



Washington, D.C. July 15, 2021

Elizabeth C. Archuleta
Director, Office of Intergovernmental & External Affairs
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Identifying Barriers in USDA Programs and Services; Advancing Racial Justice and Equity and Support for Underserved Communities at USDA; **Docket ID FSA- 2021-0006**

Submitted electronically

Dear Ms. Archuleta,

The National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) appreciates the opportunity to comment on barriers to participation in USDA programs and services to advance racial justice in equality in the food system. We strongly support initiatives that overcome an history of exploitation and white privilege, which are not only present in the Food System, but which can be historically trace in the nation agricultural foundation.

NFFC - a 34-year alliance of 30 producers and community-based organizations representing family-scale independent farmers, ranchers, fisherfolk, and food sovereignty advocates in the United States is committed to social and environmental justice, including racial equity and support for underserved communities. We applaud this effort and hope that the commitment of this administration goes beyond repeated promises.

NFFC knows that this is a complex and aged problem, and it is surprised that contrary to other request for comments this request only lasted 30 days. The time speaks precisely with the discretionary determination that many USDA programs have in its determination and the even more unrestricted power that its agents have when selecting its recipients. These practices are among the reason why white farmers thrive while minority farmers had decline substantially.

NFFC does not applied to USDA programs but some of our members had shared some of the challenges they face when applying to these programs, which by the way, they are already complex and not widely advertised. One significant problem at this point is the leverage that some public institutions have in the process, Universities and Agricultural Departments will prioritize farmers closer to them and not those who do not look like them.



4. Are there USDA policies, practices, or programs that perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits for people of color or other underserved groups? How can those programs be modified, expanded, or made less complicated or streamlined, to deliver resources and benefits more equitably?

The outreach capacity of USDA should be incremented in ways that extension agents do not depend of traditional white institutions. Farmers of colors should be approach by extension agents that look like them and speak their languages. In addition, not just for the case of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color BIPOC agrarian people, the writing level of the calls for programs and its application should mirror the educational level of potential applicants. USDA will need to address these multiple barriers to enable more BIPOC farms to access the resources they need and to create a more diverse, robust, and inclusive organic program and farming population.

BIPOC farmers faced three main challenges: access to land, resources, training, and markets. We support the Northeast Organic Farming Association proposals to solve some of these problems.

Access to Land

Policy initiatives to help address the land-access limitations in the organic sector should include:

- Expansion of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to include a prioritization for conservation of land that has been managed organically and BIPOC-owned land.
- Creation of a federal land-link program to connect retiring organic landowners with young or beginning farmers who are seeking organic land but cannot afford it. This program should also include legal resources, such as model leases, on how to structure enforceable lease and lease-to-own agreements to respect the unique needs of both retiring and new organic farmers. These legal resources should include options for new and transitioning organic farmers to purchase land at agricultural value (OPAV), after the development rights on the property are donated or sold, to reduce the cost of purchasing the land.
- Expansion of FSA grant and loan guarantee programs (such as the Highly Fractionated Indian Land Loan Program and Indian Tribal Land Acquisition Loan Program) for land acquisition for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers under sustainable agriculture covenants.



- Establishment of lending guidelines for the Small Business Administration (SBA) and private loans to low-income resident farmers and BIPOC-led farmer cooperatives¹.
- Appointment of a USDA-led “land commission” to conduct a periodic national-scale land tenure study to provide a holistic perspective on socio-economic, political, and market-based factors limiting BIPOC access to land.⁵

Access to Resources

In addition to restoring the reimbursement rates for Organic Certification Cost Share Program (OCCSP) for Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021, NOFA requests that, starting in Fiscal Year 2022, USDA should:

- Increase reimbursement rates to \$1000 annually per certification scope per operation.
- Provide reimbursement of 100 percent of annual certification costs up to \$1000 per scope per operation. The assistance should be restricted to small-and-medium scale operations only.
- Streamline and simplify the reimbursement process, by having reimbursements go directly to organic certifiers to reduce certification fees, as opposed to reimbursing organic operations for the annual certification fees they pay to certifiers.
- Permanently expand the cost share program to reimburse technical assistance fees paid by farmers transitioning to organic, prior to full certification. Organizations that can competently provide technical services to producers transitioning to organic should be compensated through the cost share program, with priority given to organizations serving BIPOC producers.

Access to Training

Training for Organic Professionals and USDA Staff

The organic program is a public-private partnership. It is a voluntary program overseen by third-party private certification agencies in combination with government oversight from the USDA’s National Organic Program, which accredits organic certifying agents and develops the rules & regulations for the production, handling, labeling, and enforcement of all USDA organic products.

¹ Soul Fire Farm & Northeast Farmers of Color alliance – Food Sovereignty Action Steps (2018)
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dt0hicyhGdJSKIC3qyE1AbG9fdDrONjUh_M_bE0KMGs/edit#bookmark=id.rii88dqcea2



USDA should provide training for USDA staff, but also should help facilitate the efforts already initiated by organic community members to provide training and professional development to organic professionals given the public-private partnership that is at the foundation of the organic program. This training should be focused on the ways in which systemic racism and USDA's discriminatory programs and policies have impacted access to organic certification. The training should also include a discussion about how to break down barriers to increase participation in organic certification by BIPOC farmers, build a more inclusive organic community, and develop a more equitable organic program.

Creation of a Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship Program for Farmers Transitioning to Organic
Farmers looking to move toward increased sustainability face difficult challenges during the 3-year transition period prior to certification, during which time the farmer incurs the higher production costs of organic without receiving the benefit of organic premiums.

Access to Markets.

“The NFFC sponsored research on prices and they found that the USDA has paid Black farmers far less than white farmers, farms that grow cotton, corn, rice. The USDA claimed it was justified because the white farmers had higher net worth, higher education, better access [more complete paperwork, more base acres]. These farmers were far better off than the average farmers in the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. Very good study: Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, places that received payments over so many years. Black farmers want the subsidies to be more fair.”²

USDA in collaboration with DOJ must breakdown large corporations and stop consolidation to allow small family farmers, particularly BIPOC farmers to have fair access to markets. In addition, USDA should support investment of this farmers on processing their production and prioritize the procurement of food from these producers.

Finally, it is important that USDA respond to each challenge and racist comments that receives in a respectful but firm matter. Language is a powerful tool that had contributed to dismiss the concern of BIPOC producers. While many organizations are doing their part to educate the public, it is important that our institutions also speak out.

Thank you,

Antonio Tovar
Policy Associate
National Family Farm Coalition

² Ben Burkett, Parity and Supply Management though a Racial Equity Lens (2021)
<https://disparitytoparity.org/parity-and-supply-management-though-a-racial-equity-lens/>