



Testimony before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry  
By Robin Kerber, American Farmland Trust, New England Policy Associate  
April 3, 2023

Re: An Act to Increase Land Access for Historically Disadvantaged Populations.

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry:

I appreciate this opportunity to testify in **support of** LD 1274 - An Act to Increase Land Access for Historically Disadvantaged Populations.

My name is Robin Kerber, and I am American Farmland Trust's New England Policy Associate. American Farmland Trust (AFT) is the only national conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. As an organization, we understand that achieving a resilient agricultural system depends on equity and inclusion for all groups who have been, and still are, marginalized. We know that social and racial injustices are entrenched in our nation's history and agricultural system. We cannot fully appreciate either without acknowledging genocide, land theft, enslavement, and other injustices perpetrated against Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized peoples. To learn more about our organizations approach to addressing systemic inequities in agriculture, we encourage you to read American Farmland Trust's full equity statement [here](#). We support policies that we know will start to rectify the harm that systemic racism inflicted on Black, Indigenous, and Other Farmers of Color (BIPOC) across Maine.

According to the 2017 National Agricultural Statistic Service (NASS) Census of Agriculture, there are 143 Black farmers who farm a total of 1,309 acres in the state of Maine. This is in comparison to the 7,600 who identify as White farmers and farm a total of 1,307,613 acres. In addition, the average size of a farm operated by Black farmers is just 9 acres while the average size of a farm operated by White farmers is 175 acres<sup>1</sup>. AFT recognizes that the 2017 NASS Census data may be limited in capturing data that accurately depicts the number of BIPOC farmers in the state due to many reasons, including the history of discrimination and distrust of USDA and NASS by many BIPOC producers. However, this stark disparity reflects centuries of land and agricultural policies, planning practices, and other forms of systemic racism that have prioritized White producers.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), "2017 Census of Agriculture," last updated April 2019, accessed August 2022, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census\\_Farm\\_Producers.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census_Farm_Producers.pdf)

The creation of a Black Farmer Restoration Program and the Farm Conservation Corps within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) is a strong step the state can take in building better relationships with historically marginalized producers and communities. According to a National Young Farmers Coalition report released in 2022, access to land is the single largest barrier to new and beginner farmers, many of whom identify as BIPOC<sup>2</sup>. Financial, linguistic, and cultural barriers and biases exacerbate typical challenges facing new and beginning farmers. Furthermore, both housing and farmland prices increased during the pandemic in Maine. Maine's housing prices increased by an average of 30% and the average value of farmland per acre increased by 10% from 2019 to 2022<sup>3</sup>. This is because there was a significant increase in development and real estate pressure from out-of-staters looking for more space during a time of restrictions and lockdowns<sup>4</sup>. Compounding this inflated real estate market with over a century of Black land loss, the number of Black farmers in Maine represents less than 2% of the total farmers using barely 0.1% of agricultural land in production.

The 1910 US census recorded over 219,000 land-owning Black farmers in the entire country. The Land Loss and Reparations Project, a report involving a multi-university research team as well as several investigative reporters, looked at census data between 1920 and 1997, and conservatively estimated that during that timeframe, the amount of Black-owned farmland that was lost can be valued at \$326 billion<sup>5</sup>. This estimate does not include many of the benefits that cannot be calculated from receiving generational wealth. There is an immeasurable magnitude of what has been lost, and \$326 billion is considered a very conservative number. The 2017 Census showed that only 11% of the Black farmers in Maine that participated owned the land they stewarded, compared to 95% of White farmers. Land ownership has historically been a means to income and growth opportunities, sales and market expansion, and generational wealth for the landowners. Yet the opportunity to own the land that farmers steward has and continues to be taken away from marginalized communities. Agriculture is not a privilege afforded to only those with significant financial means but a vital step to bring equitable access and opportunity to Maine's historically marginalized people.

LD 1274 also creates the Farm Conservation Corps that supports the education and training of young farmers in Maine's historically marginalized communities. These communities have long faced challenges such as loan discrimination, barriers to accessing state and federal programs, unequal recipients of federal funding, and unstable land tenure. The result of this unjust system means that 95% of the country's farmers are White, despite a very diverse population. Creating an apprenticeship and agricultural land grant program within the Department of Agriculture,

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<sup>2</sup> Ackof, S., Flom, E., Polanco, V. G., Howard, D., Manly, J., Mueller, C., Rippon-Butler, H., & Wyatt, L. (2022). *Building a Future with Farmers*. National Young Farmers Coalition.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), "2017 Census of Agriculture," last updated April 2019, accessed August 2022, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census\\_Farm\\_Producers.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census_Farm_Producers.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Landry, T. (2023, March 6). Maine's out-of-state homebuyers came from these states last year. *MaineBiz*.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, T. W., Francis, D. V., Hamilton, D., Rosenberg, N. A., & Stucki, B. W. (2022, May 1). Black Land Loss: 1920–1997. *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, 112(38–42).

Conservation and Forestry that specifically serves these marginalized Maine farms is crucial to equitable distribution of services and resources.

According to AFT's [Farms Under Threat](#) report non-White farming population are increasing throughout the region. New England's Black farming population has more than tripled since 2007 and has grown five times since 2002. Supporting access to land and resources for successful farming is key to ensuring farm viability for these producers and will sustain this growth. While only 30% of new and beginning farmers (defined as those who have farmed for 10 years or less) identify as White, 79% of Black farmers in New England have been farming for ten years or less<sup>6</sup>. In June 2021, Maine passed LD 870 to study the impact of policies on BIPOC farmers in the state. The report, "Land Access for Indigenous and African American Farmers in Maine", included recommendations for the state to consider making sure that those interested in farming have the resources, support, and means to reach their goals. This growing group of farmers represents an opportunity to slowly repair injustices in our nation's past and is why Maine must look at passing forward thinking legislation like LD 1274 that will establish programs like the Black Farmer Restoration Program and Farm Conservation Corps as part of Maine's robust efforts to build a resilient and equitable food system for all.

To conclude, this legislation is critical to examine how the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry can increase the number of Black producers who apply for opportunities through the agency and configure new ways to promote equity in the state's agricultural sector. AFT recognizes that similar legislation was introduced in Illinois, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, as such, we are confident that the legislature will work with stakeholders to make the proposed programs work for Maine's historically marginalized population. On behalf of American Farmland Trust, I strongly urge you to pass LD 1274 because this legislation will enable DACF to build better relationships with Black farmers, Indigenous farmers, and Other Farmers of Color in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this vital legislation. Please feel free to contact me at [rkerber@farmland.org](mailto:rkerber@farmland.org) or my colleagues at American Farmland Trust if you have any questions about this testimony on LD 1274.

Sincerely,

Robin Kerber  
New England Policy Associate  
American Farmland Trust

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), "2017 Census of Agriculture," last updated April 2019, accessed August 2022, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census\\_Farm\\_Producers.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census_Farm_Producers.pdf)