Agriculture, including any policy or pro-

1 grammatic changes to prevent similar misconduct
 2 from occurring in the future; and

3 (2) may include disciplinary actions, includ-
 4 ing—

5 (A) removal from Federal service;

6 (B) suspension without pay;

7 (C) any reduction in grade or pay; and

8 (D) a letter of reprimand.

9 **SEC. 3. IMPROVEMENTS TO THE OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT**
 10 **SECRETARY FOR CIVIL RIGHTS.**

11 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Department of Agriculture
 12 Reorganization Act of 1994 (7 U.S.C. 6912 et seq.) is
 13 amended by inserting after section 218 (7 U.S.C. 6918)
 14 the following:

15 **“SEC. 218A. ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE FOR**
 16 **CIVIL RIGHTS.**

17 “(a) ESTABLISHMENT.—The Secretary shall estab-
 18 lish in the Department the position of Assistant Secretary
 19 of Agriculture for Civil Rights (referred to in this section
 20 as the ‘Assistant Secretary’).

21 “(b) APPOINTMENT.—The Assistant Secretary shall
 22 be appointed by the President, by and with the advice and
 23 consent of the Senate.

24 “(c) DUTIES.—

1 “(1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall dele-
2 gate to the Assistant Secretary responsibility for—

3 “(A) ensuring compliance with all civil
4 rights and related laws by all agencies and
5 under all programs of the Department;

6 “(B) coordinating administration of civil
7 rights laws (including regulations) within the
8 Department for employees of, and participants
9 in, programs of the Department; and

10 “(C) ensuring that necessary and appro-
11 priate civil rights components are properly in-
12 corporated into all strategic planning initiatives
13 of the Department and agencies of the Depart-
14 ment.

15 “(2) OFFICE OF LEGAL ADVISOR FOR CIVIL
16 RIGHTS.—Not later than 120 days after the date of
17 enactment of this section, the Secretary shall estab-
18 lish an Office of Legal Advisor for Civil Rights that
19 shall—

20 “(A) be the sole office within the Depart-
21 ment responsible for providing legal advice to
22 the Assistant Secretary to—

23 “(i) ensure compliance with all civil
24 rights and related laws and regulations by

1 all agencies and under all programs of the
2 Department; and

3 “(ii) carry out fair and impartial in-
4 vestigations of civil rights complaints;

5 “(B) report directly to the Assistant Sec-
6 retary; and

7 “(C) not represent or defend the Depart-
8 ment or any of its agencies with respect to any
9 claims of program or employment discrimina-
10 tion.”.

11 (b) CONFORMING AMENDMENTS.—

12 (1) ASSISTANT SECRETARIES OF AGRI-
13 CULTURE.—Section 218 of the Department of Agri-
14 culture Reorganization Act of 1994 (7 U.S.C. 6918)
15 is amended—

16 (A) in subsection (a)—

17 (i) in paragraph (1), by adding “and”
18 at the end;

19 (ii) in paragraph (2), by striking “;
20 and” at the end and inserting a period;
21 and

22 (iii) by striking paragraph (3);

23 (B) in subsection (b), by striking “any po-
24 sition of Assistant Secretary authorized under
25 paragraph (1) or (3) of subsection (a)” and in-

1 serting “the position of Assistant Secretary of
 2 Agriculture for Congressional Relations and
 3 Intergovernmental Affairs under subsection
 4 (a)(1)”; and
 5 (C) by striking subsection (c).

6 (2) TERMINATION OF AUTHORITY.—Section
 7 296(b)(5) of the Department of Agriculture Reorga-
 8 nization Act of 1994 (7 U.S.C. 7014(b)(5)) is
 9 amended to read as follows:

10 “(5) The authority of the Secretary to carry out
 11 section 218A.”.

12 **SEC. 4. EQUITABLE RELIEF.**

13 (a) EQUITABLE RELIEF FROM INELIGIBILITY FOR
 14 LOANS, PAYMENTS, OR OTHER BENEFITS.—Section 1613
 15 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002
 16 (7 U.S.C. 7996) is amended—

17 (1) by redesignating subsections (f) through (j)
 18 as subsections (g) through (k), respectively;

19 (2) by inserting after subsection (e) the fol-
 20 lowing:

21 “(f) EQUITABLE RELIEF BY THE ASSISTANT SEC-
 22 RETARY OF AGRICULTURE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS.—

23 “(1) IN GENERAL.—The Assistant Secretary of
 24 Agriculture for Civil Rights (or a designee of the
 25 Secretary in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for

1 Civil Rights, if no Assistant Secretary of Agriculture
2 for Civil Rights is appointed and confirmed in ac-
3 cordance with section 218A(b) of the Department of
4 Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994) may grant
5 relief in accordance with subsections (b) through (d)
6 to a participant who files a civil rights program com-
7 plaint.

8 “(2) DECISIONS.—The decision by the Assist-
9 ant Secretary of Agriculture for Civil Rights (or the
10 designee of the Secretary) to grant relief under this
11 subsection—

12 “(A) shall not require prior approval by
13 any officer or employee of the Department of
14 Agriculture; and

15 “(B) is subject to reversal only by the Sec-
16 retary (who may not delegate the reversal au-
17 thority).

18 “(3) OTHER AUTHORITY.—The authority pro-
19 vided to the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for
20 Civil Rights (or the designee of the Secretary) under
21 this subsection is in addition to any other applicable
22 authority and does not limit other authority provided
23 by law or the Secretary.”;

24 (3) in subsection (g), as so redesignated, by
25 striking “or the State Conservationist” and inserting

1 “the State Conservationist, or the Assistant Sec-
2 retary of Agriculture for Civil Rights (or the des-
3 ignee of the Secretary)”; and

4 (4) in paragraph (1) of subsection (h), as so re-
5 designated, by striking “and (e)” and inserting “,
6 (e), and (f)”.

7 (b) EQUITABLE RELIEF FOR ACTIONS TAKEN IN
8 GOOD FAITH.—Section 366 of the Consolidated Farm and
9 Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C. 2008a) is amended—
10 (1) by amending subsection (b) to read as fol-
11 lows:

12 “(b) LIMITATION.—The Secretary may only provide
13 relief to a farmer or rancher under subsection (a) if the
14 Secretary determines that the farmer or rancher—

15 “(1) acted in good faith and relied on an action
16 of, or the advice of, the Secretary (including any au-
17 thorized representative of the Secretary) to the det-
18 riment of the farming or ranching operation of the
19 farmer or rancher; or

20 “(2) failed to comply fully with the require-
21 ments to receive a loan described in subsection
22 (a)(1), but made a good faith effort to comply with
23 the requirements.”;

24 (2) by redesignating subsection (e) as sub-
25 section (f);

1 (3) by inserting after subsection (d) the fol-
2 lowing:

3 “(e) EQUITABLE RELIEF BY THE ASSISTANT SEC-
4 RETARY OF AGRICULTURE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS.—

5 “(1) IN GENERAL.—The Assistant Secretary of
6 Agriculture for Civil Rights (or a designee of the
7 Secretary in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for
8 Civil Rights, if no Assistant Secretary of Agriculture
9 for Civil Rights is appointed and confirmed in ac-
10 cordance with section 218A(b) of the Department of
11 Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994) may grant
12 relief in accordance with subsections (a) through (d)
13 to an individual who files a complaint with respect
14 to civil rights regarding a direct farm ownership, op-
15 erating, or emergency loan under this title.

16 “(2) DECISIONS.—The decision by the Assist-
17 ant Secretary of Agriculture for Civil Rights (or the
18 designee of the Secretary) to grant relief under this
19 subsection—

20 “(A) shall not require prior approval by
21 any officer or employee of the Department of
22 Agriculture; and

23 “(B) is subject to reversal only by the Sec-
24 retary (who may not delegate the reversal au-
25 thority).

1 “(3) OTHER AUTHORITY.—The authority pro-
 2 vided to the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for
 3 Civil Rights (or the designee of the Secretary) under
 4 this subsection is in addition to any other applicable
 5 authority and does not limit other authority provided
 6 by law or the Secretary.”; and

7 (4) in subsection (f), as so redesignated, by
 8 striking “Secretary” and inserting “Secretary, or
 9 the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Civil
 10 Rights (or the designee of the Secretary),”.

11 **SEC. 5. OFFICE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS OMBUDSPERSON.**

12 Title III of the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and
 13 Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 (7
 14 U.S.C. 2231b et seq.) is amended by adding at the end
 15 the following:

16 **“SEC. 310. OFFICE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS OMBUDSPERSON.**

17 “(a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 120 days after
 18 the date of enactment of this section, the Secretary shall
 19 establish an Office of the Civil Rights Ombudsperson (in
 20 this section referred to as the ‘Office’) within the Depart-
 21 ment. The Office shall be independent of Department
 22 agencies and offices.

23 “(b) OMBUDSPERSON DESIGNATION.—The Secretary
 24 shall designate a Civil Rights Ombudsperson (in this sec-
 25 tion referred to as the ‘Ombudsperson’) for the Office. The

1 Ombudsperson shall be considered a senior official of the
2 Department and have a background in civil rights enforce-
3 ment.

4 “(c) OFFICE PERSONNEL.—The Ombudsperson shall
5 appoint such employees as are necessary to perform the
6 functions of the Office and for the administration of the
7 Office.

8 “(d) FUNCTIONS.—The functions of the Office shall
9 be—

10 “(1) to assist producers and other customers of
11 Department programs in navigating the civil rights
12 review process;

13 “(2) to ensure that participants (as defined in
14 section 271) are aware of the appeals process under
15 subtitle H of title II, including informal hearings
16 under section 275;

17 “(3) to promote awareness of the Office and its
18 responsibilities among producers and other cus-
19 tomers of Department programs; and

20 “(4) to raise issues and concerns with respect
21 to, and make recommendations to the Secretary
22 about, equitable access or implementation of Depart-
23 ment programs.

24 “(e) ACCESS TO INFORMATION.—

1 “(1) IN GENERAL.—Subject to paragraph (2),
2 the Secretary shall establish procedures to provide
3 the Office access to all departmental records nec-
4 essary to execute the functions of the Office under
5 subsection (d).

6 “(2) TIMELINES.—The procedures described in
7 paragraph (1) shall include a requirement that re-
8 quests from the Office for departmental records
9 shall be fulfilled not later than 60 days after the re-
10 quest is made.

11 “(f) ANNUAL REPORT.—Beginning not later than 1
12 year after the date of the enactment of this section, and
13 annually thereafter, the Ombudsperson shall prepare and
14 submit to the House Committee on Agriculture and the
15 Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
16 a report on—

17 “(1) the activities carried out by the Office; and

18 “(2) the findings and recommendations of the
19 Office with respect to equitable access or implemen-
20 tation of Department programs.

21 “(g) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There
22 is authorized to be appropriated such sums as are nec-
23 essary to carry out this section for each of fiscal years
24 2026 through 2028.”.

1 **SEC. 6. BURDEN OF PROOF FOR NATIONAL APPEALS DIVI-**
2 **SION HEARINGS.**

3 Section 277(c)(4) of the Department of Agriculture
4 Reorganization Act of 1994 (7 U.S.C. 6997(c)(4)) is
5 amended to read as follows:

6 “(4) BURDEN OF PROOF.—The agency shall
7 bear the burden of proving by substantial evidence
8 that the adverse decision of the agency was valid.”.

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