

**Opening Statement of Xochitl Torres Small Before the Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
July 29, 2021**

Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman and members of the Committee. I am honored to be here today and humbled by President Biden's nomination and Secretary Vilsack's support of me to serve as Under Secretary for Rural Development.

For the last two years, I served New Mexico's Second Congressional district, which is geographically the fifth largest district in the nation. That's a lot of dirt roads. It includes remote areas and diverse populations—from acequias and land grant communities in Valencia County to ranchers and colonias along the United States-Mexico border and Mescalero Apache in the Sacramento Mountains. I had the opportunity to represent my home because my grandparents immigrated from Mexico to pick cotton in the Mesilla Valley. I grew up hearing stories about the opportunities my grandparents seized through hard work and vision—like when my nana noticed as a teenager that the men were making more money in the fields because they were handed the larger bags for picking cotton. Farmworkers were paid based on what they picked, and she realized she was losing time because she had to go back and forth to the truck more often to haul the smaller bags. So, she built up her strength and mustered her courage to ask for the larger bags.

If I learned the power of an entrepreneurial spirit from my grandparents, I learned dedication to my community from my parents. With a mother who taught for over 30 years and a father who worked as a social worker and later a school bus driver, my parents have spent their lives paying forward the blessings they've received. I am forever grateful for their lived examples of service.

Growing up in New Mexico fundamentally molded who I am: a sunny woman of her word who will always fight for the underdog. After learning how big the world is at Waterford Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa and studying international development at Georgetown, I chose to come home, to take on the inequities of poverty and hunger in the communities I knew best. Every day, I'm grateful for that choice, in large part because it led me to find the love of my life, Nathan Small, who's with me today and whose dedication to service in New Mexico is a constant inspiration.

I chose to work in water law because I knew the opportunity my grandparents achieved through working the land and the recognition, fostered by my mentor Senator Tom Udall, that water is life, and climate change is threatening the heart of rural communities.

When I became a United States Representative, the people I served shared the same determined defense of future opportunities in the places they loved. I heard from parents who were worried about whether their kids could make a good living in the towns they grew up in. I worked with daughters and sons of farmers, committed to penciling out their future working the land. And I learned from leaders, like Senator Martin Heinrich and Senator Ben Ray Luján, that if you want to grow opportunity, you've got to support innovation already happening on the ground.

That's what I love about Rural Development. I still remember the name of the civil servant from the local Rural Development office who I met in 2009. It was the wake of the housing market

crash, and I was working for Senator Udall as a field representative. I was trying to help rural communities get clean water and invest in new businesses, and Sandra gave me her cell phone number so we could act quickly when opportunity struck. The local office also worked closely with home grown organizations like Tierra del Sol on farmworker and other affordable housing, and in the process, brought better infrastructure to New Mexico colonias. That's why I turned to Rural Development in the midst of COVID. Their work with tribes and local cooperatives opened opportunities for broadband to reach that last mile. The agency's unique rural mission and on-the-ground commitment are vital to finally closing the digital divide.

One of the most surprising things about working as a Representative was getting to know 434 people who served vastly different districts across our country. I got to know the country through people who so loved their homes they wanted to represent them. In the midst of a divided time, I regularly found hope in the moments we discovered common ground. If I get to do this job, I can't wait to learn about and love every nook and cranny of rural America the way I love New Mexico.

Thank you for your time today and I look forward to your questions.