

Sustainable food systems students tackle agriculture challenges at Model USDA event

ASU hosted 200 students and 31 universities during the three-day simulation

By Jasmine Cataño Mata, ASU News
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As the nation faces growing challenges around food production and security, it is crucial to prepare students to be the future leaders that will navigate the complex policy decisions shaping the future of America's food system.

Arizona State University welcomed nearly 200 students from 31 colleges and universities to participate in [Model USDA 2026](#), a three-day simulation in which students embodied policymaker roles to debate current food policy issues.

The event, which took place Jan. 30 through Feb. 1, takes inspiration from Model UN and Model Congress by offering students the opportunity to engage in collaborative scenarios that mimic the food and agriculture policy work of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

"It turned out better than I imagined," said Kathleen Merrigan, executive director of the [Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems](#) within the [Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory](#) and the mastermind behind Model USDA. "Students told me the experience left them wanting a career in food policy — that's a big win."

Hannah Brailer, an undergraduate student studying sustainable food systems in the [School of Sustainability](#), was excited to make a return to Model USDA to further her knowledge of food policy after her successful experience in the program's virtual simulation last year.

"It feels like you're actually doing the good work," Brailer said. "It takes the abstractness of education and it makes it feel like real life. It makes you feel like this is what is actually getting done in the real world."

Over the weekend, students participated in one of six Model USDA scenarios that capture a range of real-world food and agriculture challenges. Policy scenarios varied from healthy dietary guidelines for Americans to fighting fire with fire through prescribed burns.

Through these scenarios, students were challenged to step into the roles of various stakeholders in an effort to negotiate, innovate and co-create policy solutions. Students took on roles ranging from USDA officials and scientists to educators, industry leaders and more.

Raisa Mahmud, an ASU undergraduate student in the [Rob Walton College of Global Futures](#), participated in the “Fighting Fire with Fire” scenario, where she took on the role of a USDA Forest Service research forester. Under this role, Mahmud explored the process of co-creating an educational campaign for prescribed burns.

“It’s really a space to explore,” Mahmud said. “I felt empowered to actually put effort into the simulation. It was a really empowering and engaging experience, and it was a cool space to be in.”

Model USDA 2026 kicked off with a discussion featuring two former USDA secretaries, Dan Glickman, who served under President Bill Clinton, and Ann Veneman, who served under President George W. Bush. Both secretaries valued their time at ASU and praised Model USDA as an innovative leadership program for young people seeking careers in food and agriculture.

“Model USDA exposes students to the breadth of USDA’s mission and allows them to gain hands-on experience in leadership, teamwork and issues management,” Veneman said.

“I am especially impressed with the leadership and decision-making skills that Model USDA offers these students,” Glickman said.

“It was extraordinary to have these two former secretaries share their knowledge with next-gen leaders,” Merrigan said, “and our conversation underscored the importance of bipartisanship, the secret sauce of getting good things done in our nation’s capital.”

In 2023, ASU Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, in partnership with three other universities and FoodCorps, [received an \\$18.5 million grant from the USDA centered on educating the next generation of food systems leaders](#). From the funding, the [USDA NextGen Program](#) supports sustainable food systems students within the School of Sustainability, a unit of the Rob Walton College of Global Futures, by providing scholarships, internships and professional development. Model USDA is one such professional development opportunity.

“Through the USDA NextGen program, an extensive network has been created enabling (our) institutions to come together ... to attend Model USDA this year,” said DeShana York, the NextGen project manager from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. “This immersive experience exposes students to emerging issues USDA faces as well as a unique opportunity to network and learn from expert speakers and their peers in a very new way.”

This year’s Model USDA was built upon the program’s successful inaugural simulation in 2025, which brought more than 140 students from four universities together virtually. Model USDA will make a virtual return in 2027 but the Swette Center plans to host another in-person simulation in 2028 with the goal of expanding the program’s available scenarios and student participants.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Student participants attending Model USDA 2026, a multi-day food policy simulation at Arizona State University's Walton Center for Planetary Health. Photo by Donovan Johnson/ASU

Gallery



Student secretaries attending Model USDA 2026 with guest speaker secretaries from the USDA. From left: Madelyn Downing, Aamna Anwer, Maya Davis, Maggie Epperson, Patrice Bettison-Clark, Dan Glickman, Ann Veneman and Lynn Summers.



ASU Trustee Brian Swette reflects on his career in the food industry to Model USDA participants.



Kathleen Merrigan, executive director of the Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems, speaks to participants at Model USDA.



Students from 31 colleges and universities collaborated on policy solutions for Model USDA food and agriculture policy scenarios.



Students took on various stakeholder roles work together to find policy solutions for their Model USDA scenario.