118TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

# S. _____

To authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to provide rural partnership program grants and rural partnership technical assistance grants, and for other purposes.

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IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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Mr. CASEY (for himself and Mrs. FISCHER) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on _____

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# A BILL

To authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to provide rural partnership program grants and rural partnership technical assistance grants, and for other purposes.

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

**SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

This Act may be cited as the ''Rural Partnership and Prosperity Act of 2023''.

**SEC. 2. DEFINITIONS.**

In this Act:

(1) INDIAN TRIBE.—The term ''Indian Tribe'' has the meaning given the term in section 4 of the

Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (25 U.S.C. 5304).

(2) RURAL; RURAL AREA.—The terms ''rural'' and ''rural area'' have the meaning given those terms in section 343(a)(13)(A) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C. 1991(a)(13)(A)).

(3) SECRETARY.—The term ''Secretary'' means the Secretary of Agriculture.

**SEC. 3. RURAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM GRANTS.**

(a) IN GENERAL.—Subject to the availability of appropriations under subsection (j), the Secretary shall establish a program to make multiyear grant awards to coordinate Federal, nonprofit, and for-profit investment in rural areas.

(b) GRANT REQUIREMENTS.—

(1) TERM.—The term of a grant awarded under subsection (a) shall be not less than 2 years and not more than 5 years.

(2) AWARDS.—Except as provided in paragraphs (3) and (4), the State offices of the rural development mission area shall be responsible for reviewing applications for grant awards under subsection (a) and selecting eligible applicants described in subsection (d) for those grant awards.

(3) TRIBAL AWARDS.—Except as provided in paragraph (4), in the case of grants under subsection (a) allocated to Indian Tribes under subsection (c)(1)(B), the national office of the rural development mission area shall be responsible for reviewing applications for grant awards under subsection (a) and selecting eligible applicants described in subsection (d) for those grant awards.

(4) COMPETITIVE PROCESS.—If the amount appropriated under subsection (j) for a fiscal year is less than or equal to $300,000,000, the national office of the rural development mission area shall be responsible for reviewing applications for grant awards under subsection (a) and selecting eligible applicants described in subsection (d) for those grant awards—

(A) on a competitive basis; and

(B) by giving priority to areas that have higher nonmetropolitan poverty levels and lower population levels, while ensuring that grants under this section are awarded in diverse geographic regions of the United States.

(c) GRANT ALLOCATION.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Except as provided in subsection (b)(4), the Secretary shall allocate funding for grants under subsection (a)—

(A) for each State based on a formula determined by the Secretary in accordance with paragraph (2); and

(B) for Indian Tribes in such amounts as the Secretary determines to be appropriate, subject to the condition that the total amount allocated to Indian Tribes under this subparagraph shall not be less than 5 percent of the amount appropriated under subsection (j), with Indian Tribes located in areas that have higher poverty levels and lower populations receiving higher levels of funding.

(2) ALLOCATION REQUIREMENTS.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall develop a graduated scale to allocate funding for States under paragraph (1)(A) based on the nonmetropolitan poverty and population levels in each State.

(B) LIMITATION.—The amount allocated to any State under subparagraph (A) shall not exceed 5 percent of the amount appropriated under subsection (j).

(3) SMALL STATE EXCEPTION TO FORMULA.—Notwithstanding paragraphs (1)(A) and (2)(A), the Secretary shall ensure that each State is allocated an amount for grants under this subsection that is sufficient to fulfill the purposes of the program established under this section, as determined by the Secretary.

(4) REALLOCATION.—If a State or Indian Tribe does not use funds allocated to the State or Indian Tribe under this subsection, the Secretary may reallocate the unused funds to 1 or more other States or Indian Tribes, each of which has used all of the funding allocated to the State or Indian Tribe under this subsection.

(d) ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS.—To be eligible to receive a grant under subsection (a), an applicant shall—

(1) propose to serve a rural area;

(2) be composed of a partnership of 2 or more of—

(A) an instrumentality or political subdivision of a State, such as a municipality, county, district, or authority;

(B) a nonprofit corporation or association with significant ties to the rural area described in paragraph (1), including through—

(i) association with, or control by, 1 or more public bodies in the rural area;

(ii) broadly based ownership and control by members of the rural area; or

(iii) a substantial public funding contribution to the rural area through taxes, revenue bonds, other local government sources, or substantial voluntary community funding;

(C) a cooperative with significant ties to the rural area described in paragraph (1);

(D) a for-profit entity with a significant presence in the rural area described in paragraph (1);

(E) an institution of higher education—

(i) with a significant contribution to or presence in the rural area described in paragraph (1); and

(ii) that includes representatives who are members of the rural area; and

(F) an Indian Tribe—

(i) in a rural area described in paragraph (1); and

(ii) with demonstrated support from the Tribal council or duly elected Tribal

executive of the appropriate Tribal government; and

(3) demonstrate cooperation among the members of the partnership described in paragraph (2) necessary to complete comprehensive, asset-based rural development through eligible activities described in subsection (e).

(e) ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES.—An eligible applicant described in subsection (d) that receives a grant under subsection (a) may use the grant funds in rural areas—

(1) to coordinate Federal, State, regional, or Tribal initiatives to reduce duplicative efforts with respect to Federal investments;

(2) to leverage non-Federal financial and technical resources;

(3) to complete comprehensive predevelopment activities and planning;

(4) to create public-private partnerships and attract private investment;

(5) to support eligible operational activities, including staffing, of the eligible applicants, except that a for-profit entity may not use the grant funds for the purpose described in this paragraph;

(6) to provide capital to existing or new projects, subject to the condition that not more than

50 percent of the grant funds may be used for that purpose;

(7) to support regional projects and initiatives;

(8) to address economic recovery from emergencies and natural or man-made disasters; and

(9) to develop strategic community investment plans described in section 379H(d) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C. 2008v(d)).

(f) INELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES.—An eligible applicant described in subsection (d) that receives a grant under subsection (a) may not use the grant funds—

(1) to fund operational activities, including staffing, at a for-profit institution;

(2) to purchase or lease real property; or

(3) to support a non-rural area.

(g) SELECTION CRITERIA.—In awarding grants under subsection (b), the Secretary shall give priority to an eligible applicant described in subsection (d) that proposes to serve—

(1) a rural area with a significant change in population;

(2) a rural area with significant workforce changes or changes in major employers;

(3) an economically distressed rural area, as determined by the Secretary;

(4) a rural area that has historically received minimal Federal funding, as determined by the Secretary; or

(5) a rural area for the purpose of job retention and economic stabilization, as determined by the Secretary.

(h) MATCHING FUNDS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Subject to paragraph (2), an eligible applicant described in subsection (d) that receives a grant under subsection (a) shall provide non-Federal matching funds in the form of cash or an in-kind contribution in an amount that is not less than 25 percent of the amount of the grant.

(2) WAIVER.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary may waive the requirement under paragraph (1) based on the demonstrated need of the eligible applicant or the population served by the eligible applicant, as determined by the Secretary, including—

(i) an eligible applicant serving an area with a higher nonmetropolitan poverty level;

(ii) an eligible applicant serving a Tribal population; and

(iii) an eligible applicant composed of a partnership that includes an entity described in subsection (d)(2)(A).

(B) JUSTIFICATION.—The Secretary shall provide to the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the Senate a justification for each waiver provided under subparagraph (A).

(3) PROVIDERS.—Non-Federal matching funds under paragraph (1) may be provided by any member of the applicable partnership described in subsection (d)(2).

(i) COORDINATION.—The Secretary shall carry out this section in coordination with the Rural Partners Network established by section 6306 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (7 U.S.C. 2204b–3).

(j) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—There are authorized to be appropriated to the Secretary such sums as are necessary to carry out this section.

(2) ADMINISTRATION.—The Secretary may retain not more than 2 percent of the amounts made

available to carry out this section for administration of the program established under this section.

**SEC. 4. RURAL PARTNERSHIP TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GRANTS.**

(a) IN GENERAL.—Subject to the availability of appropriations under subsection (g), the Secretary shall establish a program to award grants, on a competitive basis, for up to a 5-year period, to be administered at the national level through the Under Secretary for Rural Development, for the purpose of advising on and assisting rural community organizations with—

(1) Federal grant management and the development of financial management systems;

(2) housing or community economic development projects; and

(3) the development of placemaking plans and applications for Federal grants.

(b) ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS.—To be eligible to receive a grant under subsection (a), an applicant shall be a qualified private or nonprofit intermediary organization, including an institution of higher education with an existing community development and planning program, including an extension program, that has demonstrated experience and capacity to provide technical assistance on community development and planning in rural areas.

(c) ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES.—An eligible applicant described in subsection (b) that receives a grant under subsection (a) may use the grant funds to support the capacity building and economic development of identified rural areas and local partners in those rural areas through the following activities:

(1) Training and supporting local staff, including relating to systems development and support.

(2) Identifying vetted technical consultants for planning and designing physical infrastructure.

(3) Facilitating coordination between Federal agencies and local partners.

(4) Providing expertise on developing public-private partnerships.

(5) Development and project predevelopment activities.

(6) Grant writing and grant management activities.

(d) INELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES.—An eligible applicant described in subsection (b) that receives a grant under subsection (a) may not use the grant funds—

(1) to fund staffing at a for-profit entity;

(2) to purchase or lease real property, buildings, or equipment;

(3) to support a non-rural area; or

(4) for research and development.

(e) PRIORITY.—In awarding grants under subsection (a), the Secretary may give priority to an eligible applicant described in subsection (b) that serves—

(1) a nonmetropolitan area with a high poverty level; or

(2) an Indian Tribe with demonstrated support from the Tribal council or duly elected Tribal executive of the appropriate Tribal government.

(f) MATCHING FUNDS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Subject to paragraph (2), an eligible applicant described in subsection (b) that receives a grant under subsection (a) shall provide non-Federal matching funds in an amount that is not less than 30 percent of the amount of the grant.

(2) WAIVER.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary may waive the requirement under paragraph (1) based on the demonstrated need of the area in which activities using the grant are to be carried out, as determined by the Secretary.

(B) JUSTIFICATION.—The Secretary shall provide to the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the

Senate a justification for each waiver provided under subparagraph (A).

(g) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—There are authorized to be appropriated to the Secretary such sums as are necessary to carry out this section.

(2) ADMINISTRATION.—The Secretary may retain not more than 2 percent of the amounts made available to carry out this section for administration of the program established under this section.

**SEC. 5. RURAL PARTNERS NETWORK.**

Section 6306 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (7 U.S.C. 2204b–3) is amended—

(1) in the section heading, by striking ''**COUNCIL ON RURAL COMMUNITY INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**'' and inserting ''**RURAL PARTNERS NETWORK**'';

(2) in subsection (a)(1), by striking ''council'' and inserting ''network'';

(3) by striking subsection (b) and inserting the following:

''(b) ESTABLISHMENT.—

''(1) IN GENERAL.—There is established a Rural Partners Network (referred to in this section as the 'Network').

''(2) SUCCESSOR.—The Network shall be the successor to the Council on Rural Community Innovation and Economic Development established by this section (as in effect on the day before the date of enactment of the Rural Partnership and Prosperity Act of 2023).'';

(4) in subsection (c)—

(A) in paragraph (1)—

(i) by striking subparagraphs (C), (D), (N), (Q), (R), (S), (T), (V), (X), (Y), and (Z);

(ii) by redesignating subparagraphs (E) through (M), (O), (P), (U), (W), and (AA) as subparagraphs (C) through (K), (L), (M), (N), (O), and (X), respectively; and

(iii) by inserting after subparagraph (O) (as so redesignated) the following:

''(P) The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

''(Q) The Appalachian Regional Commission.

''(R) The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

''(S) The Social Security Administration.

''(T) The Delta Regional Authority.

''(U) The Denali Commission.

''(V) The Northern Border Regional Commission.

''(W) The Southeast Crescent Regional Commission.''; and

(B) in paragraphs (2) through (4), by striking ''Council'' each place it appears and inserting ''Network'';

(5) in subsection (d), by striking ''Council'' and inserting ''Network'';

(6) in subsection (e)—

(A) in the subsection heading, by striking ''COUNCIL'' and inserting ''NETWORK'';

(B) in the matter preceding paragraph (1), by striking ''Council'' and inserting ''Network'';

(C) in paragraph (2), by striking ''and'' at the end;

(D) in paragraph (3), by striking the period at the end and inserting ''; and''; and

(E) by adding at the end the following:

''(4) to improve the efficiency of Federal assistance to rural communities by—

''(A) reducing administrative burdens on rural communities to pursue Federal funding;

''(B) improving the administrative efficiency of Federal economic development programs serving rural communities; and

''(C) streamlining and simplifying the application process for Federal funding opportunities for rural communities.'';

(7) in subsection (f), in the matter preceding paragraph (1), by striking ''Council'' and inserting ''Network'';

(8) in subsection (g), by striking ''Council'' each place it appears and inserting ''Network''; and

(9) by striking subsection (h) and inserting the following:

''(h) INNOVATIVE CROSS-AGENCY COORDINATION.—

''(1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary, acting as Chair of the Network, may carry out innovative strategies for coordinating with other Federal departments and agencies with respect to programs that serve rural areas.

''(2) PRIORITIES.—In carrying out paragraph (1), the Secretary shall prioritize—

''(A) improving ease of access to Federal programs for resource-constrained rural communities;

"(B) utilizing early technical assistance to reduce duplicative applications and administrative costs at the Federal level;

"(C) leveraging partnerships with local, State, philanthropic, and private entities to maximize returns on Federal investments;

"(D) integrating stakeholder and program user experience into program design; and

"(E) targeting areas experiencing economic distress, as determined by the Secretary.".