

**House Agriculture Committee
U.S. House of Representatives**

**“A Hearing to Review the State of Black Farmers in the U.S.”
Spoken Testimony of Earrak A. and Arnetta L. Cotton**

March 25, 2021

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished members of the Committee, we would like to begin by thanking you and God for the privilege and honor of testifying in this hearing. It is our hope that something said or done will result in greater understanding, reconciliation, and change.

We are Earrak and Arnetta Cotton of Oklahoma, and we have more than 54 years of farm and ranch experience and 39 years of farm and ranch management experience as the owners of Cattle For The Kingdom (CFTK). Earrak is retired from a 30-year career service with State Farm Insurance and now serves as the head pastor of Unity Temple Family Church in Inola, Oklahoma – a body of Believers that started more than 100 years ago. He also serves on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) State Technical Committee in Oklahoma. Arnetta currently serves as the Program Facilitator for Kingdom Community Development Services, the Rural Impact Food Pantry, and the Agricultural in Action Program which includes a market gardening school and farm training program in conjunction with Langston University – the 1890 Land-Grant University in Oklahoma, and Oklahoma State University – the 1862 land-grant in the state. She was also appointed by Secretary Sonny Perdue to serve on the USDA Minority Farmers Advisory Committee.

Little children across the United States who grew up watching their parents passionately work the land through torrential rains, incessant droughts, troublesome pestilence, and extreme poverty were often consumed by the idea, “*One day this land will be mine.*” Somewhere between working behind a plow for several hours at a time in the blazing sun for days on end to get the crops in and out, and the rare opportunities to reward themselves with a soda or ice cream, they developed an insatiable obsession with nature.

However, to be Black and possess that type of intensity towards the earth in the United States at a young age can accurately be compared to somebody laboring under the sweltering sun in a desert towards something that appears to be real; but, in fact, is nothing more than an optical illusion. Over time, as the mirage steadily relocates, the child matures to adulthood. What remains is the diminutive essence of potential. Yet despite years of imagining, the slightest scent of possibility is all that is required to stimulate hope in the heart of a Black farmer.

We felt that hope. So, when at the age of 24 and married less than five years with two baby girls, we were advised that the then Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) was an agency that existed to assist young and beginning farmers, especially minorities, we thought we would be welcomed with open arms. Instead, when we first stepped in our county FmHA office in 1984, the secretary looked up then continued working without ever acknowledging our presence.

“Ma’am, is this the FmHA?” We asked.

“Yes,” she answered, never moving from her desk.

An unwelcoming aura and overwhelming strangeness filled the room. Without a word ever spoken, its presence seemed to demand that we simply turn around and leave; but we didn’t.

The County Supervisor's tenure could not be denied, but neither could his unorthodox practices and forgetfulness. We had meetings at his home, and our file was lost and misplaced several times. Some years later, as our initial contact transitioned out of his role, we were buried under the transition of powers. For example, on separate occasions an FmHA contractor and Langston University representative reworked our farm plan on the same application and concluded we had good records, our cattle were in excellent condition, and that with an average production and some non-farm income, our plan was feasible. Yet despite their findings, the County Committee rebutted that they were not comfortable with our abilities, that the entire application should be changed, and that since we could not effectively explain the reworked plans, we could not possibly implement them with any degree of success. All our alternative plans and approaches were repeatedly denied, but no viable plan for success was ever offered.

Our calls were avoided, refused, or forwarded to oblivion; we were required to travel to various USDA offices, restaurants and even ball parks for any chance to discuss the issue; our meetings were canceled and rescheduled without notice; and unofficial County Committee meetings took place where official decisions were made on our application without having a completed application to review.

Often, these experiences were witnessed by our four children.

Were it not for the Elders who had a keen eye for identifying those whose work ethics, moral compass, and instinctive cunning were perfectly suited for survival, far more Black farmers would have become extinct. Thankfully, these strategic leaders (though few in number) persevered through insurmountable odds and outlasted personal assaults to maintain some semblance of dignity as they paid for their land one penny at a time.

Often, when the stage was properly set and everything was synchronized for change, they would test the waters by leasing a portion of their land to a competent, but less experienced person of color whom they could mentor through the process. The eventual glimmer in their eyes served as witness of their approval. While their wisdom was readily available, they understood for the fledgling farmer to establish a faithful relationship with the land, they had to learn about her incalculable nuances for themselves. This search for intimacy would inevitably rekindle a desire in the Black farmer to own their own property. One such Elder offered her wisdom to and trust in us.

So, we appealed the decision of the County Supervisor. We appealed because of the unjustifiable dragging out of our application process; the deteriorated condition of our home; and the intentional and persistent prodding and provocation we experienced. In 1994, the decision to deny us was overturned, and the state Farm Service Agency (FSA) office advised that the best course of action would be to proceed with the application and to let the applicant know what further information was needed.

The County Supervisor told us we only needed to have the property appraised, and he secured an appraisal service. Conveniently, the appraiser the County Supervisor secured valued the property for far less than its original worth only a year earlier. Despite winning our appeal, our request was ultimately denied based on the appraisal.

You may not know this, but the term "underserved farmer" originated from eight Black farmers in West Central Oklahoma who submitted a court brief in *Pigford v. Glickman*. The designation is meant to address the unique circumstances and concerns of underserved farmers, including Black farmers, and focus on equity in accessing USDA programs and services. The term has been used to initiate a wide variety of programs and resources at USDA, including grants and loans and scholarship opportunities for students studying agriculture at 1890 and 1994 land-grant universities.

It was not our county office who told us about this designation and how the language was expressly written to extend help to socially disadvantaged farmers like us. They did not tell us this when we were initially denied, when we were denied for the second time, or even after we were instructed to get an appraisal. It was a friend, who like us had experienced more than 35 years of extreme racial and programmatic discrimination at the hands of others.

That friend helped us navigate the system. He introduced us to key contacts at USDA including then Oklahoma state directors, Gary O'Neill at NRCS, Dr. Lee Denny at Rural Development, and Scott Biggs at FSA as well as Mike Beatty and Jacqueline Davis-Slay at USDA's Office of Partnerships of Public Engagement (OPPE). In fact, it was at a USDA OPPE Faith Fellows Training in Washington, D.C. where we learned about developing and maintaining partnerships focused on solutions to challenges facing rural and underserved communities like ours. Our friend also helped us learn that we could utilize programs from all USDA arms to solve the issues that have plagued us for nearly 40 years and other Black farmers for centuries. In fact, we could utilize community facility loans for our non-profit community organization; farm labor housing programs; water and sewer grants; and more.

Those consultations resulted in our first community outreach meeting at the church we lead. We were able to share the information we had learned with more than 100 people who came to learn about USDA resources during a deluge of four inches of rain.

Because of our new knowledge of USDA programs and partnerships stemming from our various community outreaches, we have also:

- *Partnered with Langston University to host an eight-month Marketing Garden School including an active garden throughout the growing season that supported our local Farmers Market;*
- *Distributed Farmers to Families Food Boxes to more than a million people through all five phases in Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Texas, and Arkansas;*
- *Distributed 500 turkeys at Thanksgiving last year thanks to our partnership with IRUSA;*
- *Purchase equipment, supplies, and materials necessary to bring our pantry up to code thanks to Cherokee Nation;*
- *Earrak became Oklahoma's first African Native American by card to serve on the NRCS Oklahoma State Technical Committee; and*
- *Arnetta was selected by then Secretary Sonny Perdue to serve on the USDA Minority Farmers Advisory Committee.*

One of the reasons local churches and faith-based organizations are the backbone in communities and the F2F program is because people trust them. We serve from hearts of love with boots on the ground. It is in this same spirit that we rally the cause for other Black farmers. We forward information we receive to area farmers and other interested parties. We take calls. We provide information. We instruct and advocate. That mentality should prevail when working with and conducting outreach to Black farmers.

We can no longer afford to shroud the lack of follow-through business with Black Farmers in the busyness of meetings about Black Farmers. We should not only come with business cards, but also with applications prepared to give our time not just our contact information. We should go to whatever lengths necessary to provide thorough and complete information and assistance. There is still much work to be done, and we are committed to helping achieve this goal.

We humbly ask this committee to consider implementing a Pilot Program with HBCU's Outreach Programs in cooperation with active Black Community Based Organizations to implement comprehensive training programs on behalf of USDA to underserved farmers in how to complete a Whole Farm Plan with subsequent technical and practical support. Additionally, we ask that you

consider offer training and compensation for non-governmental Black farmers to conduct community outreach meetings for USDA, FSA, NRCS and RD. This would, in turn, bolster confidence, participation and stimulate new interest in USDA programs.

Just as we have faith in God who created one race of people – the human race; one earth – the one on which we dwell together; and the heavens, which we continue to explore, we earnestly believe He gave us the ability in Him to equitably dwell together in peace, harmony and love in order to preserve it all.

Thank you again, and we look forward to your questions.