



STATE INNOVATION EXCHANGE AGRICULTURE & FOOD SYSTEMS

Talking Points: Black Farmers (for Black History Month and all year)

It's often hard to talk about race, especially in today's polarized political climate. Talking about race in farming can be especially hard, because the farm system is stacked against family farmers as a whole. Most farmers – whether white or Black, new or experienced – have experienced high prices for what they buy and low prices for what they sell, a farm economy that feels rigged in favor of the big guys, and years when they weren't sure they would make it. There is no doubt that it is challenging to be a family farmer in the US today.

It is even harder for farmers of color, and Black farmers in particular. Black farmers face ongoing discrimination as well as continued debts and other legacies from a century of well-documented discrimination by banks and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) itself. Black farmers have lost 11.3 million acres of land since 1910 and now make up only 1.4% of the farm population. One [estimate](#) suggests that USDA discrimination triggered a loss of \$300 billion in Black wealth, contributing to a massive and ongoing racial wealth gap.

We can frame these hard issues in shared values of fairness and community care:

Talking points that you can tailor to your district and your own experience

- For generations, USDA has treated Black farmers unfairly, denying them loans and providing less financial assistance than to white farmers – leading to many Black farmers losing their land and farms. Everyone deserves a fair shot; when lenders and county commissioners don't administer their rules fairly, it weakens the whole institution of family farming and makes everyone less secure. Fair treatment and investment in Black-owned farms protects a fair future for all independent farmers and their communities.
- In rural America, we look out for our neighbors and we know our neighbors look out for us. When we know Black farmers are facing extra challenges because of historic discrimination, we need to support policies so that they can keep supporting their communities. When we're looking out for everyone in our community, our whole community thrives.
- Rural America and the farmers who grow our food are more diverse than many people realize. Support for Black farmers is a key element of a healthy, equitable, thriving agriculture and food system.

General talking points on Black farmers:

- Black farmers are key to the history of the U.S. The labor of enslaved Africans was a major force in building the U.S. economy and the nation's wealth.
- Black farmers have lost 95% of their land since 1910 and account for fewer than 2% of the total farmer population today.
- USDA has a long and well-documented history of discrimination against Black farmers and other farmers of color. One [estimate](#) suggests that USDA discrimination triggered a loss of \$300 billion in Black wealth, contributing to a massive and ongoing racial wealth gap.
- Overall, U.S. farm policy has long favored the largest farm operations, with diminishing support for family-scale farms, which includes Black-owned farms.
- When Black farmers do well, all farmers and rural communities do well.

Farmer equity legislation

- Legislators in a growing number of states have introduced bills to support Black farmers. Find examples [here](#).
- From an organizing perspective, farmer equity bills start a conversation on progressive values of inclusion, environmental benefits, healthy food and community. These bills offer an opportunity to be restorative and visioning rather than defensive.
- Find more information on policy trends in farmer equity legislation [here](#).

Racial disparities in farms and farm programs

- [Coronavirus Food Assistance Program](#), 2020: White farmers received \$6.7 billion; Black farmers received \$15 million
- [Market Facilitation Program](#) (Trump's 2019 \$12 billion trade war farm bailout): Non-Hispanic white operators received 99.4 percent of all payments
- [Farm Subsidies](#) (2017): White farmers received \$9.7 billion; Black farmers received about \$60 million.
- [Farm size](#): Black farms average 100 acres; national average: 440 acres
- [Farm income](#) (2017): Average full-time Black farmer made \$2,408; average full-time white farmer made \$17,190

USDA discrimination

- A [series of government investigations](#) has documented USDA's discrimination since 1965, and other records show it goes back long before. Discrimination permeated the agency from Washington, D.C., down to county committee offices, where Black farmers were routinely denied timely loans and forced into foreclosure. USDA offices even colluded with banks and developers to steal land from multi-generational Black farming families.
- Discrimination has been so pervasive and widespread that USDA is known in Black farm communities in the South as "[the last plantation](#)."
- The agency acknowledged its history in 1999 with the settlement of the largest civil rights class action lawsuit in U.S. history, *Pigford v. Glickman*. Resolution of *Pigford* settlement

claims was fraught with problems: 16,000 claims were approved, while 7,000 were denied, and some 60,000 were rejected for being late. Additionally, for many of the farmers who did receive a payment, it came far too late to save their land or farm. Payments also did not cover debt, even though the debt itself directly stemmed from USDA's discrimination.

- A 2021 federal law aiming to address the legacy of debt many Black farmers faced from USDA discrimination promised debt relief and additional support for Black and other socially disadvantaged farmers. However, the law faced significant legal challenges and Congress repealed it the next year, to the frustration of farmers and advocates. [Learn more here.](#)

A few notable Black farmers & agriculturalists

- Henry Blair (1807-1860) was the second African-American to be issued a patent. He invented a corn planter and a cotton planter, which saved a tremendous amount of labor.
- George Washington Carver (1860s-1943). Though known primarily for his work on the peanut, Carver was a pioneer in his research on crop rotations, use of compost, and other ways to fix nitrogen and restore nutrients to soils depleted by cotton crops.
- Frederick McKinley Jones (1893-1961) invented the refrigerated truck, patenting his system in 1940. By allowing perishable food to be shipped long distances, his invention changed agriculture and how we eat.
- Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977), a civil rights advocate, founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative in 1967 to develop a self-sustaining Black community based on agriculture. "Land is the key. It's tied to voter registration," Hamer was quoted as saying.
- [Booker T. Whatley](#) (1915-2005), a horticulturist and agricultural professor at Tuskegee University, pioneered the concept of membership buying clubs for limited-resource Black farmers in the 1980s. His model of local customers paying up front for a season of food is a precursor to the community supported agriculture model.