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GREEN NEW DEAL POLICY SERIES:
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DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

LAND ACCESS FOR BEGINNING AND DISADVANTAGED FARMERS

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The Green New Deal is a broad and ambitious agenda to invest in communities, infrastructure and technology, creating good jobs and helping the United States achieve environmental and economic justice.

“It is the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal that works collaboratively with farmers and ranchers in the United States to remove pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector as much as is technologically feasible, including— (i) by supporting family farming; (ii) by investing in sustainable farming and land use practices that increase soil health...”¹

Green New Deal policies must help current and future farmers transition into agroecology and regenerative farming. One of the major long-term solutions is securing access to affordable, high quality farmland, as accessibility to land is the greatest barrier to new farmers’ entry and success.

Right now, American farmers are struggling to hold onto their livelihoods - over half living with negative on-farm income.³ The lack of sufficient federal support for all but monolithic farming creates prohibitive barriers for new farmers who are trying to start small. This directly undermines the stated goals of the Green New Deal and our ability and/or need to spread innovative farming practices to avert climate change. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, the average age of the American farmer is now 57 and has been on the rise for four decades.²

Farmers from socially disadvantaged groups – African-American, Latinx, Native American, women, immigrants, LGBTQ+ – face an even longer list of barriers, including structural socio-economic inequalities and a history of discrimination in credit markets, state and federal farm programs, and real estate.⁶ Many of these farmers, especially Latinx/Hispanic farmworkers and Indigenous peoples, possess valuable agroecological knowledge at risk of being lost without opportunities to put it into practice and pass it on.⁷

“It’s difficult to get land in California because of the cost of land per acre and the regulations as it pertains to water. The cost of equipment and our manual labor is going up. In California, if you have to start from scratch, it’s expensive. It’s expensive to sustain yourself and then not have access to the marketplace. Black farmers have been excluded from that. It all falls back on us. For young people coming up, if they want to get into farming, they are prohibited. They need training, experience and money to buy the products they need to farm.”

Will Scott, Jr.

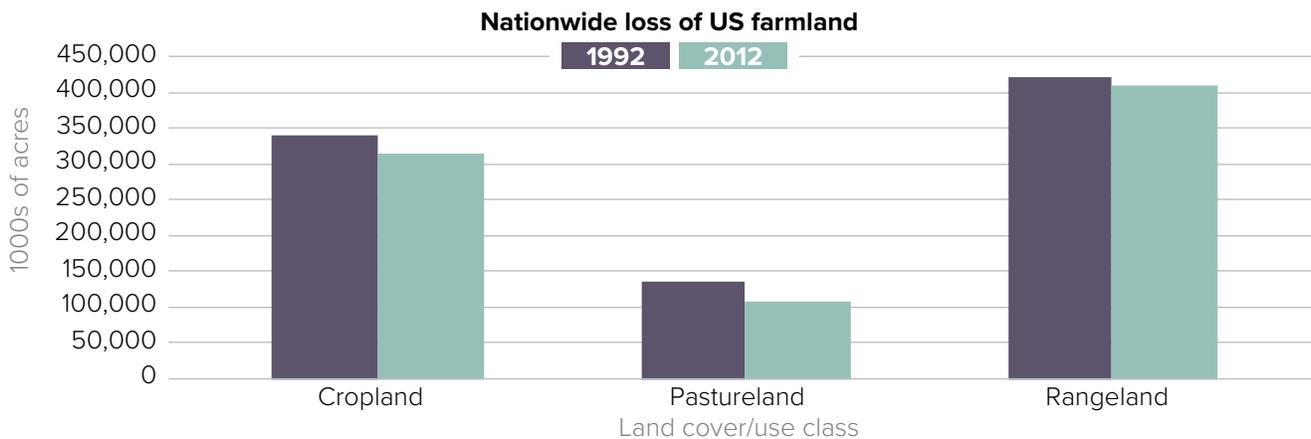
California Farmer, President of the African American Farmers of California

New farmers face numerous hurdles in gaining access to land, due to four primary factors:⁸

- ▶ Nationwide loss of farmland to development and large/institutional investment funds such as TIAA/CREF⁹
- ▶ High cost of land combined with low purchasing power of new farmers
- ▶ Historical and ongoing race- and gender-based discrimination in land access and access to credit for increasingly diverse new farmers
- ▶ Widespread tenant farming; lack of autonomy in land management and security of tenure

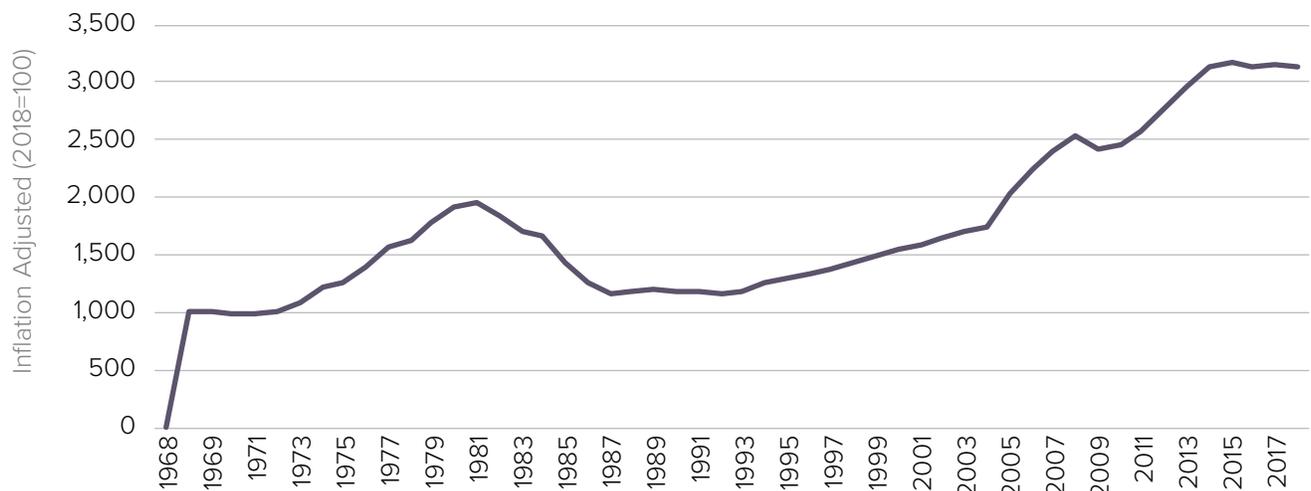
Additional barriers make utilizing sustainable practices economically unfeasible for beginning farmers. Significant capital and training is required to remain solvent during the initial startup phase. Then there’s a multi-year process of land restoration, soil remediation, and the establishment of optimally productive agroecosystems that eventually replace the need for external inputs.⁵

Figure 1: **FARMLAND CONVERTED TO URBAN/LOW-DENSITY RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT, 1992-2012**



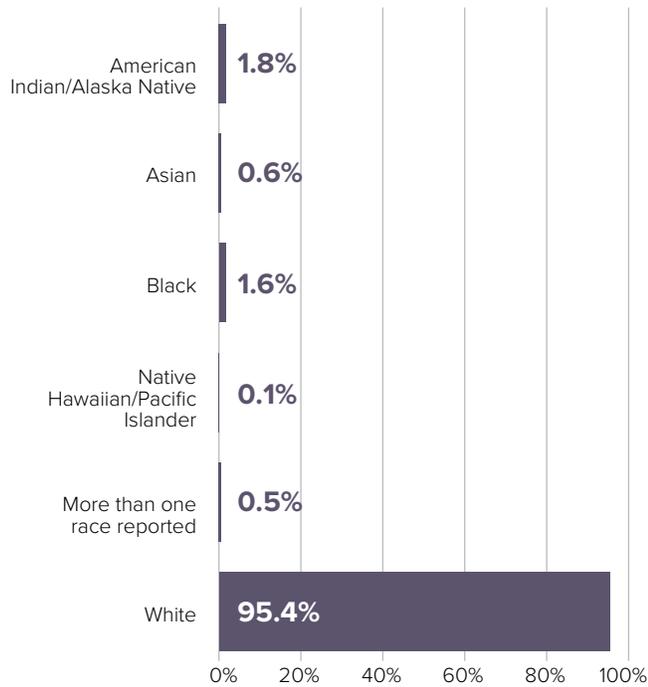
Source: American Farmland Trust. "Farms Under Threat." *The State of America's Farmland*. 2018.

Figure 2: **RISING COST OF FARMLAND**



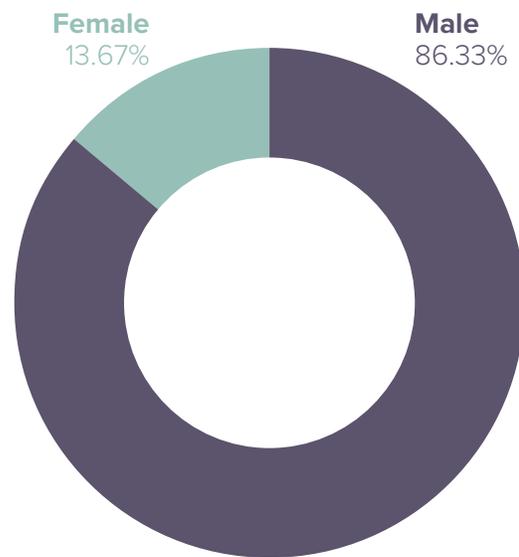
Source: USDA. National Agricultural Statistics Service. "Land Values 2019 Summary." GPO, August 2019.

Figure 3: **SELECTED PRINCIPAL OPERATOR CHARACTERISTICS BY RACE, 2012**



Source: USDA. National Agricultural Statistics Service. "Selected Principal Operator Characteristics, by Race." 2012 Census of Agriculture, Vol. 1 Ch. 1. GPO, 2012.

Figure 4: **PRINCIPAL OPERATORS BY GENDER**



Source: USDA. National Agricultural Statistics Service. "Race, Gender, and Ethnicity Profiles." 2012 Census of Agriculture. GPO, 2012.

VOCABULARY FOR PROGRESS: TENANT FARMING

Tenant farming refers to farm operators who do not own the land they farm, and therefore incur rent expenses as a share of operating costs without the benefits of land title and security of tenure. Tenant farmers include sharecroppers (who pay their rent as a share of the harvest) and farmers who pay cash rents for land. About 40% of all U.S. farmland is currently being rented, 80% of which is owned by non-operating landlords (USDA Economic Research Service, "[U.S. Farmland Ownership, Tenure, and Transfer](#)," 2014). Younger, beginning farmers, as well as socially disadvantaged farmers who face access barriers to loans and other means of land acquisition, are more likely to operate as tenants. In the context of rising farmland values, tenant farmers are at a distinct economic disadvantage to landowners, who are able to leverage owned assets to secure more loans for operating costs and land acquisition. In contrast, tenants "typically see higher rent expenses as land values appreciate, which increase operating costs and potentially reduce their ability to expand production" (USDA Economic Research Service, "[Farmland Value](#)," 2019). Moreover, lack of security in tenure and rising cash rents put economic pressure on tenant farmers to fall into the "debt treadmill" of high-input industrial cash cropping operations, and discourage sustainable agricultural practices that require long-term land management and autonomy over land use.

DISCRIMINATION IN FARMING: HOW ONE MILLION BLACK FARMERS LOST THEIR LAND

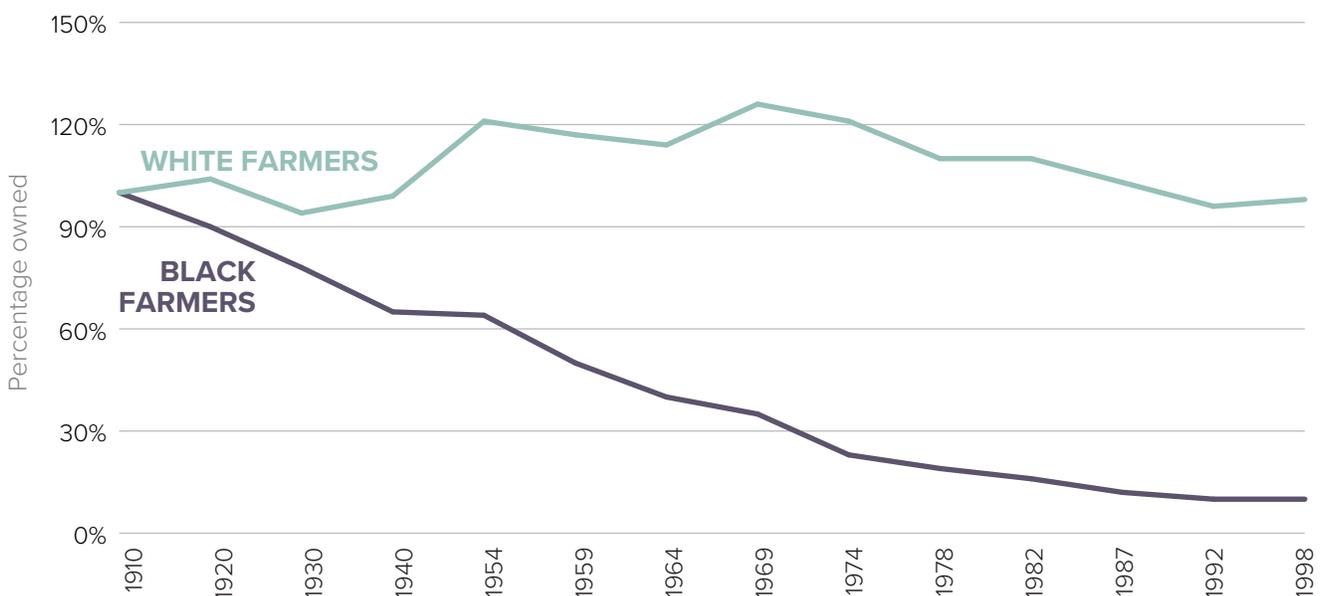
In 1910, one in seven farmers were African-American and held titles to approximately 16-19 million acres of farmland. Over the next century, **98% of Black farmers were dispossessed** through discriminatory practices at the USDA and various federal farm programs. These farmers were often denied loans and credit, lacked access to legal defense against fraud, and experienced “outright acts of violence and intimidation” resulting in a **90% loss of Black-owned farmland** in the US.¹⁰ Today, 98% of private rural land is owned by white people, while less than 1% is Black-owned.

The USDA’s systemic bias against Black and minority farmers “is well documented” and affirmed by the 2010 *Pigford vs. Glickman* class action lawsuit, which resulted in a \$1.25 billion settlement.¹¹ Black farmers continue to experience discrimination in access to credit, seeds, and other assistance, and face foreclosure at six times the rate of their White counterparts.

A GREEN NEW DEAL CAN RECTIFY THIS HISTORIC INJUSTICE BY USING REPARATIONS AS A CRITICAL FIRST STEP FOR THE COMMUNITY THROUGH:

- ▶ Land grants
- ▶ Education and legal/grant assistance in addressing heirs property issues and loss of Black farmland
- ▶ Loan guarantees and improved access to credit and technical assistance for Black farmers
- ▶ Robust anti-discrimination guidelines and oversight of USDA practices

Figure 5: **APPROXIMATE OWNERSHIP OF FARMLAND RELATIVE TO 1910, BY RACE**



Source: *The New Food Economy*, “USDA Distorted Data to Conceal Decades of Discrimination against Black Farmers,” June 2019



We believe that sustainable small-scale farming and local food consumption will reverse the actual devastation and support millions of farming families. Agriculture can also contribute to the cool down of the earth by using farm practices that store CO₂ and considerably reduce the use of energy on farms.

La Via Campesina
“Small-Scale Sustainable Farmers are Cooling Down the Earth”

Mitigating climate change in the agriculture sector requires encouraging new farmers, practicing regenerative agriculture, and rectifying historical disparities to land access and tenure. The Green New Deal can provide an *enabling environment* that supports new farmers’ access to farmland, by coordinated efforts at the federal, state, and local levels.

Several NGOs and local governments have already been experimenting with creative solutions to address these barriers. These include farmland protection, conservation easements, and various forms of long-term land leases and land sharing agreements, as well as creating equitable opportunities for new farmers from historically disadvantaged communities.¹² There has also been a resurgence of farmland cooperatives, using a number of institutional means, such as community land trusts, to secure and protect tenure rights for small farmers.¹³

Here are examples of organizations that work at the local and national level:

- ▶ Peninsula Open Space Trust
- ▶ Sustainable Iowa Land Trust
- ▶ California FarmLink
- ▶ California Farmer Justice Collaborative
- ▶ National Family Farm Coalition
- ▶ Agrarian Trust
- ▶ Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at the University of California, Santa Cruz
- ▶ National Young Farmers Coalition
- ▶ Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture
- ▶ Soul Fire Farm

Currently, these are being implemented in piecemeal, experimental settings. A Green New Deal can provide the much-needed resources to scale these efforts into programs that benefit the wider population, the nation, and the planet as a whole.

The following section details recommended institutional and financial strategies to support these existing efforts and facilitate a just transition to a sustainable, healthier and more equitable agricultural system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOSTERING A NEW GENERATION OF FARMERS (LAND ACQUISITION)

Problem:

Land grabs and discriminatory practices against socially disadvantaged farmers are still very prevalent today, making it near impossible for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) farmers to access land. Additionally, it is very difficult for beginning farmers to access land, especially when the system favors large-scale farms that specialize in a few crops. In expensive land rental markets, tenant farmers have low bargaining power to secure tenure that would allow them to implement the types of practices that lead to sustainable agriculture.

Solution:

The Green New Deal must eradicate the historical discrimination in government policies and agency practices against socially disadvantaged farmers and encourage farmland acquisition by resident operators. It must also limit land consolidation by large-scale corporations and investment funds to make more farmland available to beginning and socially-disadvantaged farmers and resident operators who plan to farm sustainably. The rights of land owners to set prices and influence land management must be balanced by the need to establish farmers who practice sustainable agriculture.

Policy recommendations

- ▶ Limit land investment by large corporations and lower barriers to entry for new farmers from disadvantaged communities.
(Example Legislation: [North Dakota Cent. Code § 10-06.1-01 to -25](#), recently upheld in state court; [South Dakota Codified Law 47-9A - Corporate Farming Restrictions](#))
- ▶ Strengthen credit lending and land access rights for BIPOC and beginning farmers, as well as help meet marketing challenges faced by small farmers and rural communities (such as strengthening/establishing local Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) networks between producers and consumers, and providing incentives for cooperative business development).
- ▶ USDA should appoint a “land commission” to conduct a periodic national-scale participatory land tenure study every farm bill cycle, anchored by BIPOC community-based institutions. This will provide a holistic perspective on the socio-economic, political, and market-based factors limiting BIPOC access to land and equal land rights and provide policy recommendations on how to address these trends.
- ▶ Establish federal & state land banks of properties to make available below market rate to new farmers and BIPOC-led farmer cooperatives under special sustainable agriculture covenants
(Example Legislation: [California AB936 - REEAL Act of 2019](#))

REGENERATIVE & SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE (TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE)

Problem:

The obstacles are especially high for those that want to establish operations based on agroecology and regenerative agriculture. USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service programs exist with soil experts, but receive very little funding to train farmers.¹⁴ Additionally, the current crop insurance programs and subsidies support commodity crop production instead of food production and ecological restoration.

Solution:

Strengthening the socio-economic safety net, significantly increasing investments in USDA conservation programs, and reinstituting supply management programs centered around ensuring that markets provide fair prices for farmers are all critical for the family farming sector and intricately linked to a number of socio-economic and agroecological goals mentioned. Reforming current farming subsidy programs to prioritize independent, family-scale producers and eliminate loopholes that allow corporations and large-scale absentee land-owners to receive the majority of farm program benefits are also part of this solution. A Green New Deal must therefore both ensure a new generation of small-scale and mid-scale farmers can make a living feeding their communities and addressing the climate crisis, while also addressing the unprecedented levels of corporate control and concentration that are pushing farmers off the land.

Policy recommendations

- ▶ Increase funding to the USDA Conservation Programs. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) will require increased on-ground staff and technical assistance capacity to successfully service their regions, where the staff are trained in the principles of agroecology. Additional information for the necessity of this funding can be found in Data for Progress' [Regenerative Farming and the Green New Deal](#) brief.
- ▶ Expand FSA grant & loan guarantee programs for land acquisition for beginning and socially disadvantaged resident farmers under sustainable agriculture covenants; establish lending guidelines for SBA & private loans to low-income resident farmers and BIPOC-led farmer cooperatives.
- ▶ Earmark funds for down-payment assistance and financial support grants for new farms practicing sustainable agriculture through the first 10 years of operation.
- ▶ Restructure subsidy and credit programs to exclude large corporations and prioritize independent, small and mid-scale resident farmers.¹⁵
- ▶ Implement a mandatory supply management program for agricultural commodities, consisting of price floors, reserves and coordinating with conservation programs to reduce acres planted, that ensures parity (indexed fair agricultural pricing mechanism that was central to New Deal-era Farm Bill programs) pricing for producers who implement strong conservation practices.¹⁶
(Example Legislation: Canada - Dairy & Egg Supply Management System, which restricts whom can supply dairy for the province based on proximity of producers' residency. For additional information see the National Family Farm Coalition's [Food From Family Farm Act](#))

RACIAL JUSTICE / BEGINNING FARMERS ADMINISTRATION

Problem:

White people own 98% and operate 94% of all US farmland and thus generate 98% of all farm-related income from land ownership.¹⁷ BIPOC farmers, especially those renting land, can face discrimination in a system that provides legal and social power to land owners.¹⁸ Farmers that are vulnerable tenants, because of their race, ethnicity, legal status, or farming history are particularly at risk to predatory lease arrangements. The USDA's farm lending policies has a history of practices that reproduce, if not deepen, racial disparities.

Solution:

Creating new and enshrining existing tenants' rights may provide new recourse for farmers who experience discrimination.

Policy recommendations

- ▶ Create an office of equity at the USDA to review policy proposals and mandate BIPOC participation on farm bureau decision making boards.
- ▶ Empower the new office to legally address claims of discrimination in agricultural credit, land credit & markets; conduct oversight of USDA practices. (*Model: National Labor Relations Board*)
- ▶ Examine the role of heirs property in the loss of land for Black farmers, and offer education and technical assistance for families to retain property.
- ▶ Pass comprehensive immigration reform that provides pathways to citizenship. The proposed "blue card" legislation in California provides a template for a bare minimum approach that would protect farm tenants who are currently undocumented.

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