Black Farmers, Policy and the 2018 Farm Bill

The policy that has impacted black farmers and black land ownership and action steps for building a more equitable and sustainable food system

By Violet King
Dreaming Out Loud
Slavery and soil degradation are interlinked systems of exploitation, and deep seated connection exists between the enslavement of human bodies and the enslavement of the land.

Carolyn Merchant
Timeline Activity
Policy and Black Farmers 1865-1933
Freedmen’s Bureau Act of 1865 & 1866

- The first act included plans for 40 acre tenants to be sold on easy terms from abandoned plantations or unsettled land. By late 1865, Andrew Johnson terminated initiatives by the Union Army to resettle land.
- The second act which was passed in 1866 lacked specific terms and actions to implement the 40 acre settlements.
- By leaving the large plantations intact the demand for farm labor in the South continued.
http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/freedmens-bureau
Land Access and Ownership

- Despite failed reconstruction attempts, African Americans were able to acquire fifteen million acres of land between 1865 and the 1920s.
- This was done through purchasing land through working relationships with whites and through coordinated land purchases and the development of settlements or communities.
- Although this was the case for some African Americans, the majority continued to work in an unfair system as sharecroppers, tenant farmers and farm laborers.
MOUND BAYOU

Largest U.S. Negro town; settled July 12, 1887 by ex-slaves of Joe Davis, who conceived idea before Civil War: Isaiah T. Montgomery (member of 1890 state convention) & his cousin, Benjamin T. Green.

http://www.orgsites.com/ms/moundbayou/_pg

http://www.orgsites.com/ms/moundbayou/_pg1.php3
Land Loss

According to recent USDA reports, black americans own only 8 million acres of land in the United States. Black landowners have lost land at a rate of twice as much as white landowners.

Two of the main causes of land loss throughout the 20th century were

1. Systematic discrimination against black farmers by the USDA which resulted in foreclosures and involuntary sales due to distress

2. Partition sales of land held under tenancies in common
The Second Morrill Act of 1890

- This act established state agricultural colleges for black students (land grant institutions)
- Booker T Washington established the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama
- George Washington Carver works with farmers
Showing some of the teams of farmers attending the Annual Tuskegee Negro Conference.
Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933

- Originally part of FDR’s New Deal program, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 was the first bill to introduce subsidies into the American agriculture system.
- The Agricultural Adjustment Act was a reaction to the great depression which included the dust bowl. The dust bowl was directly linked to damaging farming practices in the West.
- This Act cut production and raised farm prices. This negatively impacted blacks who were sharecroppers because it meant there was less work to do.
- Farmers received payments for taking their fields out of production. Large planters were favored and landowners were not required to give money to tenant farmers.
- Advances in agricultural technology during this time also reduced the need for farm labor.
The Civil Rights Movement

- During the Civil Rights Movement, black farmers in the south joined organizations like the NAACP and made attempts to register to vote.
- Farmers who joined the NAACP faced harsh repercussions from white merchants, white owned businesses and USDA agencies.
- Some black farmers formed cooperatives in order to support each other when they were blocked from making purchases or getting their cotton accepted at cotton gins.
The Cotton Pickers 1960s

USDA and Discrimination

- Discrimination against black farmers by the USDA and white farmers was rampant in the south.
- Black farmers faced discrimination and conspiracy at almost every level.
- They were denied loans needed to maintain ownership of their land.
- Whites lied and stole money from them in order to drive them out of business.
- Agribusiness and agri government collaborated with the USDA to push small farmers and particularly black farmers off of their land.
Challenges

- Structural Racism within the US and Food System
- Inequality due to years of unfair and discriminatory practices.
- Heir Properties
- Access to USDA Programs
- Barriers to apply to grants/loans- matching programs, extensive application process, need for grant writer
- Lack of Representation in FSA Offices
- Lack of Representation on County Commissions
- Lack of representation within Agriculture policy spaces
- Lack of access to technology in rural areas
Migrant workers harvest corn on Uesugi Farms in Gilroy, California (2013). U.S. Department of Agriculture
Corporate Power- Control of political and economic systems by corporations in order to influence trade regulations, tax rates, and wealth distribution, to produce favorable conditions to further corporate profit.

Agri-business- A term that refers to large-scale businesses that encompass farming and farming-related commercial activities, as well as operations that engage in the production, processing, and distribution of agricultural products, and the manufacture of farm machinery, equipment, and supplies. The term also includes large business entities that produce and sell agrichemicals including pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides, and may include the production of synthetic fertilizers, hormones, and other chemical growth agents.
Corporate Consolidation

Corporate Consolidation: Horizontal Consolidation: ownership and control within one part of the food system, such as production, processing, or distribution. Vertical Consolidation: consolidation of firms at more than one part of the food chain, such as upstream suppliers or downstream buyers.
The Farm Bill

How Does the Farm Bill Work?

- The Farm Bill is a massive piece of legislation that sets the tone for federal support for nutrition programs (SNAP), agriculture production, conservation, beginning farmer training, and programs and funding for “socially disadvantaged” farmers.

- The Farm Bill comes up for reauthorization every 5 years and is shaped by the interests of large corporations, members of government and special interest groups.
The farm bill is made up of different titles which represent different food, agriculture provisions and programs.

These can include, nutrition, crop insurance, conservation, commodities, forestry, research, rural development and more

These titles can change throughout different farm bill years.

Only programs that have a minimum spending allocation of 50 million are safe from being cut from the farm bill during reauthorization.

Typically farm bill programs that impact people of color do not have the minimum fundings level necessary to be permanent programs such as the 2501 program and the BFRDP.
Farm Bill Titles

I. Commodities
II. Conservation
III. Trade
IV. Nutrition
V. Credit
VI. Rural Development
VII. Research
VIII. Forestry
IX. Energy
X. Hort. & Organic Ag.
XI. Livestock
XII. Crop Insurance
XIII. Commodity Futures
XIV. Miscellaneous
XV. Trade & Taxes
Who Influences the Farm Bill?

- Special interest groups, corporations and advocacy groups have great influence over the Farm Bill.
- Corporations include Walmart and Monsanto.
- Special Interest Groups include the Farm Bureau Federation and The National Corn Growers Association.
- Advocacy groups include the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Center for Rural Affairs, the Environmental Working Group and Rural Coalition.
Setting the Mark

- Policy advocates create “marker bills” and find members of congress to become co-sponsors who will introduce the bill onto the floor.
- Marker bills are bills that “set the mark” for legislation, but are not intended to be voted on.
- Marker bills are important because they allow members of congress to introduce legislation that will eventually become a part of the final farm bill package.
- It is much easier to get a piece of legislation included into the farm bill if it has already been introduced as a marker bill.
- Advocacy organizations focus on House and Congress members who have the majority seating
Grassroots Action

- 2501 and BFRDP Baseline funding
- Build relationships with staffers and House/Senate Members from your home State
- Join an organization that advocates for policy
- Set up meetings with your state legislators
Inequality within the Farm Bill

- Since its inception the Farm Bill has created policies that actively hindered black farmers and farm workers.
- The rise of corporate power and influence on the farm bill has continued to widen disparities for farmers of color.
- 97.8 percent of farm payments go to white farmers.
- A majority of commodity payments go to producers who make $89,000 or more a year!
- Small scale farmers have less access to markets, loans, equipment, grants, training etc.
Changes

What needs to change about the farm bill and the food system in the US?

- Inequality within the food system is just one piece of a larger unjust system that favors whiteness and corporate power at the expense of black and brown people and the health of the land and environment.
- Change needs to happen at all levels including dismantling of corporate power and corporate consolidation.
- Those who create policies and have control and influence over the government do not represent the true interests and needs of the people.
- The people who create laws and policies are overwhelmingly older white males, who wish to uphold an unjust system that favors them and the corporations that back them.
- Elected officials need to be held accountable for unjust policies that they enact into laws.
Action Steps

A strong grassroots and advocacy movement is necessary to create true change to structural racism and inequality within the food system!
What do YOU think needs to happen to create change?