



## STATE INNOVATION EXCHANGE AGRICULTURE & FOOD SYSTEMS

### Talking Points: Increasing Black Farmer Equity

*Updated February 2025*

It can feel challenging to center race, especially in today's polarized political climate with a federal administration that is pursuing a hostile agenda towards Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and racial equity. 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.

During the Biden administration (2021–2024), there was a renewed commitment at both the state and federal levels to confront historical and ongoing discrimination against Black farmers. Efforts were made to increase racial equity, provide overdue support, and dismantle systemic barriers that have long marginalized Black agricultural communities.

However, with the return of the Trump administration, many of these initiatives have been stalled or outright dismantled, rolling back hard-won progress. This shift threatens to deepen existing disparities and reinforces structural inequities that Black farmers have fought to overcome for generations.

In this challenging landscape, it is more important than ever to frame these issues through shared values of fairness, opportunity, and community care. As states continue the vital work of addressing the needs of Black farmers, legislators may face growing resistance in political environments where history is being rewritten and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts are under attack.

*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

- **Focusing on Fair Treatment:** For generations, USDA has treated Black farmers

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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.

- **Naming a Common Enemy:** Large corporate-owned agribusinesses dominate the market, making it harder for independent farmers—including Black farmers—to compete. Policies that ensure fair access to markets and credit and expand USDA loan and grant opportunities level the playing field for all independent farmers and benefit the entire agricultural industry, not just one group.
- **Centering Community:** 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 and ongoing 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.
- **Fighting for a Thriving, Local Food System:** Rural America and the farmers who grow our food are more diverse than many people realize. Encouraging investment in Black-owned farms means more locally sourced food in our communities, reducing reliance on imports and corporate agribusiness conglomerates. Support for Black farmers is a key element of a healthy, equitable, thriving agriculture and food system.
- **Supporting Future Generations:** Many Black farmers have lost generational land due to discriminatory practices, legal loopholes, and lack of access to financial resources at the state and federal level. Addressing these injustices upholds shared values of property rights and economic freedom while strengthening legal protections for Black farmers.

#### **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.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, [only 0.1% of relief funding](#) was allocated to Black farmers.
- 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](#).
- With the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) in 2021, the USDA established an Equity Commission composed of rural development experts, civil rights advocates, diverse farm group representatives and farmers to address USDA's historic

discrimination against Black farmers. In February 2024, the commission published a final report with 66 detailed recommendations addressing how the USDA could increase equity in their programming.

- In 2024 alone, as part of funding allocated in the IRA, the USDA awarded [\\$2.2 billion to support farmers](#) who faced discrimination in USDA lending programs. This initiative provided compensation to over 43,000 farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners nationwide, including more than \$521 million dollars in [Mississippi](#) and \$383.7 million dollars distributed to 11,000 farmers in [Alabama](#).
- However, with the second Trump administration's hostility to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, these programs designed to increase equity within the USDA have been dismantled. Within the first two weeks of Trump's second term, the administration disbanded the USDA Equity Commission and had their final report and information about the commission removed from the USDA website. [You can see an archive of the final report 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.