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## **Georgia's USDA StrikeForce Partners Host Meeting to Encourage Economic Growth and Opportunity in Rural Communities**

ATHENS, GA (May 23, 2013) —Georgia's StrikeForce Team held an informational meeting today at Fort Valley State University to discuss impacts of the StrikeForce Initiative in Georgia's rural communities. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack launched the StrikeForce Initiative in 2010 to increase investment in priority, poverty-stricken rural communities through technical assistance and other resources.

During Thursday's meeting, Georgia StrikeForce Team members led a discussion that addressed the program's economic contributions in 60 designated counties and its vision and strategic goals to accomplish future success. The meeting also featured a discussion from the leadership panel that included a Q&A session followed by a presentation from the National Appeals Division (NAD).

USDA's top leadership in Georgia pledges to champion StrikeForce efforts through targeted partnerships with local and state governments and community organizations on projects that promote economic development, job creation and food security.

"The success of new efforts like the StrikeForce Initiative is dependent on reliable information. NASS's mission as a USDA partner is the source for this reliable and timely rural and agricultural data," said Douglas Kleweno, Southern Regional Director, USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Service.

"The Food and Nutrition Service will continue to support StrikeForce goals of improving access to, and awareness of, nutrition assistance programs – such as the Summer Food Service Program, the National School Breakfast Program, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefit redemptions at farmers markets -- for eligible recipients and participating farmers markets by working with Georgia state agencies and our Georgia StrikeForce partners," said Donald Arnette, Southeast Regional Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service.

"The Natural Resources Conservation Service is committed to expanded outreach, technical and financial services to farmers and ranchers all around Georgia. We are especially encouraged to

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see an increase of 263% in the total number of applications in our most requested program, the Environmental Quality Incentives (EQIP) Program in the StrikeForce region. The Georgia StrikeForce team has worked very hard over the last couple years to identify better ways to inform the public about USDA programs as well as how USDA staff can better assist our customers in qualifying and applying for USDA assistance. As the Chairman of the Food and Agricultural Council that oversees the StrikeForce Initiative in Georgia, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationist, James Tillman is excited to see that we are continuing to eliminate barriers in these persistent poverty regions,” said USDA- NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, Aquanda Jones.

USDA- Rural Development (RD) State Director Quinton Robinson stated that “Building blocks for sustainable economic growth can be achieved through Rural Development’s Community Programs, Business, Cooperative Programs, and Housing Programs. Some current priority areas this year for RD are renewable energy and bio-refinery projects, rural tourism, food hubs, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education. These areas and RD’s programs can go a long way in alleviating unemployment and poverty.”

Some of the recent successes in the StrikeForce region include:

- USDA is helping Second Harvest Food Bank of South Georgia expand its mission to gather and share quality food and nurture partnerships that will end hunger through the use of a new regional distribution center.
- StrikeForce is helping farmers and ranchers conserve natural resources on their land through technical and financial assistance. Poultry farmer Adam Nguyen now has a better way to store and manage poultry litter on his operation in Arlington (Baker County), Georgia. Fellow farmer, Howard James, now has a better way of irrigating his muscadine vineyards after obtaining assistance to install a drip-irrigation system on his Byromville (Dooly County) farm.
- In Rayle (Wilkes County), StrikeForce has restored four households with running water after the area’s previous year’s drought caused wells to run dry.
- USDA is also collaborating with Fort Valley State University to develop a cooperative business structure in the Georgia goat industry. Georgia-based Gotcha Goat was able to develop their business through the school’s Meat Technology Center and their product is now on the shelves of grocery stores around Atlanta.

USDA-Farm Service Agency’s (FSA) Acting State Director David Laster added “Reaching out in an intentional and collaborative way, USDA and its partnering community based organizations have impacted Georgia’s 60 StrikeForce counties in a very positive way. The StrikeForce Initiative has significantly raised the awareness and availability of resources in these communities and has improved the quality of life for many of its citizens.”

Participants in the StrikeForce Initiative include the USDA’s NRCS, RD, FSA, and FNS as well as other USDA agencies, state and local governments, and community based organizations.

Anyone wishing to learn more about USDA programs and initiatives like StrikeForce can visit <http://www.usda.gov/strikeforce> or stop by their local USDA service center.

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