

## **FEDERATION OF SOUTHERN COOPERATIVES/LAND ASSISTANCE FUND**

2769 CHURCH ST · EAST POINT, GA 30344

404-765-0991

[www.federation.coop](http://www.federation.coop)

### **House Agriculture Committee**

Representative David Scott, Chair  
Representative Alma Adams, Vice Chair  
Representative Glenn Thompson, Ranking Member

### **RE: BLACK FARMERS HEARING**

March 25, 2021

Good Afternoon, Mr Chairman, Madam Vice-Chair, Mr. Ranking Member and Members of the Committee.

My name is Cornelius Blanding and I'm the Executive Director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, a 54 year old cooperative association of Black farmers, landowners and cooperatives from all across the South.

Founded directly out of the civil rights movement in 1967, the Federation is the oldest and largest Black farmer owned and serving institution in the country. It is also the only cooperatively owned organization of Black farmers, landowners and cooperatives focusing primarily on Black land loss and the use of cooperatives as a tool to increase income and build wealth in the South, where 80% of all Black farmers are located.

I am honored to be before this committee today, testifying on the realities, struggles and perseverance of Black farmers & landowners in the U.S South. I have submitted my full statement to the committee, which I ask to be made part of the hearing record.

As part of my brief opening statement, I would like to thank this committee for this opportunity to testify as part of this historical hearing on Black farmers.

I am not a Black farmer nor do I pretend to speak on behalf of ALL Black farmers. I am merely a servant of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives as well as the Black farmer and cooperative movements; thus I testify on behalf of our membership, Board of Directors and all those who came before me. It is my hope that my testimony is a reflection and adequate representation of all those giants who couldn't be here today, but are the reasons that I am here.

I have served the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and Black farmers for the past 24 years and as the Executive Director of the Federation for the past 6 years.

I am a son of the South. I was born and raised in the South. I was educated in the South. I live and work in the South and I am raising my family in the South.

I am also a product of public housing and public assistance in Montgomery, Alabama, the cradle of the Civil Rights Movement. I was raised by a single mother in public housing and on public assistance. A single mother who was also one of seven heirs to over 40 acres of land in rural Lowndes County, Alabama.

My family was targeted by an unscrupulous lawyer and one of the heirs was bought out for pennies on the dollar, which resulted in a forced partition sale. Unfortunately, my story is not unique. I am part of a common story in the Black community.

We, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives – based on a study we did 41 years ago in 1980, entitled “The Impact of Heir Property on Black Rural Land Tenure in the Southeastern Region of the United States” that was commissioned by Congress and funded by USDA...and based on over 50 years of work - estimate that approximately 60% of ALL Black owned land is heirs' property; land that lacks a clear title-in that the landowner dies without a will or estate plan and the land is informally passed down to the heirs of the deceased land owner.

With this cloudy or unclear title, called heirs property, the heirs or landowners lack the ability to access USDA programs, resources or credit; thus putting the land in a vulnerable position. In fact, heirs' property is one the major reasons for Black land loss.

It is the reason my mother and her siblings lost 40 acres of land in rural Lowndes County, Alabama, and it is part of the reason my mother was forced to raise me, my brother and sister in public housing on public assistance about 30 miles east in the more urban city of Montgomery, Alabama.

It is the reason that I and thousands of others in the Black community are not Black landowners or still farming today. So you see, this work is personal for me, just like it is for the other folks testifying here today; and like it is for thousands of Black farmers and advocates across this country.

Heirs' property is a Civil Rights issue. All of the citizens of our country should have access to government services; but because of heirs' property, many don't. For decades, Black farmers haven't ... and this has resulted in Black Land Loss. The other major reasons for Black Land Loss are discrimination and access to fair & equitable credit.

These are ALL things that could have been addressed with good and reasonable legislation. These are things that are just now starting to be addressed with the introduction of the Justice for Black Farmers Act, the Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act, the Reconciliation Bill passed by this committee and the \$1.9 Trillion American Rescue Plan recently passed by the Senate and the House; and signed into law by the President.

We applaud Senators Booker, Warren, Gillibrand, Smith, Leahy, Warnock, Lujan and Stabenow. We applaud the House Agriculture Committee and its leadership. We applaud the House and Senate for getting this historical legislation passed. We applaud the Administration for its vision and USDA leadership for its support. We also applaud the many foot soldiers out there whom have tilled the soil, advocated for these issues, followed the stories, researched and wrote legislation as well as ALL those that dreamed of and struggled for this day to come.

But Black farmers are not out of the woods yet. It is not time for celebration just yet. This is not the beginning of the story of Black farmers nor is it the end. It is merely one of the many chapters of Black farmers & landowners; one of the many chapters of our rural communities; of urban migration and of our Nation.

As I mentioned in my opening statement, Mr. Chairman, I am here to testify on the realities, struggles and perseverance of Black Farmers & Landowners.

The reality is that Black farmers have gone out of business and lost the highest percentage of land than any other group in this country over the past century.

In 1910, there were 218,000 Black farmers owning roughly 15 million acres of land. According to the US Census; in 1992, there were only 18,000 Black farmers owning 2.3 million acres of land. That's over a 90% loss of Black farmers as well as almost a 90% loss of land.

Another reality is that the majority of Black farmers get their credit from USDA's Farm Service Agency- the lender of last resort. This in itself is risky because farmers are expected to graduate out of the system in 7 years. After that, they are supposed to qualify for credit in the traditional market; however that date never comes for most Black farmers. Instead they are relegated to predatory style lenders at best and farming out of their pockets at worst. No business-especially farming- can survive in this reality. Credit is the life line of any business and is crucial in farming.

The reality is also that Black farmers have historically been discriminated against in various ways - including at USDA - as shown in the historical Black farmer lawsuit (Pigford 1 and Pigford 2)...Discriminated against at FSA, the lender of last resort. Thus, the Black farmers' reality is bleak even as it relates to credit.

These realities have led to the struggles of Black farmers. The struggle to hold onto land for generations because of unsecure or cloudy titles ... when the problem of heirs property could be solved with some simple steps, such as uniform heirs' property legislation; adequate funding for the existing heirs' property relending program that was approved as part of the 2018 Farm Bill; and targeted resources for awareness, education and direct legal & technical assistance to heirs' property landowners.

The realities of Black farmers have also led to the struggle to successfully operate their farm business in a sector where they buy in a retail market, but sell in a wholesale market - primarily because of their lack of scale. 75%-80% of Black farmers operate on 100 acres or less and primarily grow perishable products. A reality that begs for cooperative solutions that aggregate

producers; and which could be addressed with more resources for cooperative development via programs throughout all of USDA.

And the realities of Black farmers have led to the struggle to access enough fair & equitable credit to grow their farms and businesses beyond part-time and/or subsistence farms. And this could readily be addressed with the creation of a cooperatively owned Black Farmer Financial Institution, owned and controlled by Black farmers.

However, these struggles and these realities have forced Black farmers and landowners to be some of the most resilient people in their communities and in this country.

Black farmers and landowners have persevered through the difficult days of sharecropping and the long nights of racism and discrimination. They continue to persevere in spite of the issues of heirs' property and the lack of access to fair & equitable credit.

Black farmers and landowners continue to be on the front lines of feeding families, anchoring rural communities and protecting our environment regardless of their realities and struggles.

The Black farmer story is a story of perseverance. It is about time for this story to be told. It is about time for this kind of hearing. It is about time for our country to support those that have given so much, but received so little in exchange.

The Black farmer story is the American story. The realities & struggles of Black farmers are woven into the fabric of this country. Black farmers are a part of and vital to our food system, the environment and our Nation. But far too often Black farmers are losing their land.

As my late predecessor and mentor, Mr. Ralph Paige, was quoted in a New York Times article in 2018, "when a Black farmer loses his land, it's our community losing a piece of this country." Now, I would take that a step further and say, "it is also this country losing a piece of our community....and thus a part of itself"

Discrimination and land loss is all too prevalent in the lives of Black farmers and the Black community, which makes it difficult for many to see themselves in this great nation and as part of the solution to many of its challenges.

So in closing, Mr. Chairman, I must reiterate that the Black farmer story is one of struggle and perseverance. A reality of land loss, discrimination, and lack of access to credit and resources....And yet, a reality of feeding families, anchoring communities and protecting our environment.

The solutions to the challenges of our Nation rest in the hands of our government, our organizations and corporations, as well as our citizens - including and especially our farmers & landowners; and this must include Black farmers & landowners.

But we must first make them whole, in order for them to be the most effective contributors that they can be.

Our air, our water, our soils and our lives depend on it!

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the committee, for the opportunity to appear before you today during this most historic hearing on Black farmers. I stand ready to answer any questions you might have.