

March 25, 2021

Statement from Shirley Sherrod to the U.S. House Agriculture Committee

Congressman David Scott, Chairman

My name is Shirley Sherrod; I live in Albany, Georgia and currently serve as the Executive Director of the Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education, Inc. (SWGP). SWGP is a non-profit organization that was born out of the civil rights movement with a mission to educate, engage and empower communities through grassroots organizing and technical assistance.

On a more personal note, today March 25, marks the 56th anniversary of the death of my father, a farmer who was murdered by a white farmer that the racist system failed to prosecute. It is within this context that I dedicated my life to help make this world more just and equitable for everyone.

For over five decades, I have worked with and on behalf of farmers – especially Black farmers – and the rural communities in which they live. I also served under the Obama Administration as the first Black State Director of Rural Development. My work has afforded me the opportunity to help build coalitions that cross both state and international borders. I have learned that small farmers throughout the world are struggling to survive in an environment that overwhelmingly favors large scale and corporate farms.

Although Black farmers share many of the problems faced by all small farmers, their situation is compounded by systemic racism within the USDA and other public and private institutions, that are supposed to provide services to all farmers no matter their race or gender. The USDA is assumed to be the source of last resort when the private sector falls short of its duties and responsibilities. Unfortunately, since its inception, the USDA itself has fallen short and failed to meet its obligations to Black farmers; regrettably, the USDA has been the driving force behind the steady decline in the number of Black farmers and Black owned farm land. This loss has and continues to have a domino effect throughout the Black Belt Region of America and beyond. Without productive land that supports economic development, the region suffers from inadequate education, lack of access to healthy and affordable food, poor health outcomes and brain drain among other things.

The USDA has been called the last plantation and for the most part has worked relentlessly to live up to that reputation. Its efforts to try and remedy the problem it caused, has generally fallen way short. Those efforts are usually underfunded, short lived, at the mercy of changing administrations and opposition from employees.

There has to be a long term, well-resourced commitment at all levels of the USDA if Black farmers are to remain part of America's production agriculture system.

Although the USDA did admit in the Pigford case that it has a history of discrimination against Black farmers, that admission and subsequent settlement did not bring about any systemic changes and left in place many of the individuals who perpetuated the racism and discrimination. In fact, to my knowledge, I (a Black woman) am the only person ever fired by the USDA for discrimination, a claim that was later disproven. Although Pigford itself was historic and exposed the "real USDA", unfortunately because the government was so intransigent, over 90 percent of the farmers who prevailed in the lawsuit were not made whole.

The question is "where do we go from here?"

There are two game changing policies (Justice for Black Farmers Act and the recently passed Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act) that could address some of the past and current problems faced by Black farmers and the communities in which they live. History has shown that good legislation often dies or is weakened in the regulatory and implementation process. While we wait for the outcome of the two policies, there are things that can be done now to help struggling Black farmers and communities.

Following are a few commonsense examples:

- Too often USDA uses regulations to hinder rather than help Black farmers such as the Value -Added Producer Program which requires matching funds as well as certain NRCS grants. Also constant changes in the Section 2501 program- changes that are making it less assessible for the groups it was originally intended for.
- Return section 2501 to its original intent. This policy was the brainchild of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) nearly three decades ago. I was a staff member of the FSCLAF and therefore very familiar with all the work and documentation that led to its passing as a permanent part of the Farm Bill. Its original intent was to provide farmers of color (especially Black farmers) with outreach and technical assistance so that they could better access USDA and other services as they work to develop successful farm businesses. That assistance would be provided by experienced community organization and minority serving universities. Unfortunately, 2501 has become a catchall for almost any small farm program such as beginning farmers and veteran farmers. These farmers are important and deserve a separate program to meet their needs while 2501 should return to its original intent and be fully funded.
- Many of the resources within the USDA cannot be accessed by Black farmers and community- based organizations; the reason being that they cannot meet the matching requirement or other restrictive rules such as having to collaborate and work with other community- based organizations across state lines. These requirements should be

eliminated and funds provided solely on the merits of the farmers or CBO's business plan or program respectively.

- The USDA's now dormant Strike Force program was based on a program I instituted while serving as Georgia State Director of Rural Development. It brought together all agencies within the USDA to analyze problems and employed a holistic approach to solving those problems. The program enjoyed mild success and could have had tremendous success had funds been earmarked especially for it. That program should be revisited by the Secretary of Agriculture.
- While I cannot speak for 1890 Universities, I will say that they play a key role in the survival of Black farmers and rural communities. There needs to be more equitable funding for these universities.
- Black farmers need to be able to market their products and not be limited to any one market; they have to be able to diversify their markets. To do this, they need the necessary infrastructure. There needs to be a Black farmer infrastructure fund that will allow farmers to develop and/or improve processing facilities, secure appropriate transportation, organize cooperatives, etc.
- There has to be diversity within the various USDA state offices and everyone in those offices should be held accountable.
- The USDA can only stop being the "last plantation" when the culture within the department changes.

These are but a few of the things we can begin to put in place today while we wait on the fate of policies currently under consideration. We must also understand that even if these policies are approved, they only represent a down payment of what is owed to Black farmers and their communities after more than a century of neglect and discrimination.