

EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN THE FARM BILL

Crafting a Bill that Supports the Needs of Families, Local Communities



A woman carries recently-harvested eggplant and peppers grown on her family's farm in Albany, Ohio. © Alex Snyder/TNC

The Farm Bill is the largest source of funding for private land conservation and sustainable agriculture production in the United States.

Its investments and programs help support not only conservation and agriculture practices that lead to better outcomes for people and nature, but do so in ways that bolster local economies.

However, institutional and structural barriers prevent socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, foresters, and underserved communities from accessing programs funded by the bill.

The 2023 Farm Bill represents an important opportunity to codify efforts that address the climate crisis and leverage the full capacity of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to build an equity-centric Farm Bill that supports the needs of local communities.

TNC'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FARM BILL

Increase availability of credit to Socially Disadvantaged Groups, as defined by USDA, for land acquisition and operational start-up costs and improvements and invest in programs that improve land retention for Socially Disadvantaged landowners.

- Expand set-asides for Socially Disadvantaged Groups within the Farm Service Agency Microloan Program and improve program outreach to Socially Disadvantaged Producers (SDP)/Beginning Farmers and Ranchers (BFR) and program accessibility by including multi-year farm leases and waiving prior farm experience requirements.
- Increase funding for programs that assist Socially Disadvantaged groups in acquiring land and clearing title issues, including the Heirs Property Relending Program and the Highly Fractionated Indian Land Loan Program.

ENGAGING ON THE FARM BILL

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has a long history of working with producers, landowners, and other stakeholders across America to create opportunities that conserve natural areas and build more resilient working lands and communities. As owners, operators, and managers of agriculture and forest lands, TNC engages with and advocates for Farm Bill policies and priorities from an on-the-ground, in-field perspective.



Jerry Evans Jr. harvests rice at his family's farm in Symonds, Miss. © Rory Doyle

Increase funding available to Socially Disadvantaged Groups

as defined by the Section 2501 Program, especially those historically discriminated against and impacted by racial disparities and injustices. Programs should establish an investment minimum for direct investments in disadvantaged communities.

- Increase funding for outreach and assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (aka Section 2501) grants for outreach and assistance to SDP and BFR.
- Codify racial Justice and Equity Cooperative Agreements and provide at least \$50 million a year in technical assistance for climate-smart agriculture and forestry program assistance.
- Expand conservation program set-asides to no less than 13% for SDP, BFR and socially disadvantaged foresters, landowners, and fishing operations within the Farm Bill conservation programs.

Improve program accessibility for Socially Disadvantaged Groups by establishing justice-oriented funding criteria, implementation requirements, transparent reporting, objective evaluation of enrollment and barriers, and enforcement mechanisms.

- Expand group definitions under Section 2501 Program and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers to include socially disadvantaged forest managers and fishing and foraging operations.
- Standardize and provide advance payment options for all Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency cost-share programs, including Conservation Reserve Program, for low-income SDPs to address the participation barrier of financing upfront costs.



The cattle pastures at the Marley farm in Elkins, Ark. © Terra Fondriest

- Expand USDA authority to waive requirements that are prohibitive to Socially Disadvantaged groups' participation in Farm Bill programs, including Regional Conservation Partnership Program partner contribution (match) requirements and caps on the use of funding for technical assistance.

Ensure federal research and research grants support public interest initiatives by bolstering USDA research funding and directing federal research agendas towards fair, just, sustainable, and democratically determined production priorities that uphold the well-being of food system workers, smallholder farmers and consumers alike.

- Focus research dollars on farmer-directed, regenerative, and inclusive farming and ranching, including specialty crop production.
- Direct USDA to establish a secure data center to collect, analyze, and securely make data available to external researchers to analyze the relationship between conservation practices, operational resiliency and diversity, and economic sustainability. Incentivize producers to voluntarily elect to submit data.

Support development and access to markets for socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, and foresters, including infrastructure, technical assistance, and marketing that supports fair and just, local, and sustainable food systems that uphold the well-being of food system workers and consumers alike and reflect local culture and foodways.

- Increase funding and outreach for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production grants to address food deserts/swamps.