

Black Farming and Land Loss

Farm Aid - 2014 Issue Brief

The Southeast is notable for its heritage of Black farmers. North Carolina in particular has an inspiring legacy of Black farmers on the one hand, and there is much to be learned from the troubling story of widespread losses of Black-owned land on the other. The decline in Black-owned farms is due in no small part to discrimination at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other institutions, as well as a mass migration of Blacks from the rural South.

Between 1920 and 1993, African-Americans suffered a 96 percent decline in land ownership.

North Carolina has seen a 77% decline in Black farmers in the past three decades, from 6,996 farms in 1978 to 1,637 farms in 2012. Today, just 3% of farmers in the state are Black. In 1920, one in seven farmers was Black; in 1982, one in every 67 farmers was Black. In 1910, Black farmers owned 15 million acres of farmland; in 1982, that dropped to 3.1 million acres of farmland.

By the late 1980s, there were fewer than 2,000 Black farmers under the age of 25. Despite these challenges, Black farmers have continued to organize to save their farm heritage and the land on which it depends.

According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, today's more than 33,000 Black farmers represent almost 2 percent of the total farming population - an increase of 2,772 farmers from 2007.



From Slavery to Property Ownership

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the ratification of the 13th amendment at the end of the Civil War freed 4 million slaves from the bonds of slavery. For the next 10 years, Congress enacted Reconstruction policies aimed at readmitting the Southern states into the Union and integrating Blacks into civic life. Part of that effort concerned land ownership — a cornerstone of American citizenship.

A well-known effort to help Blacks acquire land was a field decree from General Sherman that offered Blacks “40 acres and a mule,” but this policy was overturned fairly quickly by President Johnson, and, in general, federal policy emphasized wage labor for freedmen instead of land ownership.

One of the few opportunities for Blacks to acquire their own land was the federal Freedman's Bureau, established to provide relocation, education and medical relief to newly freed slaves. In 1866, the Bureau opened 45 million acres of public lands in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi to any settlers, regardless of race.

Many freed men and women took advantage of this, sparking the first major wave of African-American land ownership in the U.S. Most of the new Black farmers worked for many years as tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or in the steel or turpentine industries in order to purchase land. By 1910, there were 218,972 Black-owned farms and nearly 15 million acres of Black-owned land.

Black Migration From the South

The well-known expansion of violent acts and discriminatory policies in the South, rooted in White resentment following the Civil War, was an important catalyst behind the migration of Blacks from the south in the pre-Civil Rights era.

Another catalyst was a little critter called the Cotton Boll Weevil, which devastated cotton crops throughout the region. As conditions worsened, Black farmers defaulted on their farm loans, crippling 30 of the 55 independent Black-owned banks. This, in turn, meant that many Black farmers lost their life savings and were unable to recover, their lives devastated and uprooted by poverty.

The Federal Farm Loan Act of 1916, which promised to provide credit to farmers at reasonable rates, systematically discriminated against Black farmers, cutting them off from financing that was rightfully theirs. *(continued pg. 7)*

This newer prize, the Food Sovereignty Prize is awarded by the US Food Sovereignty Alliance which, in their words, “works to end poverty, rebuild local food economies, and assert democratic control over the food system.” Sponsors include Ecowatch, the Small Planet Fund, Why Hunger?, Grassroots International and the Presbyterian Hunger Program.

A winner of this year's Food Sovereignty Prize is the Palestinian-based Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), established in 1986. This group, with committees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, seeks to improve the situation of Palestinian farmers who have been marginalized by Israeli occupation. Their land confiscated and separated from their villages by a system of walls and checkpoints, with water diverted to urban Israeli settlements, the Palestinian farmers labor under the most difficult circumstances imaginable.

Witnesses, many of them Americans sponsored by Christian groups, report that olive groves, which can be hundreds of years old, have been destroyed or walled off from the Palestinian villages that care for them. To get to their land, some Palestinian farmers have to travel



**Winner of this Year's 2014 Food Sovereignty Prize
*Union of Agricultural Work Committees***

long distances to checkpoints where they may or may not be allowed to pass. Israeli soldiers amuse themselves by chasing these farmers, lobbing tear gas or shooting at them.

The UAWC has prioritized five main goals: Sustainable development to minimize reliance on food aid and emergency and relief projects; Creating work opportunities; Holistic rural development; Empowering and developing women's skills and capacities; Connecting youth to the land. Grassroots International is helping them with efforts to reclaim land, develop food security, improve water access through projects like digging and rehabilitating wells and processing gray water, and education and income generation through raising honey bees.

The other honoree of the 2014 Food Sovereignty Prize is Community to Community Development, of Bellingham

Washington. This organization is led by women of color working in their community to promote self-reliance and teach people to access the tools of democracy. They say, “We are committed to systemic change and to creating strategic alliances that strengthen local and global movements towards social, economic and environmental justice... Our work is based on the belief that everyone should have equitable access to the fundamental democratic processes affecting their everyday lives.”

So, who do we want to feed us in the future? Corporations that exploit the land, resources and consumers? Or humans working in their own communities? It's up to us to decide.

Margot McMillen, board member of Missouri Rural Crisis Center and a MO farmer raising food for her neighborhood