



SIERRA CLUB

MAINE CHAPTER

PO Box 88
Belfast, ME 04915
Phone: (207) 761-5616
www.sierraclub.org/maine

To: Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
From: Nyalat Biliew, Grassroots Organizer, Sierra Club Maine
Date: 4/3/2023
Re: **Testimony in Support of L.D. 1274; *An Act to Increase Land Access for Historically Disadvantaged Populations***

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

My name is Nyalat Biliew, and I am the Grassroots Organizer at Sierra Club Maine. We represent over 22,000 supporters and members statewide. Founded in 1892, Sierra Club is one of our nation's oldest and largest environmental organizations. We work diligently to amplify the power of our 3.8 million members nation-wide as we work towards combating climate change and promoting a just and sustainable economy. To that end, we urge you to support LD 1274.

This legislation addresses the history of anti-black racism that has contributed to almost 90 percent of black farmers' land being diminished¹ in the United States. The struggles faced by Black farmers today are a continuation of historic oppression and denial of land. The denial of Land access has contributed to high surges of food security in black families and a lack of community autonomy from the systems that oppress us. The struggles of black farmers until this day are still being met with resistance. Black farmers in America have virtually been forgotten. They were abandoned in the civil rights movement, as the issues of racism, inflicted by the USDA, have not been nationally recognized².

In my work with Sierra Club, I have been conducting research and interviews on this topic to better understand the needs of Black people in Maine, and one person in particular comes to mind with this legislation. A farmer by the name Eddie Wise served many years in the military and worked as an ROTC instructor at Georgetown and Howard University. His wife Dorothy Wise also worked at Howard University. Wise grew up in a farming household and always wanted to start his own farm. He and his wife shared this dream, and while living in Maryland, they had an organic soybean and hog farm.

¹ Bustillo, Ximena. "Black Farmers Call for Justice from the USDA." *NPR*, NPR, 12 Feb. 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/12/1151731232/black-farmers-call-for-justice-from-usda>.

² Bustillo, Ximena. "Black Farmers Call for Justice from the USDA." *NPR*, NPR, 12 Feb. 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/12/1151731232/black-farmers-call-for-justice-from-usda>.



SIERRA CLUB

MAINE CHAPTER

PO Box 88
Belfast, ME 04915
Phone: (207) 761-5616
www.sierraclub.org/maine

In Nash County, North Carolina, a 105-acre hog farm was on the market. Eddie and his wife decided to pursue this land and requested a land ownership loan from the FSA. Eddie met with agent Sydney Long to discuss the terms of the application. At the end of the discussion, Eddie was told that before being considered for the loan, he needed to show paperwork proving that he can raise 8.5 healthy hogs³. As an experienced farmer, Eddie and his wife had already been organically growing hogs. He provided agent, long with paperwork to display that in 5 years Eddie produces about 11.5 pigs per sow⁴. Agent Long disclosed significant information to the Wise family that the farm was designated for minority farmers. In other words, people of color could only purchase farmland.

During the application process, there were only two applicants that were considered for the farm; the Wise family and another African American woman. It turned out that the African American woman was paid to fill out an application by a white farmer who wanted the farm and understood that he could get it this way. After three years, the Wise family was finally able to acquire a 130k-land purchase payable over 40 years with a guaranteed note. However, agent Long changed the terms to 15 years⁵. Taking a period of 6 months, agent Sydney Long finally approved the Wise application, and since the Wise's hadn't accessed the loan, the money was put on a supervised loan.

When it came time to renovate the farm, the construction company that was hired to do the job found no money in the Wise's bank account. The Wise family had learned that their loan was put under supervision because Agent Long dragged out the billing process. Meanwhile, the Wise's pigs had grown from 50 pounds to 250-pounds during the three-year application process and were in desperate need of a larger facility.

Everything about this story seems very out of the norm for just acquiring the legal documentation for a loan but this is what numerous black farmers endure. When farmers borrow money from USDA, the local USDA offices, with input from county committees, decide which farmers obtain loans. In many cases, loans for Black farmers would take two or three times longer to receive compared to loans for white farmers, according to USDA documents. As such, Black farmers often have to wait to plant crops or address urgent maintenance needs, causing their yields to suffer. This is exactly what happened to the Wises when about 400 hogs froze to death during the winter due to renovation delays because the contractors could not access the money.

³ Return Farm Unjustly SEIZED Back to Black Farmer Eddie Wise!
<https://www.change.org/p/tom-vilsack-return-farm-unjustly-seized-back-to-black-farmer-eddie-wise> Accessed November 29

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*



SIERRA CLUB

MAINE CHAPTER

PO Box 88
Belfast, ME 04915
Phone: (207) 761-5616
www.sierraclub.org/maine

After 9 years of fully operating, Eddie Wise was assigned two new Farm Service Agents, Paula F. Nicholls and Mike Huskie. Within the span of a month, the Wise loan increased \$60,000 more. This led to the foreclosure process; and on January 20, 2016, about 14 US Marshal officers enter the home of Eddie Wise and escorted him and his wife out of their home at gunpoint⁶. Eddie stated that if he or his wife had resisted, they could have lost their lives. This is similar to the type of discrimination experienced by Timothy Pigford; a black farmer who filed a landmark lawsuit against the USDA for discriminatory actions in 1999⁷.

I could fill many more pages with stories of Black farmers being discriminated against when trying to access farmland in the United States, and would be happy to provide the committee with more examples if requested. However, the theme in all of my research has been clear - in order to address these historic issues, we must take urgent action to clear the path for Black and immigrant farmers to access land without racial discrimination and begin becoming food insecurity resources for the community.

Again, I and Sierra Club Maine urge you to vote 'ought to pass' on LD 1274. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Nyalat Biliew
Grassroots Organizer
Sierra Club Maine Chapter

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *U.S. Opens Spigot After Farmers Claim Discrimination*. The New York Times.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/26/us/farm-loan-bias-claims-often-unsupported-cost-us-millions.html> Accessed November 29 2017