"There are plenty of things that we can do, we just really need the narrative to be changed so that more people can understand it better. So they're not so scared to say, 'let's imagine something different.'"

Bonnie Haugen
Dairy Grazier, Springside Farm, MN

Just Transitions to Managed Livestock Grazing

Needs and Opportunities for Change in the Midwestern United States

Erin Lowe & Ana Fochesatto

January 2023

There is a growing call to transform the U.S. food system so that it better supports farmers, communities, and the environment. Managed livestock grazing is one tool that can promtoe environmental health and restore the economic and social viability of rural communities.

This report synthesizes ideas from 128 members of the Midwest agricultural community on how to support managed livestock grazing in ways that build a more socially, economically, and environmentally just food system.

Recommendations include policy and governance actions around education, markets, processing, essential workers, consolidation, capital, land access, and social norms. These recommendations can be adapted to inform strategic planning, educational programming, organizing, or advocacy efforts.

Photo: Wendy Johnson, Jóia Food Farm

This report synthesizes knowledge, aspirations, and ideas shared by 128 people participating in the sustainable agriculture movement in the Midwestern United States. We are incredibly grateful to those who lent us their valuable time and expertise to participate in the interviews and workshops.

Workshop participants

Alison Volk | Easement Project Manager, American Farmland Trust

Armando Ibarra | Professor, University of Wisconsin School for Workers & Founding Member of Voces de la Frontera

Brittany Isidore | PhD student & aspiring farmer, University of Wisconsin & Evaluation Project Assistant, UW Extension

Celize Christy | Next Generation Coordinator, Practical Farmers of Iowa

Evelyn Reilly | Communications & Program Support, Green Lands Blue Waters

Isaiah Skenandore | Diversified Grazier, Skenandore Farm LLC

Jeffrey Mears | Executive Director, Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council

Jonathan Pruitt | Resource Conservationist, Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council

Kyle Wisneski | Tsyunhehkw^ Farm Supervisor, Oneida Nation

Lauren Langworthy | Director of Special Programs, Wisconsin Farmers Union & Diversified Grazier, Blue Ox Farm

Lori Stern | Executive Director, Marbleseed

Margaret Krome | Public Policy Program Director, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute

Meghan Filbert | Livestock Program Manager, Practical Farmers of Iowa & Diversified Grazier

Nadia Alber | Director, Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy and Livestock Farmers & Diversified Grazier, Ducks in a Row Family Farm

Nick Levendofsky | Government Relations Director, Wisconsin Farmers Union

Pete Huff | Co-Director, Resilient Agriculture and Ecosystems, The Wallace Center

Reginaldo Haslett-Maroquin | Co-Director, Regenerative Agricultural Alliance & Diversified Grazier, Salvatierra Farms

Robin Moore | Land Access/Land Legacy Manager, Land Stewardship Project

Rodrigo Cala | Agricultural Trainer, Latino Economic Development Center & Diversified Grazier, Cala Farm

Scott Mericka | Dairy Grazier, Uplands Cheese

Ted Krauskopf | Beef Grazier, Hickory Flat Cattle Company

Vanessa Miller | Food & Agriculture Area Manager, Oneida Nation

Wendy Johnson | Diversified Grazier, Jóia Food Farm

Yimmuaj Yang | Community Director, Groundswell Conservancy

Workshop facilitation Team

Adena Rissman | Grassland 2.0, Policy and Governance Lead & Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology

Andrew Bernhardt | Agriculture Program Specialist, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection

Claudia Calderón | Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Horticulture

Laura Paine | Outreach Lead, Grassland 2.0 & Beef Grazier, Paine Family Farm

Mia Ljung | Community Development Educator, University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension

Michelle Miller | Associate Director, University of Wisconsin-Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems

Michael Bell | Grassland 2.0, Grassland Education Lead & Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Rural Sociology

Randall Jackson | Grassland 2.0, Grassland Ecology Lead & Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Agronomy

Rebecca Power | Grassland 2.0 Learning Hub Lead & University of Wisconsin Extension

All workshop participants and interviewees quoted throughout the report are listed with their position at the time the workshops and interviews were conducted.

Photo: Wendy Johnson, Joia Food Farm

This report was produced with support from *Grassland 2.0*. *Grassland 2.0* is a collaborative group of producers, researchers, and public and private sector leaders working to create and identify clear pathways for producers to achieve increased profitability, production stability, and nutrient and water efficiency while improving water quality, soil health, biodiversity, and climate resiliency through grassland-based agriculture. *Grassland 2.0* is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Sustainable Agriculture Systems Coordinated Agricultural Program grant no. 2019-

grassLAND 2.0

Report editors

Adena Rissman, Aubrey Streit-Krug, Austin Frerick, David LeZaks, Jeff Mears, Michelle Miller, Payge Lindow, Randall Jackson, Sarah Lloyd

Graphics and layout

Erin Lowe

Cover photos

Front: Photos from interviewees L-R, T-B: Interviewee, Edgar Navarro and Everett Mericka, son of Interviewee, Scott Mericka (Liana Mericka); Hickory Flat Cattle Co. (Ted Krauskopf); Owen de Kok-Filbert, son of interviewee, Meghan Filbert (Robb Klassen); Jóia Food Farm (Wendy Johnson)
Back: Bill Paine, hsuband of Grassland 2.0 Outreach Lead, Laura Paine, with calf, Yang
Animal graphics: Liz Anna Kozik

Suggested citation

Lowe, E.B. and Fochesatto, A. (2023). Just Transitions to Managed Livestock Grazing in the Midwestern U.S.: Needs and Opportunities for Change. Grassland 2.0, University of Wisconsin-Madison. grasslandag.org/justtransitions

As people who work in food systems, land and its history is integral to our work. The land on which the authors of this report live and work is called Teejop and it has been the homeland of the Ho-Chunk Nation since time immemorial. In 1832 the Ho-Chunk were forced to cede this territory, and in the decades that followed, the state government tried repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, to remove the Ho-hunk from Wisconsin. This land, along with additional parcels of Indigenous land seized under the Morrill Act, helped build the wealth of UW-Madison out of which this project was based.

While this statement acknowledges our history, it's also a matter of the present. In this project we've worked with members of the Ho-Chunk, Oneida, Menominee, and Forest County Potawatomi Nations in Wisconsin to identify strategies for dismantling colonialism in our agricultural system. Moving forward, we are committed to developing deeper partnerships with Native Nations, supporting Native sovereignty, and working to address ongoing legacies of colonialism and land-based injustice. We urge our readers to do the same.

CONTENTS

Bison at Bodwéwadmi Ktëgan, Forest County Potawatomi Nation, WI

Photo: Bodwéwadmi Ktëgan

Executive Summary

Midwest farmers and members of the managed grazing community are working toward a future in which the food system supports community and environmental well-being. This report highlights key takeaways from conversations with nearly 130 people within this community about their visions for the future and how to make that future a reality.

In the future they imagined, agriculture builds rich soils and farms are vibrant with life. It's a future in which anyone, no matter their background, can become a farmer, and in which all who grow, harvest, and process food live comfortably. It's one of abundance, in which no one goes hungry and healthy food is available to all. In this future, rural communities are lively, collaborative, and welcoming places known to city-dwellers nearby – places where kids want to stay and many are proud to call home.

Today, the food system in the Midwest falls far short of this vision. Increasingly, rural communities contend with biodiversity loss, soil erosion, and contaminated well water, a consequence of farming practices that favor intensive production of a few commodity crops. Farm owners and workers struggle to make a living, access healthcare, and retire, and the next generation is unable to afford land to farm. Urban flight and farm consolidation have stressed the fabric of rural communities. Exploitation of workers throughout the supply chain is the norm, and healthy food remains inaccessible to many in rural and urban communities alike.

In this report, we share community perspectives on how to create a 'just transition' in agriculture through the lens of expanding managed livestock grazing in the Midwest region.

A just transition would enable those who work in agriculture and food systems to regain control over agricultural land, markets, and institutions; address inequities in the distribution of power and resources; and support healthy environments, communities, and livelihoods.

The purpose of this report is to share ideas on how to support managed livestock grazing in a way that addresses inequities and creates a food system that supports everyone.

Who this report is for

This report is intended for a wide audience of change-makers including policy makers and advocates, farmers and farmer organizers, NGOs, agricultural educators, Extension professionals, technical support providers (TSPs), and agriculture financiers. A range of recommendations with implications for grassroots organizing, governmental and non-governmental policies and programs, and broader governance solutions are integrated throughout. Diverse audiences can adapt the content to their line of work, for example by incorporating them into strategic goals, programming, organizing, or advocacy efforts. We have also developed briefs with tailored recommendations for universities (researchers and Extension), National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and policy advocates. These can be found at grasslandag.org/justtransitions.

Takeaways

The report is divided into eight sections: education, alternative markets, processing, essential workers, consolidation, capital, land access, and social norms. These sections help organize actions around specific areas of work. However, we also recognize that many actions interact with others and have highlighted some places where they connect with other sections of the text. The following provides an abbreviated summary of takeaways. Recommendations are also summarized at the start of each section.

EDUCATION

- Invest in farmer-to-farmer networks, mentoring programs, and sustainable agriculture
- Increase support for animals other than cattle, business planning, and marketing
- Build trust between TSPs and BIPOC communities

PROCESSING

- Support small and cooperative processors and mobile and on-farm processing
- Strengthen antitrust laws to decrease consolidation
- Address labor exploitation and expand education on butchering and processing

CONSOLIDATION

- Address industry consolidation
- Equitably distribute profits made in the food system
- Stabilize dairy prices by addressing consolidation and overproduction

LAND ACCESS

- Reduce farm consolidation, financial speculation, and urban sprawl
- Return land to BIPOC farmers
- Decouple retirement from land sales, support succession planning, and connect beginning and BIPOC farmers to land
- Shift dominant ways of thinking about land

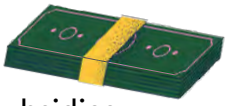
ALTERNATIVE MARKETS

- Improve consumer demand and accessibility for grass-based foods
- Improve certifications and labels and support markets for animals other than cattle
- Expand institutional procurement, co-ops, and pay for performance programs

ESSENTIAL WORKERS

- Change immigration laws, expand education on workers' rights and create avenues for workers to build wealth
- Provide living wages, healthcare, and housing for farm owners and workers
- Support co-ops across the supply chain

CAPITAL



- Restructure agricultural subsidies
- Expand sustainable agriculture knowledge and cultural and language competency among lenders/grant makers
- Change lending and grant-making norms, reform FSA and USDA programs, and amend EQIP
- Develop programs to support small farms and cover basic operating expenses

SOCIAL NORMS

- Measure "farm success" in ways that center farmers and communities, and profitability over productivity
- Understand food as medicine and expand notions of what agriculture looks like
- Build grazing communities and support the next generation

Introduction

The food system of today

Inequity has characterized the U.S. food system since the founding of the United States. Decades of agricultural policies, including social and economic incentives, have limited who can farm and what types of farms have the best chance of success. This has created disparities in power and resources, constructing a food system that privileges a few at the expense of most farmers, communities, and the environment, and making it incredibly difficult for farmers using practices like managed grazing to succeed.

Who can be a farmer

U.S. agricultural policies and social structures have long been used to prevent BIPOC farmers from accessing land and capital and to relegate them to farm labor.[1] Between the 1500s and 1800s, Europeans conducted colonial campaigns around the world, claiming land stewarded by local communities and enslaving people from Africa and Latin-America to work on plantations throughout the Americas. The United States bears a similar history. Over the course of the 1800s, the U.S. government waged genocide on Native Americans and seized 1.5 billion acres of land.[2] Land seizures were

A Note on the Term "BIPOC"

In this report, we use the term "BIPOC" – Black, Indigenous, and People of Color – to highlight the shared experiences of groups who have been racialized and marginalized for the purposes of exploitation and profit-maximization in the U.S. food system. We have chosen to use this term to emphasize power asymmetries that marginalize communities considered "non-white." However, we acknowledge that this term obscures important differences within and across communities. We have tried to highlight histories, challenges, and opportunities unique to specific groups throughout the report. The challenges of Native American communities are particularly distinct because Tribes are sovereign nations able to grant citizenship and rights such as voting and access to government services. In this report, we distinguish between the challenges and recommendations specific to Tribal governments and those referring to Native American farmers navigating the food system within and outside of Tribal lands.

1 Horst, M., & Marion, A. (2019). Racial, ethnic and gender inequities in farmland ownership and farming in the U.S. Agriculture and Human Values, 36(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-018-9883-3

2 Saunt, C. (2020). Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory. W.W. Norton and Company. ISBN: 978-0-393-54156-4 Interactive map at: https://usg.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=eb6ca76e-008543a89349ff2517db47e6

enacted both through treaties and explicit land policies like the Indian Removal act, the Homestead and Morrill Acts, and the Dawes Act.

Prior to colonization, Native peoples throughout the Midwest and the Great Plains managed sustainable grazing systems through controlled burns and bison hunting, activities that were critical to building the fertile soils that support the regions' agriculture today.[3] The U.S government slaughtered bison as part of its violent colonial campaigns against Native communities.[4] European norms around land ownership, private property, and the family farm were used to sanction the destruction of Native food systems. Native communities were forced to abandon systems of communal land stewardship and ecologically-based farming practices and to establish farms based on European ideas of how a farm should look.

> "We were…forced to ignore the food systems that existed in this country for centuries in favor of establishing…practices more familiar to the new settlers. Treaties, federal removal, and reservation policies led not only to the loss of our rights to be at home on our own traditional lands, but to feeding our people in food systems which had supported us for centuries. [The] act of feeding ourselves…the embodiment of self-determination and self-governance…we had exercised for so long, was lost."[5]

During the same time period, the U.S. government redistributed the land taken from Native Americans at little or no cost primarily to white settlers. Slavery fueled the agricultural economy, enriching white landowners. Meanwhile, Alien Land Laws,[6] immigration policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act,[7] and labor policies like the Bracero and H2-A visa programs[8] were and are used to exclude BIPOC farmers from land ownership.[9] Despite these efforts, some BIPOC farmers were able to purchase farmland. But over the following decades, Heirs' Property laws and discrimination at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) dispossessed many BIPOC farmers of the land they had been able to attain.[10]

Today, 97% of farmland is owned by white farm owners while the vast majority of farm labor and food processing is low paid and exploitative work done by BIPOC farmers. As a result, 97% of profit in agriculture is made by white farmers, making it even harder for BIPOC farmers to build the capital necessary to purchase land.[11] Skyrocketing land costs exacerbate issues with land access. This is true for

---

3 Mueller, N. G., Spengler, R. N., Glenn, A., & Lama, K. (2021). Bison, anthropogenic fire, and the origins of agriculture in eastern North America. The Anthropocene Review, 8(2), 141–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019620961119; Shamon, H., Cosby, O. G., Andersen, C. L., et al. (2022). The Potential of Bison RestWoration as an Ecological Approach to Future Tribal Food Sovereignty on the Northern Great Plains. Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution, 10, 826282.

4 Smits, D. D. (1994). The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883. The Western Historical Quarterly, 25(3), 312. https://doi.org/10.2307/971110; Taschereau Mamers, D. (2020). 'Last of the buffalo': Bison extermination, early conservation, and visual records of settler colonization in the North American west. Settler Colonial Studies, 10(1), 126–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2019.1677134

5 Hipp, J.S. & Duren, C.D. (2017). Regaining Our Future: An Assessment of Risks and Opportunities for Native Communities in the 2018 Farm Bill. Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative and Seeds of Native Health. Prior Lake, Minnesota: Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. https://seedsofnativehealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Farm-Bill-Report_WEB.pdf

6 McGovney, D.O. (1974). The Anti-Japanese Land Laws of California and Ten Other States. California Law Review 35(1): 7-60. DOI: 10.15779/Z385V3G

7 Lee, E. (2002). The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882-1924. Journal of American Ethnic History 21(3): 36-62. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27502847

8 Minkoff-Zern, L.A. (2019). The New American Farmer: Immigration, Race, and the Struggle for Sustainability. MIT Press: ISBN 9780262537834. https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262537834/the-new-american-farmer/

9 Rippon-Butler, H. (2020). Land Policy: Toward a More Equitable Farming Future. National Young Farmers Coalition. https://www.youngfarmers.org/land/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/LandPolicyReport.pdf

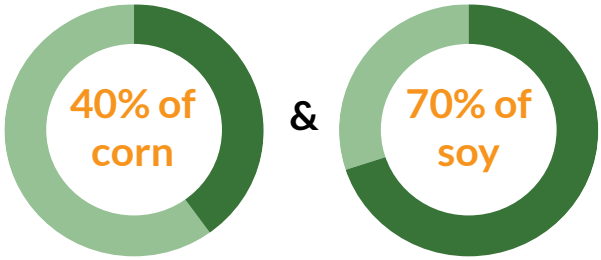
10 Ibid.

11 Horst, M., & Marion, A. (2019). Racial, ethnic and gender inequities in farmland ownership and farming in the U.S. *Agriculture and Human Values*, *36*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-018-9883-3

many beginning farmers, but especially for would-be BIPOC farmers who are less likely to inherit family land or have the capital necessary to purchase it.

The types of farms that can succeed

Since the 1970s, U.S. agricultural policy has increasingly favored some types of farms over others. This has incentivized farmers to move from diversified farms and pastured livestock operations to large-scale production of commodity crops and animals raised in confinement.



Goes to animal feed in the U.S.

Animal feed makes up 50-60% of costs for confinement operations

Commodity subsidies have constituted payouts ranging on average from $72,000-$760,000 / year to individual CAFO farms and up to $5 million / year to each of the largest hog CAFOs[16]

The policies that govern crop insurance and commodity subsidies have had a particularly significant impact on farm structure. While insurance programs can provide an important safety net for farmers, current policies disproportionately benefit large commodity farms. Between 2019 and 2023, the U.S. government is expected to spend ~13.5 billion per year on commodity programs and crop insurance that primarily benefit farmers growing just a few commodities.[12] Together, corn and soy make up nearly half of this spending.[13] Nowhere are the impacts of these policies more evident than in the Midwest. Since 1950, the average number of crops grown per Midwest county has declined by 50%,[14] and corn and soy dominate 75% of farmland across the region.[15]

These programs also benefit corn and soy buyers, including farmers raising animals in confinement. Both commodity programs and crop insurance cover price losses, masking market signals that would normally rein in overproduction. This artificially lowers corn and soy prices, and by extension the price of animal feed, incentivizing farmers to raise animals in confinement rather than on pasture.[16]

These subsidy programs also benefit the largest, wealthiest commodity farms. Commodity programs are not capped or adjusted for income, meaning that the more land a farmer has, the more money they are able to make. In 2014 and 2015, 60% of commodity subsidies and crop insurance payments went to

12 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research ServicWe. Farm Bill Spending. https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-commodity-policy/farm-bill-spending/#:~:text=The%20Congressional%20Budget%20Office%20(CBO,representing%20nearly%20all%20the%20rest.

13 Schnepf, R. (2017) Farm Safety-Net Payments Under the 2014 Farm Bill: Comparison by Program Crop. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Congressional Research Service. Report #R44914 https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R44914.pdf

14 Hemberger, J., Crossley, M. S., & Gratton, C. (2021). Historical decrease in agricultural landscape diversity is associated with shifts in bumble bee species occurrence. *Ecology Letters*, *24*(9), 1800–1813. https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.13786

15 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Climate Hubs. Agriculture in the Midwest. https://www.climatehubs.usda.gov/hubs/midwest/topic/agriculture-midwest#:~:text=FACT%3A%20There%20are%20over%20127,%2C%20oats%2C%20onions%2C%20peaches%2C

16 Gurian-Sherman, D. (2008). CAFOs Uncovered: The Untold Costs of Confined Animal Feeding Operations. Union of Concerned Scientists. https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/cafos-uncovered-full-report.pdf

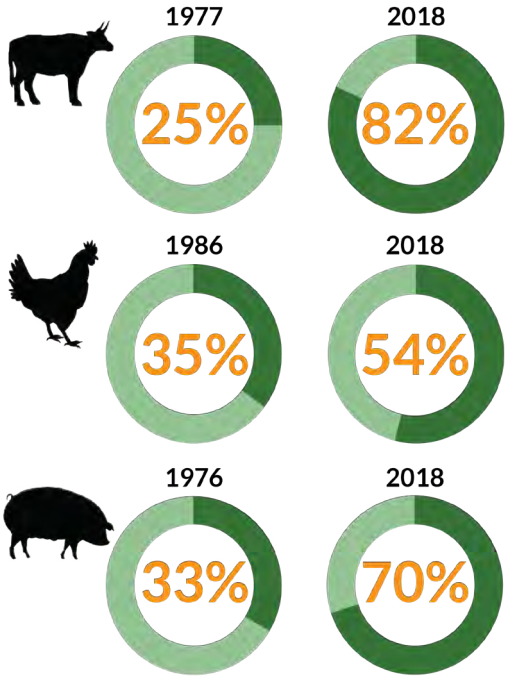
the top 10% of the wealthiest commodity farms.[17] This creates an uneven playing field for other types of farms and fuels a vicious cycle of farm consolidation. As large commodity farms accumulate capital from commodity payments, they're able to outbid other farmers in land sales, allowing them to receive more government payments and access even more capital to continue expanding. Commodity payments and crop insurance also tie the hands of current commodity farmers who may be interested in farming differently. Because comparable support structures are nonexistent for other types of farming, moving away from corn and soy constitutes a risk many farmers are unable or unwilling to take.

Agribusiness consolidation

The agribusiness industry (including companies that sell processed foods and beverages; seeds, chemicals, and fertilizers; and the meat and dairy industries) also profit from commodity subsidies. In the meat industry, corn and soy subsidies have saved Tyson, one of the four largest meatpackers, $288 million per year on feed costs for chicken, alone.[18] These subsidies, along with lax antitrust regulation and enforcement, have created ideal conditions for industry consolidation.[19]

Consolidation allows companies to set the prices they want, enabling them to maximize profits at the expense of farmers and consumers. Despite relatively stable cattle prices, beef prices (as well as the profits of the largest meatpackers) increased steadily over the past seven years.[20] This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when beef prices increased by 14% while meatpackers made record profits.[21] Farmers' profits have also shrunk while meat prices have increased. Most major American proteins have been subject to price-fixing investigations,[22] and the largest meat and dairy companies have all settled multiple class-action lawsuits alleging they underpaid farmers and engaged in anti-competitive behavior.[23]

In the last 40 years the 4 largest beef, chicken, and hog processors have increased their market share dramatically.



In the dairy industry, Dairy Farmers of America (DFA) now holds contracts for 30% of the raw milk supply in the U.S. while Dean Foods controls 30% of the marketing. Monopolization is even greater at a regional scale.[23]

17 Bekkerman, A., Balasco, E.J., Smith, V.H. (2018). **Does Farm Size Matter? Distribution of Crop Insurance Subsidies and Government Program Payments across U.S. Farms. Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy. 41(3): 498-5118** https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/10.1093/aepp/ppy024

18 Howard, P. H. (2019). Corporate concentration in global meat processing: The role of feed and finance subsidies. Global meat: Social and environmental consequences of the expanding meat industry, 31-53.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Deese, B., Fazili, S., Ramamurti, B. (2021). Addressing Concentration in the Meat-Processing Industry to Lower Food Prices for American Families. White House Briefing Room. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/blog/2021/09/08/addressing-concentration-in-the-meat-processing-industry-to-lower-food-prices-for-american-families/

22 Bloomberg Law (2019). Turkey Remains Rare Meat Not Embroiled in Antitrust Probes. https://news.bloomberglaw.com/antitrust/turkey-remains-rare-meat-not-embroiled-in-antitrust-probes

23 Kelloway, C. & Miller, S. (2019). Food and Power: Addressing Monopolization in America's Food System. Open Markets Institute.

Consequences borne by farmers, communities, and the environment

The U.S. agricultural system is built to maximize commodity production and generate profits for a small handful of extremely large farms and companies. In the process, it pays flagrant disregard to the well-being of most farmers as well as the need to feed people and to support healthy communities and environments.

For many farmers, retirement depends on selling their land, making it difficult for them to pass it to the next generation of farmers, most of whom can't afford to purchase it. Meanwhile, rural areas are becoming less livable. Farm consolidation has fueled rural depopulation, limiting economic development, leading to the loss of services like hospitals and schools, and stressing the social fabric of rural communities.[24] Increasingly, these communities are experiencing the environmental consequences of farming a small number of commodity crops. Compared to diversified or perennial farms, large-scale monocultures lead to greater issues with soil fertility, erosion, and agricultural runoff. Farmers and rural communities are forced to deal with the health hazards of contaminated well water and the challenge of making a living on land that has experienced decades of declining soil fertility and erosion.

These impacts escape the boundaries of rural areas. Agricultural runoff contaminates drinking water and lakes across the Midwest creating serious health hazards and limiting opportunities for fishing and swimming.[25] The economic impacts of runoff extend as far as the Gulf of Mexico, causing up to $2.4 billion of damage each year to fisheries and marine habitat.[26,27]

The companion to commodity monocultures, CAFOs, also constitute serious environmental and health hazards. Well-documented impacts include algal blooms and contaminated drinking water; unpleasant odors and air quality issues that can lead to a variety of respiratory diseases, problems with lung function, and cardiac arrest; and the spread of diseases and antibiotic resistance.[28] In some regions CAFOs are disproportionately located in communities of color and the health effects are experienced most acutely by the majority BIPOC labor force.[29]

Photo: NOAA

Eutropication (nutrient loading) at the mouth of the Mississipi River where it drains into the Gulf of Mexico

24 Azzam, A., Walters, C., Kraus, T. (2021). Does subsidized crop insurance affect farm industry structure? Lessons from the U.S. Journal of Policy Modeling 43(6): 1167-1180. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpolmod.2021.06.003

25 Cox, C. & Rundquist, S. (2018). Polluted Runoff: A Broken Promise Threatens Drinking Water in the Heartland. Environmental Working Group. https://www.ewg.org/sites/default/files/u352/EWG_PollutedRunoff.pdf?_ga=2.209397714.1927250027.1658246142-155099221.1657544215

26 Boehm, R. (2019). Reviving the Dead Zone: Solutions to Benefit Both Gulf Coast Fishers and Midwest Farmers. Union of Concerned Scientists. www.ucsusa.org/resources/reviving-dead-zone

27 Rabalais, N. N., R. E. Turner, and W. J. Wiseman. 2002. Gulf of Mexico hypoxia, aka "The dead zone". Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics 33:235-263

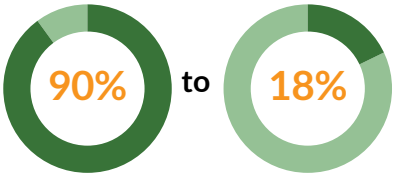
28 Haribar, C. (2010). Understanding Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations and their Impact on Communities. The National Association of Local Boards of Health. https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/docs/understanding_cafos_nalboh.pdf

29 Son, J. Y., Muenich, R. L., Schaffer-Smith, D., Miranda, M. L., & Bell, M. L. (2021). Distribution of environmental justice metrics for exposure to CAFOs in North Carolina, USA. *Environmental Research*, 195, 110862.

Immigration and labor policy, agricultural exemptions to labor protections, and razor-thin farm profit margins have made farm labor one of the leading industries in labor abuse and exploitation.[30] This is also true of work in the food processing industry, particularly in meat processing. Industry consolidation makes it easier for companies to lobby for limited workplace protections and decrease workers' bargaining power. As a result, meat processing has gone from a middle-class job to an incredibly hazardous and low-paying profession,[31] and workplace abuses such as workers being prevented from taking bathroom breaks are commonplace.[32]

Wages in meat processing have fallen from $25 / hour in 1974 to $19 / hour in 2021, adjusted for inflation.

Between 1952 and 2020, union membership in meat processing has decreased from



Injury rates in meat processing are

50% ↑

than workplace averages[31]

Taxpayers and farmers increasingly subsidize industry profits while bearing the cost of the damage done by the agricultural system. Because commodity subsidies incentivize production while covering price losses, the cost of subsidies increase as production increases. This means that taxpayers increasingly front market costs that would otherwise be borne by industry. Between 1991 and 2017, taxpayer subsidies for crop insurance alone have increased from $300 million to $6.1 billion.[33] A recent report by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition estimates that eliminating crop insurance premium subsidies to farms with an adjusted gross income of greater than $250,000 would save taxpayers $20.2 billion over ten years.[34]

Farmers and taxpayers also foot the bill for the agricultural system's impact on human health and the environment. Soil erosion from corn and soy production in Iowa is estimated to cost farmers across the Midwestern Corn Belt $0.9 to 2.8 billion per year.[35] The emphasis on corn and soy production supports the proliferation of cheap, highly-processed foods, fueling an obesity epidemic that disproportionately impacts the health of communities of color.[36] The costs of underpaid workers and health hazards in the workplace are externalized from companies onto taxpayers, as underpaid workers are forced to use emergency room services and rely on food assistance and subsidized housing.[37]

---

30 Costa, D., Martin, P., Rutledge, Z. (2020). Federal labor standards enforcement in agriculture: Data reveal the biggest violators and raise new questions about how to improve and target efforts to protect farmworkers. Economic Policy Institute. https://files.epi.org/pdf/213135.pdf

31 Southern Poverty Law Center (2013). Unsafe at These Speeds: Alabama's Poultry Industry and its Disposable Workers. https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/Unsafe_at_These_Speeds_web.pdf

32 Ibid.

33 National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (2017). How Farm Subsidies Encourage the Big to Get Bigger. https://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/farm-subsidies-encourage-big-get-bigger/#:~:text=Since%201991%2C%20taxpayer%20subsidies%20for,farms%2C%20also%20indicative%20of%20consolidation.

34 Belasco, E.J. (2022). An Economic Analysis of Payment Caps on Crop Insurance Subsidies. National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. https://sustainableagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Payment-Limit-Report-FINAL.pdf

35 Thaler, E.A., Larsen, I.J., Yu, Q. (2021). The Extent of Soil Loss Across the U.S. Corn Belt. PNAS 118(8). https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1922375118

36 Ayazi, H. & Elsheikh, E. (2015). The U.S. Farm Bill: Corporate power and structuralized racialization in the United States Food System. Haas Institute, University of California-Berkeley. https://belonging.berkeley.edu/farm-bill-report-corporate-power-and-structural-racialization-us-food-system

37 Ibid.

The food system of tomorrow

What could a just food system look like? How do we get there? In conversations with 128 Midwest community members people imagined a different future, the primary tenets of which are shared below. No one shared every idea, but these concepts came up across many interviews.

IN THIS FUTURE...

PEOPLE WHO PRODUCE AND PROCESS FOOD LIVE A COMFORTABLE LIFE WITH ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE, HOUSING, A LIVING WAGE, AND RETIREMENT, ENABLING THEM TO SUPPORT A HEALTHY COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT.

DIVERSE REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS CONNECT FARMERS AND EATERS AND GIVE COMMUNITIES CONTROL OVER WHAT THEY EAT AND HOW IT'S PRODUCED. EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLY-PRODUCED, AND CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE FOOD.

RURAL COMMUNITIES SUPPORT A DIVERSE POPULATION WITH EQUITABLE ACCESS TO LAND AND RESOURCES AND PATHWAYS TO OWNERSHIP FOR FARMWORKERS, AND PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE IN LEADERSHIP ROLES. FARMING AND MARKETING COLLABORATIVELY IS COMMONPLACE.

POWER AND RESOURCES ARE DISTRIBUTED EQUITABLY IN THE FOOD SYSTEM. LAND AND ANIMALS ARE STEWARDED BY MORE PEOPLE; GOVERNMENT SUPPORT IS DISTRIBUTED EQUITABLY; CORPORATE PROFITS ARE SHARED WITH FARM OWNERS, WORKERS, AND CONSUMERS; AND NATIVE COMMUNITIES HAVE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY.

Art by Liz Anna Kozik

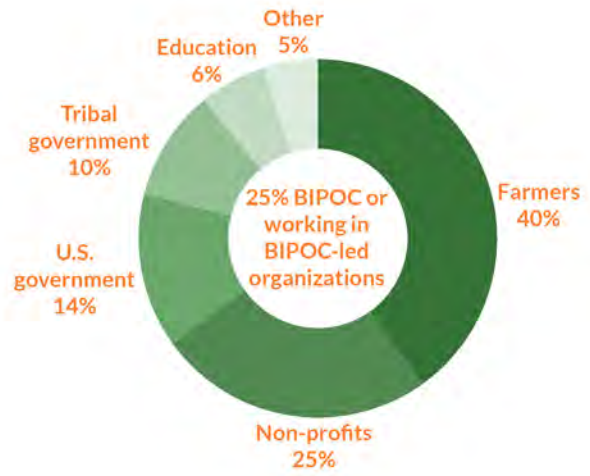
A 'just transition'

A just transition encompasses both *where we're going* and *how we get there*. It includes actions that allow those who work in food and agriculture to regain control over agricultural land, markets, and institutions; address inequities in the distribution of power and resources; and support healthy environments, communities, and livelihoods. In this project, the vision themes above define the *where*. In the interviews and workshops, participants discussed how work within the Midwest sustainable agriculture movement could shift to move us toward the future vision.

A just transition acknowledges that poor outcomes for people and the environment have the same root causes. They're a product of the way the food system is structured. Thus, a just transition adopts an integrated view of human, environmental, and economic well-being and seeks transition pathways that achieve all these aims.

It is possible to provide some support for managed livestock grazing without changing the way the food system is structured. But without structural change, farming practices like managed grazing will remain marginal while the current beneficiaries of the system continue to benefit, reinforcing structural inequities.

We interviewed 128 community members across the Upper Midwest in 2020 and 2021, primarily in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, and Michigan. We asked them about their vision for the future, and what is needed to support managed livestock grazing.



After the interviews, we conducted a series of 3 workshops with non-profit professionals and farmers, most of whom also participated in the interviews. In these workshops we connected the interview data to the visions for the future above, and discussed what actions could best support that vision as well as a "just transition."

This report synthesizes recommendations from both the interviews and the workshops.

Thus, a major goal of this report is to understand not only how we can support managed livestock grazing, but how we can do so in a way that addresses inequities and creates a food system that supports everyone involved.

Defining a 'just transition'

We developed our definition of a 'just transition' through conversations with community members and from a definition given by the Climate Justice Alliance. The idea of a just transition has roots in labor organizing and the environmental justice movement. It also draws on the idea of *sumac kawsay* (in Quechua), *suma qamaña* (in Aimaran), or *buen vivir* (in Spanish), a philosophy originating from Indigenous communities in the Andes which imagines how everyone can live well without living at the expense of others. Today, the idea of a just transition is frequently used in climate advocacy and green energy, but it is increasingly applied within sustainable agriculture movements as well.

Why managed grazing?

Managed grazing is a farming practice in which livestock are actively moved through pastures, allowing each pasture to rest after it has been grazed.[38] Grazing systems are ecologically and culturally important in the Midwest region. Grassland ecosystems, on which Native peoples managed bison herds, were the ecosystem covering much of the area before European colonization. Today, many Native Nations are actively re-establishing bison herds and reconnecting tribal members with this ancestral practice and food source.

Well-managed grazing systems can create positive outcomes for farmers, communities, and the environment

ENVIRONMENT

The perennial plants in many pasture systems sequester carbon, improve soil and water quality, and provide better wildlife habitat.

PROFITABILITY

Because it requires relatively little in terms of labor, equipment, and purchased inputs, managed grazing can provide better economic outcomes for farmers and an easier entry-point than a confined animal operation for beginning farmers with limited capital.

COMMUNITY

A well-managed grazing system requires active management that is harder to accomplish with a large number of animals. This promotes a greater number of small farms, creating opportunities to repopulate and revitalize rural communities.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Many farmers enjoy the lifestyle that managed grazing provides. Grazing allows for a safe work environment, less labor than a confined animal operation, and it can help connect farmers with the environment and the animals they're raising.

38 Franzluebbers, A. J., L. K. Paine, J. R. Winsten, M. Krome, M. A. Sanderson, K. Ogles, and D. Thompson. 2012. Well-managed grazing systems: A forgotten hero of conservation. Journal of Soil and Water Conservation 67:100A-104A

"If you've ever thrown compost to chickens, this is nothing but pure happiness. You see them running around, and the happiness that you can bring the animals by doing such a simple thing just brings a lot of happiness to me…You can tell that they have gratitude…Just the way that the animals act when they are well taken care of makes me excited."

DaQuay Campbell
Aspiring grazier, IA

"Don't neglect to point out how enjoyable grazing is, because you're not waking up every morning thinking about 'what do I need to kill today to perfect my crop.' I want to grow more things and see things thrive. We've got more bird species…than we used to have when it was in crops, butterflies all over. My [grandson] comes from the city and he can't get anywhere because he stops to look at all the butterflies."

Ted Krauskopf
Beef Grazier, Hickory Flat Cattle Co., IL

"I [graze] because I'm lazy. My cattle are harvesting their own food and depositing their own waste. I think it's crazy to go out at six o'clock and haul a bunch of feed to the barn and then go back at four o'clock, clean it all up, and take it back to the field. Conventional farmers who have converted I mean, then they're like, 'whoa, this is golden'"

Rachel Bouressa
Beef Grazier, Bouressa Family Farm, WI

"I did not want to farm with a little kid on each leg and drive a tractor…because that just didn't seem safe…And so grazing was an option that worked. And then the more I learned about it, it was just like, wow, this does do all the things that are important to me…it's a great way to raise a family… There's health benefits to the food and all the environmental benefits to the world."

Kirsten Jurcek
Beef Grazier, Brattset Family Farm &
Grazing Plan Writer, WI

Thinking beyond cattle

Cattle are often central in conversations around managed grazing because markets for beef and dairy are better developed than they are for animals like sheep and goats, and because pigs and chickens aren't ruminant animals. However, in this report we focus on a wider variety of pasture-raised livestock including cattle, goats, sheep, poultry, pigs, and bison. Expanding the focus of managed grazing to include animals other than cattle is important because other animals produce fewer carbon emissions and require fewer resources, they provide better opportunities for farmers with limited capital, and they can make space for culturally important foods.[39] They can also provide numerous benefits to farmers and communities in that many provide healthier meat; smaller animals are easier to work with and butcher on site; and they can be produced year-round, stabilizing markets for processors. Some farmers manage diversified grazing operations, rotating a variety of animals. Diversified systems can increase environmental and economic resiliency and may benefit livestock and pasture health.

"[The] entry point [that] had the least barriers, the more accessibility, the quickest turnaround at the lowest investment up-front, (and) was the most culturally compatible with all of the workers in the food system, most(ly)...Latin American immigrants...was the chicken."

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin
Co-Director, Regenerative Agriculture Alliance & Diversified Grazier, Salvatierra Farms, WI

BIPOC farmers and animal agriculture

> ***"We need to recognize that BIPOC-led agriculture isn't just urban agriculture...BIPOC farmers have shaped agriculture in this country and will continue to do so in both urban and rural communities. But the latter can come with greater social risk - particularly in the Midwest where most of the community is white. We need to be able to look at the larger social fabric of rural America to understand how people do or do not feel welcome and safe. This larger dialogue not only on diversifying what is being grown but also who is doing the growing is critical for rural communities and for ensuring multi-generational success, ownership and wealth for BIPOC farmers in the Midwest."***
> ***–Pete Huff, Co-Director, Resilient Agriculture and Ecosystems at the Wallace Center, IL***

Over the course of this project, we talked with some people who assumed that BIPOC farmers are primarily urban farmers who are not involved with or interested in animal agriculture. We found both of these assumptions to be false. In fact, recent Census data shows that 24% of rural America is composed of people of color[40] and 54% of Native people live in rural communities or small towns.[41] The idea that rural communities are all white erases people of color and their needs in those spaces.

---

39 On chicken: Haslett-Marroquin, R., Andreassen, P. (2017). *In the Shadow of Green Man: My Journey from Poverty and Hunger to Food Security and Hope*. United States: Acres U.S.A., Incorporated.

On goats: u C.D., Miller B.A. (2019). Current status, challenges and prospects for dairy goat production in the Americas. *Asian-Australas J Anim Sci*. 32:8, 1244-1255. doi: 10.5713/ajas.19.0256

40 Rowlands, D. & Love, H. (2021) Mapping rural America's diversity and demographic change. Brookings Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2021/09/28/mapping-rural-americas-diversity-and-demographic-change/

41 Dewees, S., & Marks, B. (2017). Twice Invisible: Understanding Rural Native America. First Nations Development Institute. https://www.uset-inc.org/wp-content/uploads/bvenuti/WWS/2017/May%202017/May%208/Twice%20Invisible%20-%20Research%20Note.pdfW

Our conversations with BIPOC farmers also emphasized their interest in farming animals. Many immigrant farmers have experience raising animals in their countries of origin and most dairies are staffed by immigrants highly skilled in working with cows. Tribal Nations across the U.S. manage large amounts of grazing land, which makes up the majority of Tribal agriculture. Raising animals can also provide culturally important food to many immigrant communities and some interviewees expressed interest in raising specific breeds or kinds of animals for this reason. Likewise, many Tribal governments and Native peoples are actively working to recover bison herds to support food sovereignty efforts.

Many beginning BIPOC farmers start with vegetable farming because of lower land and capital requirements. However, this does not mean that they're uninterested in raising animals. The fact that we encountered false assumptions about BIPOC farmers' interest in animal agriculture underscores the importance of listening closely these communities. Hiring people of color into leadership roles would help create services, opportunities, and policy goals that align more closely with the interests of BIPOC farmers. Building stronger connections between the animal agriculture industry (processors, buyers, farmer networks etc.) and BIPOC communities is also needed to help farmers succeed. Finally, ending discrimination in access to land and capital is a deep-seated issue that must be addressed to support BIPOC farmers in a just transition toward managed grazing.

Bison at Bodwéwadmi Ktëgan, Forest County Potawatomi Nation, WI Photo: Bodwéwadmi Ktëgan

Interviewees Roman Miller and Serge Koenig talk on Miller's farm in Wisconsin Photo: Finn Ryan

Education

Needs at a glance

- Increase support for farmer-to-farmer education networks and mentoring programs
- Increase technical support capacity for grazing, especially for animals other than cattle
- Improve technical support for BIPOC farmers
- Support business planning, marketing, lending, government programs, and succession planning
- Invest in sustainable agriculture education at the high school and college level

The issue

Managed grazing was a critical part of many people's vision for the future. They saw grazing as a means of restoring or mimicking the bison herds that originally grazed on Midwest grasslands, providing a more viable livelihood for farmers and rural communities; and stewarding the environment for future generations. Education plays an important role in both supporting managed grazing and educating the public about grazing and sustainable farming.

Because managed grazing is a knowledge-intensive practice, building technical support capacity for graziers is key.[42] However, particularly in states where corn and soy dominate, educational capacity is limited. This is especially true for animals other than beef cattle and dairy cows. Interviewees expressed a need to build technical support capacity within institutions like NRCS and Extension and emphasized the importance of developing more farmer-to-farmer networks and mentoring programs. Building trusting relationships between technical support providers and BIPOC communities and establishing

42 Paine, L. K., R. M. Klemme, D. J. Undersander, and M. Welsh. 2000. Wisconsin's grazing networks: history, structure, and function. Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education 29:60-67

networks specific to BIPOC farmers is critical to support those who have long been left out of traditional educational networks.

In addition to increasing the amount of grazing education, interviewees emphasized the importance of providing more education on business and succession planning, marketing, lending, and government programs. There is also a need to expand public agricultural knowledge by investing in education in elementary, high school, and higher education settings.

Increase support for farmer-to-farmer education networks and mentoring programs

Many interviewees emphasized the value of farmer-to-farmer educational networks, including grazing networks and mentoring. Some felt that this was more important than investing in technical support providers and/or could make up for the current lack of capacity within NRCS and Extension. They stressed that farmer-to-farmer networks are particularly important for beginning farmers and that they are one of the most effective ways to encourage existing farmers to adopt new practices. To facilitate these networks, interviewees emphasized the importance of paying farmer-mentors for their time, as well as creating roles for people who can organize and publicize farmer-to-farmer networks.

> ***"Getting information from [a farmer] who actually lives it is so much better than an agency person"***
>
> **Kirsten Jurcek**
> Beef Grazier, Brattset Family Farm and Grazing Plan Writer, WI

Mentorship is crucial for many beginning farmers, yet finding a mentor can be challenging for those who aren't well-networked in rural communities. Moreover, a few interviewees mentioned that some farmers refuse to mentor farmers of color. This makes it particularly difficult for BIPOC farmers to gain the technical skills, connections, and resources needed to get established. DaQuay Campbell, a beginning grazier based in Iowa shared that:

> ***"[A big] challenge for me is not having a mentor. I'm looking for mentorship with somebody who already has boots on the ground, somebody who has some experience, somebody who I can call up and say, 'Man, 12 of my chickens just died. What do I do? Help me? Why did my chickens just die?'"***

Investing in networks of BIPOC farmers is key to supporting the next generation of farmers. The IDEA Farm Network and Practical Farmers of Iowa's Labor for Learning, mentoring programs, the Beginning Farmer Summit, and the Black Oaks Center Apprenticeship Program were cited as useful examples of farmer-to-farmer network and mentoring programs.

> ***"It's important for [BIPOC] farmers to be part of a network of other BIPOC farmers; it's just really uncomfortable to be a BIPOC farmer in a world designed for white farmers. You don't necessarily have that sense of comradeship…and shared experience."***
> ***–Margaret Krome, Policy Director at Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, WI***

Increase technical support capacity for grazing, especially for animals other than cattle

"[You can] see counties where… they hired grazing planners [and] the tremendous impact that having good grazing plans had on the establishment of successful grazing farms. [In] adjacent demographically similar counties…the difference was very stark. It's really clear that what had made the difference really was GLCI."

Margaret Krome,
Policy Director, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, WI

Many people talked about how technical support capacity for grazing is lacking within NRCS and university Extension programs. Support varies state-by-state and county-by-county and is particularly poor across states dominated by corn and soy. This influences graziers' ability to access NRCS programs because a grazing plan prepared by a technical support provider is a pre-requirement for receiving NRCS funding. Restoring funding for the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI), which provided state-based support for grazing technical assistance and network facilitation, would help address the gap in expertise (***see Capital)***.

Interviewees expressed even more frustration with the lack of technical support capacity for grazing animals other than beef cattle and dairy cows, including goats, sheep, chickens, pigs, and bison. This has manifested in disproportionate difficulties accessing NRCS funding (***see Capital***). People had difficulties finding technical support providers with expertise in writing grazing plans for their type of livestock and shared stories of NRCS employees requiring them to purchase forages or fencing infrastructure that was irrelevant or even harmful to the animals they were raising. This lack of support also extends to breeding and genetics and to veterinary expertise. Jane Hansen, who raises sheep on Autumn Larch Farm in Wisconsin, shared that her vetrinarian *"did the cow calculation and divided it by ten [for] sheep, and I thought, 'okay, well, that's part of it…hopefully, that's gonna actually work.'"*

Jane Hansen, Autumn Larch Farm, WI

Improve technical support for BIPOC farmers

> ***"For most farmers… access to support from the USDA and/or Cooperative Extension is really important… What I found with immigrant farmers is they didn't know that that existed. They were undocumented and afraid to work with anyone from the government. They tried but nobody spoke Spanish, or nobody thought they were a farmer because they looked like a farmworker… institutional resources were not available to them in the way that they would be to a U.S.-born white farmer" – Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Professor of Food Studies, Syracuse University***

Photo: WTCAC

NRCS employee, Adam Abel, speaks about the Menominee Nation Buffalo Grazing Plan at a Tribal Regenerative Agriculture Workshop hosted by the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council (WTCAC)

Many government agencies as well as university Extension systems have long histories of discrimination against women and BIPOC communities and there is a great deal of trust-building and repair work that needs to be done to work effectively with these groups.[43] NRCS, Extension, and other technical support providers have few relationships with BIPOC farmers and the 5% of NRCS funds allocated for "underserved producers," often go undistributed.[44] Chris Borden, a NRCS Tribal Liaison in Wisconsin, talked about how NRCS has worked with *"generations of dairy farmers in Wisconsin. [When] you go into the field offices, you'll see great grandpa's casefile…and we just worked with the great, great grandson,"* while for many BIPOC farmers, those types of relationships don't exist. He emphasized that *"There has to be that level of trust"* for NRCS to work effectively with clients and "*that exists more strongly in our traditional clientele than it does with new groups.*"

Immigrant farmers emphasized the value of having someone who speaks their language within institutions like NRCS and Extension, and some shared that fear of misunderstanding application processes or regulations has made them hesitant to use government programs, sell certain products, or apply for loans (***see Capital***). Phrakhounmany "Air" Philavanh, a diversified grazier who immigrated from Laos to Iowa shared *"I would like to (access government programs) but the problem is English… if somebody helped to direct me to get in a program… I'd go for it, but I just don't know how."* And a Minnesota farmer who grazes a variety of animals said *"In Mexico, I used to make cheese… I wanted to make cheese (again). We bought a goat [but] I did not try to sell [the cheese] because I was afraid that they (regulators) were going to say that it wasn't done right."*

43 NRCS bulletin on Descrimination Lawsuits against the USDA https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs141p2_015583.pdf

44 Happ, M. (2021). Closed out: How U.S. farmers are denied access to conservation programs. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. https://www.iatp.org/documents/closed-out-how-us-farmers-are-denied-access-conservation-programs

To build trust with BIPOC communities and improve technical support, interviewees provided the following recommendations:

- Address racism and implicit bias among technical support providers
- Hire staff from communities of color and staff who speak languages other than English
- Build relationships with trusted organizations in BIPOC communities and distribute resources through those groups (e.g. community centers, mutual aid associations, Tribal newspapers)
- Increase support for navigating federal programs and reduce the complexity of application processes, especially for immigrant farmers (e.g. walk people through paperwork in their preferred language; provide space to verbalize rather than write business plans; use images; reduce jargon and define terms like "organic" that are not used in some languages)
- Listen to communities and engage them in program development as opposed to consulting with them after programs have been created
- Increase flexibility and opportunities to tailor programs to community needs
- Recognize the value of what can be learned by listening to Native communities and other communities of color

When working with Native communities:

- Develop cultural competency with Indigenous agriculture, Tribal government structures, and the priorities of each Tribe
- Understand how Indian law and Tribal land and legal structures affect participation in programs and access to technical assistance
- Create and support Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, like the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council to interface between Tribes and NRCS
- Increase staffing and support for outreach programs at Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils (TCACs) that connect Tribal producers with USDA resources
- Create more positions for Tribal Liaisons and hire individuals who can work cooperatively with TCACs to support Native producers
- Increase funding and support for pathways programs that place students from Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) into careers at NRCS, FSA and other agencies
- Design programs with feedback from Tribal producers and representatives, rather than consulting them after the fact

Support business planning, marketing, lending, government programs, and succession planning

> ***"[A farmer] is a plumber, he is an electrician, he is a carpenter, he is a vet. He is our nutritionist, and then on top of that, is he also supposed to source and price and market and sell? We've set it up where everybody is supposed to know everything and then I'm also supposed to know how to set up a website?" - Marisa Ulmen, Diversified Grazier & Owner, Ulmen Custom Feed, MN***

Farmers are expected to wear many hats and it can be particularly difficult for farmers using less mainstream farming practices like managed grazing to piece together funding sources and access markets in what is currently a niche industry (***see Alternative Markets)***. Beginning farmers who lack experience and connections, particularly those whose first language is not English, face additional barriers. Many farmworkers interested in becoming farm owners have a wealth of experience farming, but haven't had the opportunity to learn to manage a business or market their products. Practical Farmers of Iowa's Beginning Farmer Savings Incentive Program, Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings program,

and Food Finance Institute's Financial Management Boot Camp are examples of programs that offer assistance with business planning. The Latino Economic Development Center in Minnesota provides one-on-one assistance in business development as well as access to capital.

On the other side of the equation, many retiring farmers struggle to figure out how to pass on their farm ***(see Land Access)***. Departments of Agriculture in three states, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, contract with technical support providers who can help farmers with business and succession planning. The Land Stewardship Project's Farm Transitions Program and organizations like Land for Good and Farm Commons also support farm transition and succession planning.

Invest in sustainable agriculture education at the high school and college level

> ***"When I was in high school there weren't that many opportunities to go into agriculture…The schools should have a more viable path to agriculture…I took [all the agriculture] classes [they had], but…I was simply not learning what I needed to learn." –Edgar Navarro, Grazing Dairy Farmworker, Uplands Cheese, WI***

Experiences with agriculture in elementary and highschool can cultivate an interest in farming, particularly for people who don't come from farming communities. Some interviewees shared how their experiences in grade school were fundamental to cultivating a love of farming, while others felt that they weren't able to learn as much as they wanted and stressed the need to provide more agricultural education at a younger age. Interviewees also voiced that they thought exposure to agriculture was important in helping the next generation of eaters understand food production. Cherrie Nolden, who grazes goats at 1Dr Acres Farm, suggested making USDA demonstration plots more accessible by locating them along bus and bike routes.

Many interviewees emphasized the need to expose students to sustainable agriculture ***(see Social Norms)***, and that there's a growing interest among students to learn about it. Valerie Dantoin, who coordinates the Organic and Sustainable Agriculture and Food Program at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC), shared that at NWTC, the sustainable farming program remains popular while agronomy was cut and dairy science may face a similar future due to lack of interest. She also highlighted successful examples of programs that connect highschool students with agricultural programs at universities like Green Bay Area Public School's Pathways to Agriculture program.

"I remember this – I'll never forget… I brought [okra seedlings] to (high)school and I said 'I want to grow my own okra plants.' So [the teacher] gave me a raised bed…In the Haitian culture, we love okra. One of my favorite meals that my mom makes me (is) okra and beef and red sauce over a nice white rice…The fact that I got to go to school and grow [okra], bring it to my mom, wash it, make a meal with her, give it away to other people – I think that was my aha moment where I felt like…'you didn't have any help with this, this was all you.' FFA gave me a place. It showed me…I actually enjoy learning about farming."

Brittany Isidore
Agroecology PhD Student & Aspiring Farmer, WI

The Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council

For the last twenty years, the eleven federally recognized Tribes in Wisconsin have come together through the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Council (WTCAC) to strategize on natural resource and agricultural issues. The WTCAC assists Tribes in accessing NRCS Programs; relays Tribal resource concerns, conservation innovations, and traditional ecological knowledge to the NRCS; and guides the NRCS in adapting program rules to better fit Tribal needs. This relationship helped the NRCS and other USDA agencies create programs and practices that are impactful and culturally relevant to the Wisconsin Tribes. As Chris Borden, Wisconsin NRCS Tribal Liaison reflected:

> *"The Tribes [are] thinking longer-term and [at the scale of] larger landscapes...we're appreciative of the fact that the Tribal natural resources staff knows exactly the data that we need...to be able to improve our programs."*

Over the years, the WTCAC has increased its capacity to address the evolving needs of the Tribes. With the help of the WTCAC, more than 20 EQIP practices have been developed for general use using traditional ecological knowledge and Wisconsin Tribes have implemented projects around *manoomin* (wild rice), grassland, stream, and forest restoration; walleye rearing; and managed grazing. In July and August of 2022, WTCAC and other partners held two Tribal Regenerative Agriculture Workshops where participants visited Tribal agricultural operations in Southern Wisconsin, featuring diversified systems including rotational grazing.

> *"WTCAC has done a fantastic job of coordinating access to programs for Tribes. Tribal efforts are usually looking at natural resources management…Food falls underneath that, [for example] managing wild rice and forest management. But that's not…the same thing as food and agriculture production (on a farm). WTCAC recognized this and created an ag subcommittee that has been looking at ag-specific issues." – Dan Cornelius, Outreach Program Mangaer, Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center & Beef Grazier, Yowela Farms*

One example of the WTCAC's success supporting agriculture can be seen at the Forest County Potawatomi Nation's farm Bodwewadmi Ktegan. The Tribe worked with WTCAC to secure EQIP funding to establish a rotational grazing operation with chickens, pigs, cattle, and bison on their farm. Meat from the farm goes to both Tribal members and patrons at the Nation's casino restaurants.

By supporting Tribal conservation initiatives, the WTCAC helps Wisconsin Tribes exercise the stewardship needed for them to maintain their sovereign rights to hunt, fish, and gather on ceded and unceded lands. In the future, the WTCAC hopes to leverage its private, federal, and Tribal partnerships to facilitate conservation across state and federally-owned land outside of reservation boundaries.

Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils (TCAC) were formed in response to the 1995 Farm Bill to advise NRCS on Tribal issues. TCACs can be a committee or department within an individual Tribal Nation, or, like the WTCAC, an association formed by multiple Tribal Nations. This has created an outlet for Tribal governments to work more directly with the U.S. government. The WTCAC, established in 2001, was the first TCAC. Since 2001, the WTCAC has advised over 220 Native Nations in how to establish TCACs. While state-level TCACs like the WTCAC remain relatively uncommon, Washington, New York, California, and Oklahoma have created similar Councils.

For more information, see: https://www.wtcac.org/files/1416/1909/5029/2021_Wisconsin_Tribal_Conservation_1.pdf

Packaged meat from Riemer Family Farm, WI, owned by interviewee, Bryce Riemer Photo: Anastasia Wolf-Flasch

Alternative Markets

Needs at a glance

- Cultivate consumer demand for grass-based products and make them accessible and affordable
- Improve certification processes and address the co-option of labels
- Support markets for sheep, goats, and bison
- Leverage institutional procurement programs
- Develop and support collaborative farming and marketing
- Restructure government programs and ecosystem service markets to pay for performance

The issue

Interviewees and workshop participants envisioned a future food system in which the public would have a stronger understanding of farming and be better connected with those who produce their food. They emphasized the importance of diversified regional food systems and some felt that shortening the distance between sites of production and consumption would increase public knowledge of food and agriculture and encourage more people to pay for the real price of production. Many also imagined a future in which sustainably produced food like grass-fed meat and dairy would be accessible and affordable, a vision that within the current food system is sometimes at odds with farmers' ability to make a living.

Certifications such as USDA Organic and grass-fed can help educate consumers and support markets for managed graziers. However, interviewees emphasized that certifications can be difficult for farmers to acquire due to lack of staffing at certifying organizations, and that lax laws around country-of-origin labeling can obfuscate where animals were raised.

While price premiums from labels and certifications provide important income support for sustainable farmers, they can also make healthy, sustainably-produced food a luxury item, out of reach for many consumers. Interviewees talked about institutional procurement programs and co-operative marketing structures as ways to support graziers and increase access to local food.

Cultivate consumer demand for grass-based products and make them accessible and affordable

> ***"Consumers are actually one of our only hopes…They're waking up to…animal welfare standards and soil health [and] the benefits of grass-fed…products." - Valerie Dantoin, Beef Grazier, Full Circle Farm & Instructor, Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, WI***

Photo: Anastasia Wolf-Flasch

Interviewees emphasized the important role that consumers can play in developing and supporting markets for grass-based products. To facilitate consumer demand, many voiced the importance of building public understanding of the realities of farming and the impacts (good and bad) that it can have on the environment. One element of this is creating avenues for more nuanced discussion about the role of meat in relation to climate change and animal welfare. While vegetarianism or veganism are often posed as solutions to these problems, managed grazing can also play a role in tackling the climate crisis and creating a healthier relationship with animals and the environment.

Many interviewees shared the belief that all families should have access to high quality, culturally-appropriate foods. Some emphasized that one way to resolve the tension between farmers' ability to make a living and the community's ability to afford food is to more equitably distribute profits made in the food system ***(see Consolidation)***.

Improve certification processes and address the co-option of labels

Interviewees expressed that labels such as USDA Organic and grass-fed can be important tools for improving the economic prospects for sustainable farms. However, others shared that the premium from the grass-fed label alone wasn't enough and that Organic certification was necessary in addition. Some expressed frustration with the Organic Certification process due to staffing limitations within USDA and certifying organizations. Finally, many interviewees were concerned by the ways in which companies have co-opted and diluted labeling claims. Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) is particularly misleading because animals raised abroad can be shipped to the U.S. for slaughter and labeled as a "Product of the U.S.A." Many interviewees expressed the importance of amending the COOL Law so that labeling reflects where animals are actually raised (*see Consolidation*).

> ***"So much of our grass-fed beef is coming in from other parts of the world, and labeled 'product of the USA.' That's a confusing piece for consumers. It makes it difficult for our ranchers to tell their story." –Daniel Suarez, Conservation Program Manager, The Audubon Society, IL***

Support markets for sheep, goats, and bison

"We see more sheep and goats than we used to... There is an increasing market interest."

Selma Mascaro
NRCS State Grazing Specialist, MO

There are numerous benefits to raising livestock beyond beef cattle and dairy cows ***(see Introduction)***. From a market perspective, there is demand for bison, sheep, and goat meat, particularly in communities of color, because of the cultural importance of these meats. Rodrigo Cala, a diversified grazier and Agricultural Trainer with the Latino Economic Development Center explained, *"I started [raising sheep] because I wanted to make barbacoa. [Selling them] is Mexican money gold."* Interviewees also reported that profits for selling these animals at sale barns can also be higher than for cattle.

However, higher prices can be offset by high costs and limited opportunities for processing ***(see Processing)***. This issue is exacerbated by a dearth of information, lack of veterinary expertise, and lack of technical assistance for raising small animals ***(see Education)***. Providing more support for livestock beyond beef and dairy cows would help foster important market opportunities, particularly for beginning farmers and farmers of color, and provide more affordable food to communities that value other types of meat.

Leverage institutional procurement programs

Institutional procurement programs can be used to support BIPOC farmers, local markets, and food sovereignty. The FDPIR 638 Self-Governance Demonstration Project provides a powerful example of the change that can be made when an institutional procurement program is structured to empower communities. The U.S. government used food as a tool for colonization by systematically dismantling Native livelihoods and food systems and cultivating a reliance on government food aid that persists in many communities to this day. The current iteration of these food aid programs is the Federal Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Before the 638 project, Tribes had never been able to control the foods allocated through these programs. Normally, the FDPIR program sources commodity food staples from large farms off-reservation, undermining market opportunities for Native farmers and contributing to high rates of obesity and other health problems in Native communities. The FDPIR 638 Self-Governance Demonstration Project has given certain Tribes (including the Menominee and Oneida Nations in Wisconsin) control over what goes into FDPIR boxes, enabling Native governments to provide their communities with healthy, culturally appropriate foods sourced from Native farmers.

> ***"To think about these program food boxes that have this good Indigenous food…long grain wild rice or things like that. It's just really emotional for us because it's feeding our people the right things." –Vanessa Miller, Food & Agriculture Area Manager, Oneida Nation, WI***

Another example from cities across the United States is the adoption of the Good Food Purchasing Program. This program reforms lowest bid procurement regulations and establishes a metric-based framework that rates how large institutions make purchases based on five core values: local economies, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, a valued workforce, and nutrition.

Develop and support collaborative farming and marketing


RAA farmer and interviewee, Jose Callejas, Callejas Farm, MN

Many interviewees were interested in developing collaborative marketing structures. Visions for what this could look like ranged from simply facilitating more collaboration across supply chains, to establishing marketing co-ops (e.g., Wisconsin Grassfed Beef Co-op), to creating opportunities for farmers to farm and market cooperatively (informally or through organized systems like the Regenerative Agriculture Alliance (RAA)). Many saw collaborative marketing as a way to lower barriers for beginning farmers and farmers of color. Clifford Martin, who pastures chickens with RAA, emphasized how important joining a cooperative had been to his success as a beginning farmer.

> ***"[If you're] integrated into an actual functioning economic system like a coop, [it's] really different than, 'well, I've been to 10 Farm trainings, but I still have no buyers'...I'd rather be trained in something I'm gonna run that already has an infrastructure to it."***

Most interviewees were not currently part of cooperatives but many expressed an interest in them, and emphasized the need to increase support for developing new cooperative or collaborative marketing structures. Supporting these marketing structures was highlighted by many as a way to return marketing power to farmers. However, a few interviewees also mentioned how cooperatives, like many dairy co-ops, can become subject to corporate capture or get so large that they limit farmers' power rather than expanding it ***(see Consolidation)***.

Restructure government programs and ecosystem service markets to pay for performance

> ***"If [carbon markets become] a main climate solution, I think [it's] going to disincentivize...transition [to managed grazing] because the carbon offset credits are going to come from just doing more of the same with some little tiny amendment… The research has not shown that these carbon market schemes actually reduce emissions. If you look at the bigger picture, it's just a profit-making scheme that I think makes people feel better." –Jessica Kochick, Federal Policy Organizer, Land Stewardship Project, MN***

Many interviewees expressed a desire to change the structure of government conservation programs to pay farmers for their performance rather than rewarding farmers for reducing harmful practices – a policy that primarily benefits row crop and CAFO farmers. Restructuring programs to pay for performance could help even the playing field for both beginning farmers who wish to start a sustainable farm and existing farmers who have been farming sustainably for many years. While CSP is intended to pay for performance, a few interviewees felt that like EQIP ***(see Education)***, the practices for which farmers can receive payments stack more easily for row crop farms because more of them apply to row crops than to farms with more holistic management like managed grazing.

These frustrations also extended to carbon markets which many felt would disproportionately benefit large, row crop producers and companies selling carbon credits. Tribes have been particularly cautious with some already experiencing exploitative deals with carbon companies who collect profits up front and leave Tribes to bear monitoring costs for the duration of 100-year contracts. In light of this, the National Indian Carbon Coalition was developed to help Tribes establish fair carbon contracts.

Photo: USDA

Processing

Needs at a glance:

- Create opportunities for more small and cooperatively owned processors and for more mobile or on-farm processing
- Address labor exploitation and consolidation, and expand educational opportunities

The issue

Many interviewees wanted to see more farms raising a greater variety of crops and animals and more opportunities for beginning farmers. Limited processing capacity for meat, dairy, and fiber has made it incredibly difficult for smaller farmers, particularly those raising small ruminants to stay in business. It also makes managed grazing an unattractive option for new farmers.

Lack of processing capacity is a particular problem in the meat industry. This problem is driven in part by successful efforts to loosen antitrust laws which have enabled rampant consolidation, resulting in fewer and fewer meat giants owning a dwindling number of large processing plants ***(see Consolidation)***.

> ***"These meat giants are so powerful…they can come in and they can name their price [because they're] your only market. By owning the processing facilities they've monopolized on many levels. There's not a choice for the farmer anymore. There's not a choice for the worker anymore…There were record beef prices during COVID at the grocery store [while] all the farmers were getting record low prices…[The companies] trick the price so the farmer doesn't get paid a fair wage." --April Prussia, Pastured Hog Producer, Dorothy's Grange, WI***

The consequences of consolidation have been severe. Interviewees talked about farmers having to sign up for processing slots before their animals are born and concerns about the welfare of animals transported long distances to processing facilities.

The structure of processing regulations exacerbates issues caused by industry consolidation, making it even harder for small processors to open and stay in business. Mark Bearce, CEO of Kettle Range Meat Company in Wisconsin explained that running a small meat processing facility is "*significantly more expensive for small processors than (for) larger processors*" because the *"same regulations apply to a small processor [as to] a large processor…so the costs are inherently higher for the little guy, and that gets passed down all the way along the food chain.*"

"One of my friends called me a couple weeks ago and he said… 'My business has been great [but] if I've got no place to process [my cattle],' and so he's literally leaving the business. [The processors] can't meet the demand, they're just turning people away. It's a shame when there's an economic opportunity like that and people are having to pass it up."

Paul Dietmann
Senior Lending Officer, Compeer Financial, WIw

Only ~25 states allow state-certified (as opposed to USDA-certified) processing facilities, increasing regulatory burdens at the USDA. In states that do allow state-certified facilities, farmers who wish to sell to certain markets are required to use facilities certified by the USDA. This includes farmers, such as those who live close to a state border, who wish to sell across state lines and farmers selling into federal institutional purchasing programs like the FDPIR 638 Self-Governance Demonstration Project ***(see Alternative Markets)***.

Photo: Syed-Hussaini

Access to affordable processing for goats and sheep is more challenging than it is for cattle, chickens, or pigs. Cherrie Nolden, a goat grazier in Wisconsin shared that in her experience, processing a small ruminant adds $4-$8 per pound relative to cattle, *"prevent(ing) lamb and goat meat from being an accessible food to many Americans"* ***(see Alternative Markets)***.

Interviewees also cited different technical skills needed to make cuts on smaller animals, processors increasingly specializing in a single type of meat, and lack of access to specialized processing facilities like Halal processing as important barriers. While access to processing for smaller animals is often more difficult, diversifying animal production can create an opportunity for processors who wish to process animals raised on pasture. In grass-based systems, cattle are processed at one time of year, creating bottlenecks and market fluctuations for processors over the course of the season. Processors who accept a wider variety of animals could have access to a more steady, year-round market even if they exclusively process animals from grass-fed production systems.

Create opportunities for more small and cooperatively owned processors and for more mobile or on-farm processing

> ***"I'm really intrigued by the group of livestock producers in this San Francisco Bay area (Bay Area Ranchers Co-op), who formed a cooperative that is purchasing a mobile slaughter unit. I love that model because there's shared investment in the processing and in its success." –Liz Moran Stelk, Executive Director, Illinois Stewardship Alliance, IL***

Visions for cooperative processing ranged from a group of farmers or Tribes owning a plant together to worker-owned cooperatives. Interviewees also talked about how small and/or cooperatively owned processing plants could open avenues for culturally-important processing practices. Vanessa Miller, Food & Agriculture Area Manager for the Oneida Nation emphasized the significance of her Tribe owning a processing facility:

> ***"[Owning a processing facility would allow us to] process animals…in a responsible way…being able to manage [the] "waste" or other parts of the animals that…otherwise (would have) been disposed of…Hooves, or horns, or bones…are part of the animal that the Creator gave us to be able to use…When we give our animals over to an external processing facility…those are all going to waste…These aren't seen as waste or items to be disposed of in Indigenous communities, these are all things of use. Even just the way that we harvest an animal with a good mind, with thankfulness, with reverence. We can't guarantee that that's done when we aren't doing it ourselves."***

Photo: Bobbi Webster

Bison at the Oneida Nation Farm

To create more opportunities for small and cooperative processors, interviewees proposed:

- Changing regulations:
  - Regulate small processors differently from large processors
  - Reduce record-keeping and paperwork burdens for small processors
  - Hire more processing plant inspectors
  - Build more USDA-certified facilities and ease restrictions on state/local facilities and on which facilities farmers can use based on their markets
  - Ease regulations through legislation like the Strengthening Local Processing Act and the Processing Revival and Interstate Meat Exemption Act (PRIME Act)
- Funding small processors/mobile and on-farm processing:
  - Federal: Food Supply Protection Act, Value-Added Producer Grant Program
  - State: rural development enhancement funds, tax dollars (already used to fund ethanol plants in some states). Examples of state policies include:
    - In Wisconsin: the Department of Financial Institutions platform can be used to crowdsource funding to start or expand a business (underutilized)
    - In Minnesota: the Local Food Advisory Committee, which partners with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, has helped advocate for processing funding

Address labor exploitation and consolidation, and expand educational opportunities

In addition, some interviewees emphasized the need to address labor exploitation ***(see Essential Workers)*** and consolidation in the processing industry ***(see Consolidation)***, as well as to increase educational opportunities around processing at community colleges and other learning institutions to address labor shortages.

> ***"Immigrant(s) [do most of the labor in processing plants that put them] in dangerous working conditions. [They're] underpaid for doing hard work that most people in Wisconsin and elsewhere don't want to do… You (can) reach out to some of those people and give them an opportunity to work in better conditions in a Tribally-run plant or joint-run, co-op" –Dan Cornelius, Outreach Program Manager, Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center & Beef Grazier, Yowela Farms, WI***

Dan Cornelius at Yowela Farms

Photo: Laura Paine

Photo: Spencer Selover

Essential Workers

Needs at a glance

- Farmworkers and workers in processing plants:
  - Create more programs to educate workers on their rights
  - Provide for worker well-being: adequate housing, healthcare, job security, workplace protections, living wages, and transportation/mobility (see spotlight on Milk With Dignity Program, below)
  - Provide pathways for wealth-building and farm ownership
  - Develop worker-cooperatives to achieve better outcomes for workers in the processing industry
  - Reform immigration laws. Immigration reform needs to be at the heart of any actions around land and capital access since in many states undocumented people can't get loans or own land.
- Farm owners:
  - Provide for farmer well-being: healthcare, retirement, living wages, and student loan relief
  - Increase support for collaborative and cooperative farming and marketing structures

The issue

Interviewees wanted to see a future in which farm owners, farmworkers, and food supply chain workers are valued. Ensuring farm owners and workers have access to basic supports like housing, healthcare, a living wage, and retirement was seen as crucial. Interviewees also emphasized breaking down the false division between farm owners and workers. They suggested acknowledging that farmworkers are farmers and both farm owners and farmworkers are 'essential workers' and moving away from the term 'unskilled labor' since it legitimizes low wages and inaccurately describes the work being done.

While there may be some avenues for change within the Farm Bill, many stressed that truly addressing these issues will require thinking beyond the Farm Bill as it's currently structured. There are many active advocacy campaigns around affordable housing, healthcare, wages, retirement, and immigration and potential for more collective organizing to address these issues ***(see How do we make change)***. Many farmworker advocacy groups and labor campaigns circumvent policy, focusing instead on raising public awareness and persuading large companies to ensure worker dignity throughout supply chains. This strategy works by exerting pressure where the most money and power lies within the food system ***(see Consolidation)***.

Provide for the well-being of farmworkers and workers in processing plants

On farms across the country, worker exploitation is rampant. Most of the agricultural industry is staffed by undocumented workers, many of whom find themselves in situations that resemble "modern slavery."[45,46] Workplace abuses often go unreported by workers who have not been made aware of their rights and/or fear deportation.

"Across the United States, the majority of the ownership of land is white and it's male, [but] the majority of the workforce [in] every part of the food chain is mostly Hispanic. There's a problem with that. That's not right. There needs to be an opportunity for people who are doing the work to get to the point where…they can realize their actual worth, because the farmworkers in the United States are a lot more valuable than anybody gives them credit for."

Scott Mericka
Dairy Grazier, Uplands Cheese, WI

Many workers lack control over their lives because of poor access to transportation. Undocumented workers can't get IDs because of their legal status. Because of the isolated location of most farms, workers must often depend on farm owners to fulfill basic needs like going grocery shopping or attending medical appointments. Interviewees stressed the importance of amending state ID laws so that workers can have greater mobility.

There is also a crucial need for adequate housing and housing stability. Many workers live in houses provided by farm owners, putting them in jeopardy of housing insecurity if they are fired. Marita Canedo, Program Coordinator with the Vermont-based farmworker advocacy organization Migrant Justice, described the living and labor conditions faced by many of the workers she works with:

> ***"[Farmworkers] become like a servant(s)…You live where you work [and] if you lose your job, you lose your housing…(Some) workers [live] in very crowded situation(s) with pests, holes, and no heat…They work three shifts [every day] without a day off."***

As a result of market shocks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many farms laid off workers, leaving them without housing in the midst of a public health crisis. Others took on more animals to make ends meet. Marita shared that many farms that did this asked employees to work harder and faster for the same pay. Because farmworkers do not qualify for overtime pay like other workers under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) situations like this are commonplace, particularly when farmers find themselves in a crisis. The processing industry is also primarily staffed by people of color or undocumented workers who

45 Farmworker Justice and Oxfam America (2010). Weeding out abuses: Recommendations for a law- abiding farm labor system. https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/7.2.a.7-weeding-out-abuses.pdf

46 Human Rights Watch (2012). Cultivating Fear: The vulnerability of immigrant farmworkers in the U.S. to sexual violence and harassment. https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/05/15/cultivating-fear/vulnerability-immigrant-farmworkers-us-sexual-violence-and

face serious workplace abuses.[47,48] OSHA is notorious for poor enforcement of worker protections in processing plants, resulting in severe injuries, labor abuse, and even deaths. This was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when President Trump used the Defense Production Act to allow processors to increase line speeds. The loss of middle-class jobs in processing has also led to a labor shortage, heightening processing capacity issues ***(see Processing)***. At one point butchering and other jobs provided middle-class wages, but since the 1980s, butchering has seen a 40% reduction in salary adjusted for inflation. This is in large part due to consolidation in the processing industry, which has allowed companies to dissolve unions that once advocated for fair wages ***(see Consolidation and Processing)***.

Photo: Carlos Fernandez, CIW march

Revising the FLSA and H-2A Visa Program[49,50] to protect agricultural workers, developing and strengthening workplace protections, and providing immigrant workers with pathways to citizenship would help address labor abuses in the agricultural sector. The H2-A program is designed for seasonal and temporary agricultural work and is therefore of little use to dairies and other farms that need year-long labor. To address labor shortages, some dairies have started using TN or H1-B visas to hire workers with advanced degrees.[51] However, because H1-B visas are limited to 3-6 years and there is a cap on the number that can be issued, this does little solve labor shortages.[52] TN visas are easier to access but U.S. employers utilizing them have been accused of fraud, wage theft, and other workplace abuses. Since many jobs in dairy are held by undocumented workers, farmers and advocates are calling for reforms that would allow employers to sponsor visas for undocumented workers already in the U.S. and create pathways for residency and citizenship.[53]

47 Southern Poverty Law Center (2013). Unsafe at These Speeds: Alabama's Poultry Industry and its Disposable Workers. https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/Unsafe_at_These_Speeds_web.pdf

48 Human Rights Watch (2019). "When we're dead and buried, our bones will keep hurting": Workers' rights under threat in US meat and poultry plants. https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/09/04/when-were-dead-and-buried-our-bones-will-keep-hurting/workers-rights-under-threat

49 The Migrant Farmworker Division of Colorado Legal Services (2010). Overworked and Underpaid: H-2A Herders in Colorado. https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Overworked%20and%20Underpaid%20-%20CLS.pdf

50 Farmworker Justice (No way to treat a guest: Why the H-2A agricultural visa program fails US and foreign workers. https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/7.2.a.6-No-Way-To-Treat-A-Guest-H-2A-Report.pdf

51 Grace, J. (2018). Wisconsin dairy navigates gaps in immigrant labor policy. Wisconsin State Farmer. https://www.wisfarmer.com/story/news/state/2018/08/24/where-migrants-documented-undocumented-fit-into-wis-ag-workforce/1085101002/

52 US Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration. H-1B, H-1B1 and E-3 Specialty (Professional) Workers. https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/foreign-labor/programs/h-1b

53 Zak, D. (2019). Bill Summary: Farm Workforce Modernization Act. National Immigration Forum. https://immigrationforum.org/article/bill-summary-farm-workforce-modernization-act/

In addition to being highly exploitative, agricultural jobs provide little or no pathway for upward mobility. Edgar Navarro, a farmworker at Uplands Cheese, a grass-based dairy in Wisconsin shared:

> ***"Most of the Hispanic people that I know are interested in working in a ranch, but I've noticed that a lot of them are losing interest because the bosses don't offer too many opportunities and they don't pay well. There are people who might work 15 years in a ranch… They liked working with animals, liked cows, they liked the country life, but they realized that there aren't too many opportunities to move up doing that type of work."***

To address this, interviewees emphasized the importance of developing ways for farmworkers to build equity through their work and creating pathways to ownership for farm workers ***(see Capital and Land Access)***.

Provide for the well-being of farm owners

Like farm workers, farm owners are also often overworked and underpaid, with no guaranteed access to healthcare or a means to retire. While interviewees shared that grazing animals alleviated some labor needs because more of the labor is done by nature, labor is still a challenge. Farmers expressed that over-work limits their ability to apply for grants and access extension resources, to meet their own standards for environmental stewardship, to be creative, to take time for themselves, and to spend time with family. To address this issue, interviewees expressed a need to ensure farm owners have access to the basic necessities for a dignified life like healthcare (including mental healthcare), a living wage, and retirement. Relieving student loan debt would also make a big difference for both beginning and existing farmers.

> ***"When farmers can't get health care unless they pay through the nose, that's not right… We're not talking [about] entitlement to a fancy truck. We're talking about basic human needs: food…health care, and access to a decent place to live. There's no guarantee with that and here these are the people that are harvesting our food, growing our food, transporting our food." –Vicki Morrone, Organic Farming Specialist, Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems, MI***

Develop/increase support for collaborative and cooperative farming and marketing structures

> ***"Why do we need to fence in all of the landscape? Could we get back to fencing around… ecologically sensitive areas [and] roadways [and] collectively own(ing) herds of cattle and bison…in a more shared system…instead of all having to own our own land and our own livestock?" –Meghan Filbert, Small Ruminant Grazier & Livestock Program Manager, Practical Farmers of Iowa, IA***

Many people were interested in more collaborative or cooperative ways of farming, marketing and processing ***(see Processing and Alternative Markets)***. They felt that cooperative farming would help ease the burden on farmers with fewer resources, reduce risk, and allow farmers to ride out crises together rather than alone. Visions for what this could look like ranged from developing integrated cooperative structures like the Regenerative Agriculture Alliance (a network of farmers that collaboratively markets their product under a shared trademark and cooperatively owns processing infrastructure); to collectively stewarding land, animals, and/or farm equipment; to sharing ownership with their employees; to simply normalizing collaboration and resource-sharing across independent farms within a given region. Bryce Riemer, co-owner of Riemer Family Farm, talked about how they'd sold their egg production to an

employee who now owns the infrastructure and chickens and markets chickens under her own label. Likewise, Scott Mericka, a dairy farmer and owner of Uplands Cheese in Wisconsin, has been searching for ways to allow his workers to build equity through their labor and to enable him to share some of the risk of owning the land and assets on his farm. He said:

> ***"(In New Zealand) you can start off as a milker…and then go all the way up to a farm owner. I want to be able to provide a similar ladder here in the United States with emphasis [on] social justice for immigrant populations…We're trying to sell this sole proprietorship model where you always got to go out and buy the whole kit and caboodle – go get all the tractors, go get the cows, and try to make it go. That is a lot of risk and it is a pain in the butt…I would love not to own my cows. I would love it if my employees (could) own my cows…It would make my life less stressful."***

Scott Mericka checks out the insect diversity on his farm, Uplands Cheese, WI

While many of interviewees expressed interest in developing these types of models, most were unsure how to begin. Collaborative and cooperative farms are no longer as common in many farming communities in the Midwest. However, collaborative farming is a recent memory for many farmers and within many BIPOC communities, collaboratives continue to thrive. Rodrigo Cala, who farms with the Regenerative Agricultural Alliance shared how the cooperative model made sense to him because it's similar to the Ejido system in Mexico:

> ***"We have a model called "Ejido," where a piece of land is divided among 100-200 families. Every family knows that that's their piece of land and that they need to respect each other. They need to share water, tools, and they have to do their part for that system to work well. Is it easy? No. It's not an easy task, it's difficult to have people with different ideas, with different perspectives all the time. [But] for me, the co-op is the way to do business, because many families can reap the benefit, not just one person."***

As Rodrigo highlighted, several people also talked about how difficult cooperatives can be to manage, particularly when those involved have different interests. To support cooperative development, there is a need to highlight and support existing cooperatives as well as to provide more training on cooperative development and how to manage conflict, communication, and interpersonal relationships.

Migrant Justice and the Milk with Dignity Program

Tackling inequities and abuses within the dairy supply chain and lifting up the voices of farmworkers is crucial. The Milk with Dignity Program led by Migrant Justice, is a model that can help all types of farms, including grass-based farms in the Midwest, provide better working conditions.

Migrant Justice is a Vermont-based non-profit organization that advocates for human rights, economic justice, and dignity for farmworkers in the dairy sector. The organization was founded in 2009 after the tragic and preventable death of a young farmworker, José Obeth Santiz Cruz.

In 2011, Migrant Justice surveyed workers to better understand their perspectives and needs. They launched the Milk with Dignity Program (MDP) soon after. The MDP model is based on the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' (CIW) Fair Food Program. This approach centers workers' needs and builds solidarity between farm owners and workers by targeting the companies that make the most money in the dairy supply chain. The MDP acknowledges that farm owners often have limited capital to support better working conditions. Instead, it asks companies to foot the bill. Participating companies pay farmers a premium that goes directly toward improving working conditions on their farms.

Before the MDP came to fruition, it was not uncommon for workers to work 3 shifts per day with only 8 hours off. Workers had no weekend breaks or overtime pay. The worker-authored labor standards set by the MDP ensure that farms provide paid sick days and paid time off, as well as better wages and overtime. The program also educates workers at enrolled farms on their rights and empowers them to report workplace violations.

In 2017, Ben and Jerry's (20% of the Vermont dairy market) joined the MDP, integrating worker rights into its existing compliance standards for environmental issues and animal welfare. The MDP hopes to encourage other companies to sign on to the program through public information campaigns aimed at environmentally and socially conscious consumers and students. Their next goal is to enroll Hannaford Supermarkets, a grocery chain in the Northeast Region.

Beyond the farm, Migrant Justice has also led successful campaigns related to immigrant rights such as advocating to allow undocumented people to receive driver licenses and the passage of a law prohibiting police from acting as immigration enforcement. They are currently working with the state of Vermont to increase financing options for farmers to provide adequate housing to workers. A recent partnership with a construction co-op teaches former farmworkers sustainable construction techniques and works with them to design homes based on their needs.

For more information see: https://migrantjustice.net/MDProgram

Photo: Egor Myznik

Consolidation

> ***"The rural fabric is stressed, it's being pulled apart. Corporate ag has their thumb on pressures in the markets in ways that are unfair. It's tough to recognize, tough to do anything with, but if we don't, it's just only going to get worse." –Bonnie Haugen, Dairy Grazier, Springside Farm, MN***

Needs at a glance

- Address industry consolidation and more equitably distribute profits made in the food system
- Stabilize dairy prices by addressing industry consolidation and milk overproduction

The issue

Interviewees and workshop participants imagined a future with more farms and more equitable opportunities for all farm types and sizes. Many specifically envisioned more small, diverse farms, which they thought would build regional food systems and increase resilience in the face of crises like COVID and climate change. In this future, profits would be less concentrated by companies and large farms, and redistributed to farm owners, workers, and consumers.

Consolidation directly inhibits this vision. People expressed concerns over both industry consolidation and farm consolidation. They talked about how farm consolidation is enabled by agricultural subsidies, as well as through Farm Bill conservation programs, agricultural education, research funding, and lenders who all disproportionately support the needs of large, row crop farms ***(see Capital and Education)***. As farms consolidate, they also acquire more assets that can be leveraged to outbid smaller farms for land. This can increase the price of land, fueling issues with land access ***(see Land Access)***.

Industry consolidation is promoted by lack of antitrust legislation as well as agricultural subsidies ***(see Capital)***, leading to massive concentration of power and wealth in the hands of large agribusiness companies. These companies primarily support large, commodity farms, creating a positive feedback loop with farm consolidation. The agribusiness industry has little interest in grazing or other ecological farming practices as these practices minimize the need for the inputs they sell. Interviewees talked about how distributing some of the profits made by agriculture and food companies could improve conditions for farm owners and workers and decrease food prices. They also voiced how consolidation in the dairy industry along with the overproduction of milk is driving the loss of dairy farms throughout the U.S. and emphasized the dire need to stabilize dairy prices.

> ***"(Crop insurance is) giving [farmers] incentives to raise something that loses money. The government [subsidizes] tilling up the soil, pumping chemicals into it…spraying pesticides everywhere. Why are we incenting that system? … Because…big companies [are] making a living off that."***
>
> **Rod Ofte**
> Diversified Grazier, Willow Creek Ranch & General Manager, Wisconsin Grassfed Beef Co-op

Address industry consolidation and more equitably distribute profits made in the food system

As food retailers, processors, and agribusiness companies have consolidated, they've captured an increasing share of profits made in the food system at the expense of farmers, workers, and consumers. While we focus primarily on the meat and dairy industries, monopolization impacts all sectors of the agriculture and food system including farm input and equipment companies, grain processing and commodity trading, groceries, cafeterias, and makers of processed foods. Interviewees shared how these monopolies have limited farmers' choices and forced them to accept low prices, worsened conditions for workers, and in some cases, particularly in the meat industry, increased prices for consumers.[54] Darin Von Ruden, a dairy grazier and President of the Wisconsin Farmers Union shared,

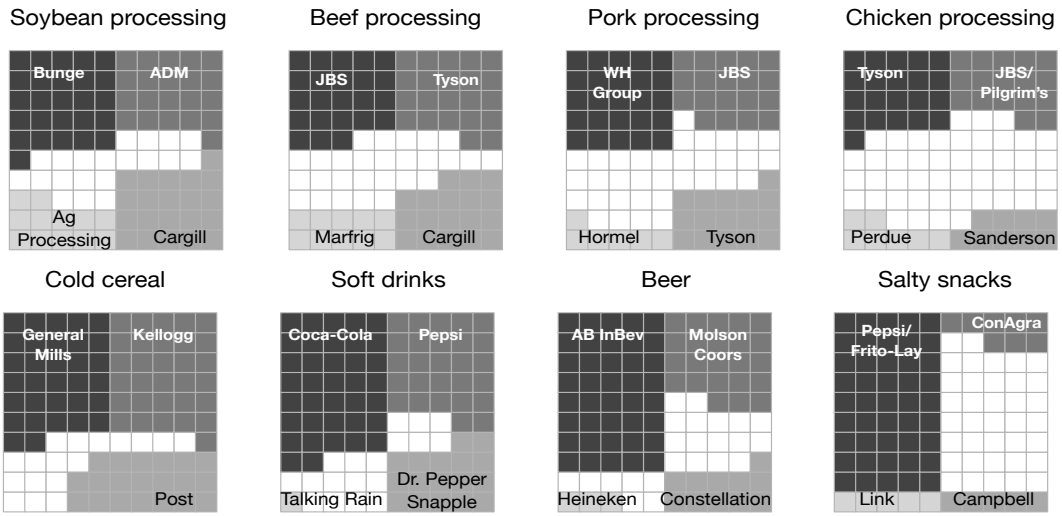
> ***"When I was in high school, the farmer received on average 45 cents of every dollar the consumer spends. Today the farmer is receiving about 16 to 18 cents…Where has that 30 cents gone to? It's basically went to the middleman, whether it's private corporations or private individuals. They're building their wealth very fast, where the farmers are not. So, really the consumer is paying too much for the products they're receiving versus what the farmer is receiving."***

People also discussed how consolidation creates a false tension between both farmers and consumers and farm owners and workers. When farmers don't make a living wage themselves, they struggle to pay their workers and rely on price premiums that many consumers can't afford ***(see Alternative Markets and Essential Workers)***.

> ***"I think we get stuck in the weeds talking about farmers versus farmworkers and small business owners who don't want to see the tipped wage go away, and we ignore the fact that no matter what the economy looks like, money's being made in the food system. I think we need to be targeting our energies towards breaking up those corporate monopolies that make it so everyone down the line just gets pitted against each other."***
> ***–Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Professor of Food Studies, Syracuse University***

54 Kelloway, C. & Miller, S. (2019). Food and Power: Addressing Monopolization in America's Food System. Open Markets Institute. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e449c8c3ef68d752f3e70dc/t/614a2ebebf7d510debfd53f3/1632251583273/200921_MonopolyFoodReport_endnote_v3.pdf

U.S. Market Concentration



Hendrickson, M.K., Howard, P.K., Miller, E.M., Constance, D.H. (2020) The Food System: Concentration and Its Impacts

Interviewees proposed increasing corporate taxes, promoting cooperative ownership at all levels of the food system, amending legislation on checkoff programs, and implementing antitrust legislation as ways to address this issue. While antitrust issues were once addressed through legislative action, today this happens primarily through the courts. Because the fines imposed through antitrust lawsuits are minimal in comparison to companies' profits, legislative action is necessary to have an impact.

Helpful antitrust legislation would include policies that:

- Prevent vertical integration, e.g., companies can no longer own the animals they slaughter and can only slaughter one type of meat
- Prevent companies from merging with others after they own a certain number of market shares
- Encourage attorney generals to hire antitrust attorneys at a state level as many states lack this kind of judiciary capacity

Stabilize dairy prices by addressing industry consolidation and milk overproduction

Forty percent of Wisconsin dairy farms have gone out of business since 2004, constituting a loss of 2 dairy farms per day when losses peaked in 2018.[55] Overproduction and industry consolidation are major culprits of this crisis, driving low prices and price instability. Smaller dairies have largely been driven out of business, while those that remain have consolidated into CAFOs, giving them the capital and scale necessary to ride out price fluctuations.

Photo: Andy Farrington

55 Kelloway, C. & Miller, S. (2019). Food and Power: Addressing Monopolization in America's Food System. Open Markets Institute. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e449c8c3ef68d752f3e70dc/t/614a2ebebf7d510debfd53f3/1632251583273/200921_MonopolyFoodReport_endnote_v3.pdf

As in the meat industry, dairy companies have consolidated rapidly in the last few decades. In 2019 Dairy Farmers of America (DFA), a vertically-integrated co-op, handled 30% of the U.S. milk supply, while Dean Foods processed 30% of U.S. dairy products. At a regional scale, monopolization is even greater, with a single company controlling 85% of fluid milk in the Northeast and two companies controlling nearly the entire milk supply in the upper Midwest.[56] These companies are known for paying farmers low prices, striking deals with processors and marketers at farmers' expense. Dairy farmers across the country have settled multiple class-action lawsuits against DFA and Dean for collusion, monopolization, and price fixing.[57]

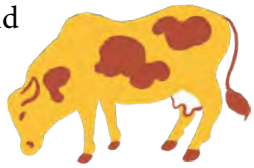
> ***"It seems like the milk processors never lose. We never get to set our prices, we're at their mercy." –Bonnie Haugen, Dairy Grazier, Springside Farm, MN***

Interviewees suggested a number of ways to address these problems. While many felt that cooperatives could increase farmers' power within the food system, the legal frameworks that govern cooperatives are structured in ways that have enabled the consolidation of dairy co-ops. Updating these frameworks would help prevent similar issues in the future. Addressing antitrust issues at an appropriate spatial scale is also important. Because consolidation is most severe at the regional scale in the dairy industry, developing antitrust legislation at the regional level would be useful. Some interviewees shared that amending food safety regulations in states that don't allow direct-to-consumer sales of raw milk would also be helpful in providing small dairies with additional market channels.

In addition to industry consolidation, the overproduction of milk has hurt farmers' profits. Yet in spite of this, the dairy industry has continued to emphasize production ***(see Social Norms)***. As Sarah Lloyd, dairy farmer and Supply Chain specialist for Grassland 2.0 put it

> ***"We're just greatly over-producing milk. The market is not asking for this much milk (but) instead of [saying] 'why don't we reduce production a little bit?'...the only organized government and industry response is...'let's see if we can get people in Malaysia to start eating cheese.' Why don't we just produce less and get paid more for what we produce and not try to make Malaysian people like cheese?"***

The answer lies, at least in part, in the benefit of production to the dairy industry. Just as meat and dairy companies benefit from low feed prices, dairy companies benefit from the low milk prices generated through overproduction of milk. Interviewees cited policies that limit growth and promote supply management as ways to address oversupply. The Dairy Together movement as well as other organizations, are seeking to galvanize support for growth management policy in the 2023 Farm Bill.



56 Hardin, P.L. and Shelley, Z.R. (2022). The Northeast Dairy Dilemma: Solutions for Concentration in a Vertically Integrated Market. Conference Compendium, Yale University. https://som.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2022-06/Grocery-Compendium_1.pdf

57 Kelloway, C. & Miller, S. (2019). Food and Power: Addressing Monopolization in America's Food System. Open Markets Institute. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e449c8c3ef68d752f3e70dc/t/614a2ebebf7d510debfd53f3/1632251583273/200921_MonopolyFoodReport_endnote_v3.pdf

Photo: USDA

Capital

Needs at a glance

- Increase equity in agricultural subsidies (crop insurance & commodity programs)
- Educate financiers on sustainable agriculture and expand cultural and language competency within lending and grant-making institutions
- Change lending and grant-making norms
- Reform FSA and USDA grant & loan programs
- Amend the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Develop a new program to provide capital for basic operating expenses
- Develop and expand financial mechanisms that support small farm businesses

The issue

Addressing inequities in the distribution of resources within the food system was central to many people's future visions. Interviewees and workshop participants imagined a future in which profits are less concentrated in the hands of industry and more equitably distributed among farms of all types and sizes, and one that addresses historic injustice enacted through depriving BIPOC farmers of land and capital. Equitably distributing capital can have a significant influence on who is able to farm as well as the structure of agricultural landscapes.

Many interviewees voiced about how crop insurance and commodity programs concentrate wealth in the food system in the hands of large commodity farms and companies. These subsidies artificially increase the profitability of the corn and soy industry by subsidizing commodity production over other types of agriculture. Because payments are not capped or adjusted for income, the largest commodity farms make

the biggest share of the profits ***(see Consolidation)***.[58] By supporting the production of cheap corn and soy, these subsidies also provide massive payouts to agribusiness companies including meatpackers ***(see Processing and Consolidation)***.[59]

Lenders also preferentially provide loans to large, row crop and CAFO farms both because it's the type of farming they understand and because they see large farms as "too big to fail," particularly with the support of crop insurance and commodity subsidies ***(see Social Norms and Consolidation)***. Meanwhile, debt locks many farmers into their production practices, while cash-flow and farm viability issues exacerbate this problem. When profits are good, farmers have little incentive to change how they farm and when they're bad, they have incentive to change but little ability to do anything different. Debt and financial insecurity also contributes to the mental health crisis among farmers, stressing the fabric of rural communities[60] ***(see Essential Workers)***.

Interviewees talked about how managed grazing offers a relatively low-cost entry point for beginning farmers compared to row-crops or CAFOs and because it requires less infrastructure, it also alleviates issues with debt. However, many also emphasized that farming animals requires far more up-front land and capital than farming vegetables, meaning that grazing is out of reach for many. Smaller animals are less costly and can cash-flow more quickly than cattle, reinforcing the need to support other types of livestock (***see Education, Alternative Markets, and Processing***).

"If you don't have that generational help...it's really, really hard to compete. The big keep getting bigger because they've got the assets."

Melissa Bartz
Beef Grazier, Oak Grove Ridge Farm, WI

General needs expressed by interviewees included issues discussed elsewhere such as expanding ways for farmworkers to build equity and providing relief from student loan debt ***(see Essential Workers)***. Some also discussed moving beyond loans as the primary tool for financing beginning farmers because many people who are interested in farming, particularly young people and BIPOC farmers, don't qualify for business loans. Finally, Brain Weigel, Bureau Director at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, emphasized the need to streamline funding across government agencies, concentrating it into fewer, larger and more flexible pools rather than underfunding many small programs.

Increase equity in agricultural subsidies (crop insurance & commodity programs)

> ***"I have seen corn planted on marginal land with only the hope of a crop insurance payment to bring a profit. Steep hillsides are better suited for grazing - not for plowing. Soil is at risk, water quality is at risk and if chemicals are used - that all goes downstream. Cattle bring fertility to the land. The land needs livestock and the livestock need the land. – Mariann Holm, Dairy Grazier, Holm Girls Dairy, WI***

People discussed many ways in which subsidies lock us into the current agricultural system, compounding the issues this system causes for community and environmental health. Subsidies make

58 Bekkerman, A., Balasco, E.J., Smith, V.H. (2018). Does Farm Size Matter? Distribution of Crop Insurance Subsidies and Government Program Payments across U.S. Farms. Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy. 41(3): 498-5118 https://doi.org/10.1093/aepp/ppy024

59 Howard, P. H. (2019). Corporate concentration in global meat processing: The role of feed and finance subsidies. *Global meat: Social and environmental consequences of the expanding meat industry*, 31-53.

60 Yazd, S.D., Wheeler, S.A., Zuo, A. (2019). Key risk factors affecting farmers' mental health: a systematic review. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph16234849

corn and soy artificially profitable, increasing land costs and fueling farm consolidation ***(see Land Access, and Consolidation)***. Artificially low feed costs incentivize farmers raising animals to switch to grain instead of grass and increase the price disparity between grass-fed and grain-fed meat and dairy. People also discussed the role of subsidies in harming the livelihoods of farmers worldwide by flooding foreign markets with excess products ***(See Essential Workers, Land Access, and Social Norms)***.

Everyone who talked about crop insurance and commodity subsidies agreed that it would encourage a rapid shift away from row crop agriculture to eliminate them. However, a number of people also stressed how difficult it has been to change subsidy structure because of the entrenched power of the agribusiness industry. One policy advocate talked about how there have been efforts for 30-35 years to institute price caps on subsidies to no avail. These people emphasized the importance of providing subsidies for alternatives like grazing or making changes to crop insurance policy as a more viable way to shift the status quo. Several farmers expressed interest in an insurance program for pasture. While the Pasture, Range, and Forage Program theoretically supports grazing, interviewees agreed that it isn't useful. Farmers discussed how difficult it is to use (because it requires you to accurately predict the month(s) in which you'll have a drought, an increasingly difficult task in the face of climate change) and how the program doesn't pay enough to cover insurance costs. Other people suggested changes to crop insurance policy like allowing farmers who transition to grazing to keep their base acres and requiring farms to strengthening conservation compliance criteria.

Educate financiers on sutsainable agriculture and expand cultural and language competency within lending and grant-making institutions

> ***"I've gone to bankers and said 'why aren't you financing grazing?' And they'll say… we don't have the numbers…The only thing [for which they] have definite numbers is conventional ag…We need to be able to provide those those numbers…so that when any farmer who walks into the bank says, 'what can I do, I'm not making money,' grazing should be one of those options." –Lynn Utesch, Beef Farmer, Guardian of the Fields Farm & Farm Worker, Tsyunhehkw^, Oneida Nation, WI***

Graziers shared that lenders often have a poor understanding of sustainable agriculture, making it difficult for them to access loans. They underscored the need to teach lenders about managed grazing and other sustainable farming practices and how these practices can mitigate long-term risk. Likewise, some people wanted to see lenders who are better versed on beginning farmer loan programs and more capable of helping beginning farmers who might not currently qualify for a loan determine how to do so in the future.

There is also a need for lenders and grantmaking institutions to expand their cultural and language competency. Several immigrant farmers spoke about how they avoid applying for grants or loans because no one understands them and they fear making a mistake. By far the best way to increase representation within these institutions is by hiring from BIPOC communities. However, at a minimum, educating staff on cultural differences and Tribal governance structures, and hiring people who speak languages other than English would be helpful.

Change lending and grant-making norms

A few interviewees emphasized the need to change the way lenders assess risk including incorporating how different types of agriculture can increase or mitigate this risk in risk assessments. They also discussed the need for lenders and grantmakers to adjust expectations about how grant applications should be written and to be aware of cultural differences related to written records. Cassidy Dellorto-Blackwell, Farmer Training Program Manager at The Land Connection talked about how in the philanthropy sector, she has seen many grant reviewers dismiss grant applications with small grammatical errors. This denies capital to many farmers with limited education or experience applying for grants and loans particularly those who didn't grow up in the US. She said:

> ***"Things are set up where you work the system [and] if you would have the education and background to work the system, it makes a huge difference…I could look at those grants and say this is a great idea. There's bad grammar, maybe there's some things that don't fit, but this person has the history that says they could do it. But [some] people…are going to say 'I don't know, can they do it? Because they can't write.'"***

Similarly, many lending institutions may ask for farm business information that some immigrant farmers are unaccustomed to keeping written records of. Adjusting these expectations or providing more education on how to navigate the system is important. Finally, Yimmuaj Yang, Community Director at the Groundswell Conservancy, talked about the power of allowing communities more leeway in determining how grant funding is spent. She said:

> ***"A lot of advocates are advocating for instead of top-down grant funding opportunities, bottom-up funding opportunities. Where the community organization or the people that are the most in need are dictating how that funding gets used so that it is culturally appropriate [and] it's making differences within the community."***

Cris Stainbrook, President of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, shared that despite a good track record of paying back loans, lending to Tribes is often considered a credit risk. He reported some lenders have charged Tribes 6-8% more in interest than they do for other financing projects. Similar attitudes extend to other BIPOC communities. Redlining is often discussed as an urban issue, but Johari Cole, a diversified farmer in Illinois, talked about how redlining is also an issue for businesses in her community, which has a large number of Black farmers. In particular, she told the story of a young, Black woman who wanted to start a farm, but despite *"A1 credit [and] business plans [that] met every criteria they had, she got denied."*

Finally, changing policies that govern lending institutions, such as the requirement that clients provide immigration papers or provide land and other assets as collateral would be helpful. Using land as collateral is a documented cause of land loss particularly among Black farmers and other communities of color ***(see Land access)***. To address this issue, the Indian Land and Capital Company has established a 'full faith and credit' model where Tribes must show that they can pay back the loan but do not have to put up assets as collateral. While many questioned this model, they've found that it works – in their fourteen years of operation, they haven't had a single Tribe default on a loan. Implementing similar models in traditional financial institutions would be helpful but this is currently prohibited by bank regulators.

Reform FSA and USDA grant & loan programs

Some farmers reported positive experiences with FSA's Beginning Farmer Loan Program, however, many also suggested improvements. Specifically, they suggested increasing loan limits to keep up with land costs and covering leases as well as land purchases ***(see Land Access)***. Jessica Kochick, Federal Policy Organizer for the Land Stewardship Project, also voiced the need to reduce income requirements for loans and/or to provide farmers with access to healthcare to eliminate trade-offs between healthcare and capital. She shared that income requirements to qualify for FSA loans are high enough that farmers who meet them sometimes lose state-sponsored healthcare even though healthcare is too expensive for them to purchase on their own ***(see Essential Workers)***. As she put it, *"You're literally stuck. Even if you technically could get yourself in a situation where you could qualify for a loan to purchase this land… you're putting yourself in a position where you can't afford health care. And you're in so much debt that if anything goes wrong, you're basically just out of luck."*

> ***"My ideal vision would be for the workers to have more opportunities. If there are employees who have been working 10-15 years in a farm, maybe banks can take that into account. Maybe the employee doesn't have a lot of money to give for a down payment, but if only the banks would take into account how long the person has been working in a particular place, that could really help us...qualify for a loan or any other type of support."***
>
> **Edgar Navarro**
> Grazing Dairy Farmworker, Uplands Cheese, WI

Many interviews discussed the need to adjust the Beginning Farmer Loan program so that more types of farm labor count as farm experience ***(see Essential Workers)***. Without this change, it is difficult for both farmworkers and beginning farmers from non-farming backgrounds to qualify for Beginning Farmer Loans. As Nadia Alber, diversified grazier and Director of the Wisconsin School For Beginning Dairy and Livestock Farmers, put it:

> ***"People can get Beginning Farmer Loans if they have some experience farming, [but] there's the catch 22. How do you get experience farming and have tax returns that show that you've been doing something in order to get a beginning farmer loan?...People that don't come from a farming background...are not gonna have a foot in the door as easily as someone who(se) parents [own] a farm."***

People also discussed changes to USDA grant programs and operating procedures that would help support agriculture in Indian Country. One action that would streamline access to capital for projects on Tribal land is to increase coordination between the USDA and the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Cris Stainbrook, President of the Indian Land Tenure foundation shared a story about how difficult it can be to complete projects when the two agencies don't talk to one another:

> ***"We helped eight tribes buy back a holy site. We wanted to put some buffalo on it. We had the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) put in some money for fencing…NRCS is supposed to be doing the water development on the site [but it was] going to go across trust land and that required the BIA approval. It took three years to do what could have been done in an afternoon with a black pipe and a tank."***

Colby Duren, Director of Policy and Government affairs for the Intertribal Agriculture Council, echoed the importance of cross-agency collaboration. He said: *"There's been examples of that in the past where you have a BIA representative and a NRCS representative talking to each other about trying to get approval for an NRCS contract and that conversation makes it happen...Building that collaboration and connection on the ground...is a very strong way to help solidify that."* Finally, Gary Besaw, Director of the Menominee Nation's Department of Agriculture and Food Systems shared the importance of giving tribes access to the same capital project grants as U.S. territories. He emphasized that even though Tribes are sovereign Nations and *"have legal infrastructure…that easily mirrors some of the other (U.S. territories),"* they are not eligible for this funding. Making these grants available to Tribes would help them address infrastructure needs.

Amend the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Many interviewees expressed how helpful EQIP had been in supporting infrastructure investments on their farms and emphasized that there's a need to expand EQIP funding. This was particularly important to cover fencing costs, which are especially costly in Midwest states where fencing has been largely removed. However, many interviewees also suggested changes to EQIP.

Photo: Finn Ryan

Interviewee , Roman Miller, Roman Miller Farm, WI

Many talked about speeding up the EQIP application process and making it less complicated. Hiring more staff, particularly people with the expertise to write grazing plans would also be helpful in terms of speeding up wait times ***(see Education)***. They also shared that many of the infrastructure standards, particularly for fencing, are more robust than they need to be and they recommended changing these standards so that EQIP contracts are costly for both farmers and taxpayers.

Interviewees also emphasized the significance of changing program policies to reduce the amount of capital needed to participate in the program. Farmers who are not "underserved" are required to front the full cost of infrastructure investments for which they are later reimbursed, meaning that to participate, they must have a large amount of cash on hand. In addition, farmers need to be able to afford grazing plans or other assessments that are currently required to receive funding. While "underserved producers" are eligible for advance payments of up to 50% of start-up costs, the up-front cost can still be prohibitive for many farmers with limited capital.

People also shared the need for EQIP to better support livestock farmers, especially those farming animals other than cattle, raising crops and livestock, or utilizing less common systems like silvopasture. Interviewees reported NRCS preventing them from receiving funding for both crops and livestock (e.g., cover crops and fencing). A finance specialist in Wisconsin emphasized how this is detrimental to normalizing diversified operations, sending the message that "either you're doing livestock, or you're doing crops. We don't do both here." Moreover, EQIP doesn't cover infrastructure for grazing non-ruminant animals like chickens or pigs and many TSPs don't understand grazing protocols for animals other than cattle ***(see Education)***.

Photo: Tom Rafavolich

Wendy Johnson, Jóia Food Farm, IA

Some interviewees also felt that row crop farmers could get funding more easily than those using less common practices like managed grazing. They expressed the need to educate service providers on these types of practices or at a minimum to encourage them to seek out relevant information when faced with practices with which they're less familiar. Wendy Johnson, a diversified grazier who owns Jóia Food Farm in Iowa, talked about how perennial practices are less well-codified within EQIP than practices for growing row crops, making the application process more complicated and costly:

> ***"We've had trouble navigating the NRCS cost-share programs for [silvopasture]…You need a grazing plan, you need an Organic transition plan, you need a silvopasture plan, and then you have to pay for these plans…You're like two years behind and the deadlines are all over the place… It's not fair that…they're so in tune with [practices for annual crops] but it's like fighting tooth and nail when you want to try [perennials]."***

Develop a new program to provide capital for basic operating expenses

> ***"We desperately need a truck. We are literally filling the tires every time we…go somewhere. It's very difficult to find money for that kind of basic, basic stuff. I would say right now…that's our greatest roadblock – flexibility in purchasing, especially, capital and infrastructure…We can't get…the traditional foodways [we want] without a truck. It's really that simple." –Jen Falck, Diversified Farmer & Program Coordinator, Menominee Department of Agriculture & Food, WI***

Farmers, particularly those with limited capital, also expressed frustration about the lack of programs to cover basic repairs or infrastructure investments: things like building exterior fencing; purchasing animals, trucks, or freezers; and covering repairs to roads, houses, and farm equipment. While FSA provides microloans to cover these types of expenses, it was notable that no one mentioned this program. It is unclear if interviewees were unaware of this option or if the program was inaccessible because they didn't meet loan requirements. Minnesota's Rural Finance Authority provides flexible funding for some of these expenses at low interest rates and could provide a useful model for developing similar programs in the future.

Develop and expand financial mechanisms that support small farm businesses

Economic development and financing tools could be applied to support the local food system. Some states have mechanisms where businesses can crowdsource for equity capital to start or expand their operations (e.g., the Department of Financial Institutions in WI, ***see Processing***). It is important to develop platforms like this where they don't exist and expand outreach around ones that do. States could also provide more support for rural planning and economic development since rural communities often lack the staff capacity, expertise, and funding to implement local economic development tools (e.g., Tax Incremental Financing Districts, which could help subsidize local food and farm infrastructure).

Interviewee Bryce Riemer and Jen Riemer, Riemer Family Farm, WI Photo: Nick Berard

Land Access

> ***"We are disconnected from the land in so many ways…That disconnection is the root of so many issues we are trying to solve now. So much of everything that involves agriculture, land use, and access to land really depends upon that relationship to land. Part of that is a human relationship – a connection between earth and ourselves. Part of that is legal structures – the structures of ownership and tenure that exist in this country (and) how [they're] utilized to bring about those connections…or to fracture and aggregate for some and exclude and marginalize the majority of others." –Ian McSweeney, Director, Agrarian Trust***

Needs at a glance

- Recognize that BIPOC farmers have experienced land theft and exclusion from land ownership, and repair this damage via land return, land policy, debt relief, and worker-to-owner programs Increase availability and affordability of farmland by reducing farm consolidation, financial speculation, and urban sprawl
- Increase support for succession planning and decouple farmers' ability to retire from land sales
- Improve infrastructure to connect beginning farmers and marginalized groups to land
- Shift dominant ways of thinking about land and support community land management

The issue

Interviewees and workshop participants wanted to see a future that addresses historic and ongoing inequity in access to resources and in which anyone who wants to farm can be part of the next generation. Land access poses a great barrier to achieving this vision. This is particularly true for people of color whose families have been systematically deprived of land, and for others who don't have land to inherit.

For these reasons, land access was a critical issue to many – 90 out of 128 interviewees brought it up as an issue that was important and 30% stated explicitly that it was one of the biggest barriers to supporting managed grazing. Interviewees wanted to see actions that would increase the availability and affordability of farmland, help existing farmers with land transfers, and find ways to better connect beginning and BIPOC farmers to land. Moreover, while land access is a problem for most farmers, many interviewees emphasized that BIPOC farmers are disproportionately affected because of historic land theft and exclusion and wanted to see action to rectify this injustice. Finally, a number of interviewees emphasized that problems with farmland access stem from social norms that treat farmland as a financial asset rather than a critical life-giving resource ***(see Social Norms)***.

Recognize that BIPOC farmers have experienced land theft and exclusion from land ownership, and repair this damage via land return, land policy, debt relief, and worker-to-owner programs

> ***"Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color have been systematically disenfranchised from their land...since our earliest history. We won't have real solutions until these farmers and communities feel safe to fully participate in rural communities and the decision-making that goes with them. In the small Wisconsin town that I live in, there is an incredible community of Hmong farmers, but they're mostly only visible on farmers market days - why not on the city council and county board that make decisions that influence their farms and businesses? Because it's not always safe to be noticed and push for something different than the status quo...We need...diverse farmers to own farmland and food businesses, but also [for] farmers of all types feel safe and supported to be leaders in their communities." –Pete Huff, Co-Director of the Resilient Agriculture and Ecosystems program at the Wallace Center***

Interviewees acknowledged that the inequitable distribution of land we have today is due to a long history of racist land policy in the United States. As Neil Thapar, Co-Director of Minnow, put it, "*Land didn't pop up and exist, and people were like, 'Oh, it's yours. It's free.' That's a story that we're told, but that's not the reality in most cases.*"

The reality tells a story of colonial violence whereby the U.S. government systematically removed Native peoples from their homelands, redistributed that land to white farmers, and excluded other BIPOC groups from land ownership. These policies built on global displacement through colonization and the slave trade, which was used to fuel the US agricultural economy.

> ***"Unless you come from wealth and you're basically inheriting the land, you don't have access to it. Anyone who is from a marginal community, there's nothing."***
>
> **Austin Frerick**
> Deputy Director, Thurman Arnold Project

Today, many people around the world continue to lose their livelihoods to international policies including those related to agriculture ***(see Capital and Social Norms)***. Forced to migrate to places like the US, they often face incredibly inhumane conditions working in the agricultural sector ***(see Essential workers and Social Norms)***. Both land loss and labor exploitation has inhibited many BIPOC communities from building wealth, exacerbating issues with access to capital and inhibiting their ability to purchase land today ***(see Capital)***.

Repairing this damage starts with creating more pathways through which people of color can reclaim a place of dignity within agriculture and food systems. As this intersects land access, interviewees talked about land reparations including returning land to Native communities; developing land redistribution

policies; providing debt relief for BIPOC farmers; giving Tribes right of first refusal on the sale of federal land, land within former reservation boundaries, and culturally important land; and developing pathways for farmworkers to become farm owners ***(see Capital and Essential Workers)***.

As with many of these issues, the needs of specific BIPOC communities differ widely based on their unique histories. Doing justice to the complexity of this issue requires its own report. However, we've briefly highlighted an example of some of the land access challenges specific to Tribes in the spotlight below.

Increase availability and affordability of farmland by reducing farm consolidation, financial speculation, and urban sprawl, and enacting intentional land policy

Today, land is increasingly out of reach for most farmers. Interviewees talked about how the amount of available farmland is decreasing and its cost is rising rapidly and discussed the role of large farms, financial speculation, and urban sprawl as drivers of this trend.

> ***"(Crop insurance is) what's kept the land price up in our county. If you took that away, maybe I could have had cattle in this county, but at $12,000 an acre ground, you just can't pencil having cattle let alone even row crop at those prices, especially if you're starting out."***
>
> **Evan Schuette**
> Beef Grazier, IL

Crop insurance and commodity subsidies as well as lending norms disproportionately increase the profits of large, commodity farms and CAFOs, driving up land prices and fueling farm consolidation. This is a problem both for land purchases and leases – multiple interviewees shared experiences where large CAFOs or commodity farmers had outbid smaller farmers for leases by offering twice the going rental rate. Rachel Bouressa, who grazes beef at Bouressa Family Farm in Wisconsin, talked about how most of her family's farm is rented by a CAFO that outbids her for her own family's land. She said, *"the CAFO pays twice what everyone else in the neighborhood pays for rent… so rather than taking my family's land…I'm picking up these other parcels for half the price from other neighbors."* Farm consolidation can create a vicious cycle where, as farms gain land, they increase assets that can then be used to leverage even more capital, allowing them to acquire more land from smaller farmers who are pushed out of business ***(see Consolidation and Capital)***.

Increased interest in farmland as a financial asset has also led to a proliferation of landholding by companies, funds, and wealthy individuals. Ian McSweeney, Director of the Agrarian Trust, emphasized that there's no federal policy or program that addresses consolidation in land ownership:

> ***"We're silent on who owns the land…There's no (federal) money for farmland ownership…That's why the largest farm landowner in this country is Bill Gates. There are systems at play that allow the aggregation of land. There are systems at play that allow the theft of land, the marginalization [and] removal of people from land, and we're silent on all of that…we're missing the critical piece."***

To make matters worse, several interviewees talked about how tax policies encourage non-farmers to purchase and hold on to farmland. These policies include capital gains exemptions, use-value assessments, and low estate taxes. As a result, a large amount of land is now held by people with little understanding of farming and limited stake in the communities that live where that land is located. There is a need both to quell financial speculation in land and to educate existing absentee owners on both sustainable farming and appropriate lease terms.

Interviewees also mentioned urban development as a factor responsible for increasing the cost of farmland adjacent to cities. This is a particular issue for smaller, sustainable farmers who often rely on niche markets and for many immigrants whose communities are centered in urban locations. Zoning laws are one of many ways to address this issue.

Increase support for succession planning and decouple farmers' ability to retire from land sales

Lack of support for farmers' retirement and technical support for succession planning fuels land consolidation ***(see Education)***. When farmers' ability to retire is linked to land sales, it becomes difficult to pass land on to beginning, BIPOC, or sustainable farmers ***(see Essential Workers)***. Rather, land often gets sold to the highest bidders – the largest row crop or CAFO farms, those interested in land for financial speculation, or developers.

> ***"Retirement is to sell land... There's no incentive, typically, for [farmers] to say '[I'll] keep my land in farming' versus selling it to a contractor to build a complex of houses...there's a lot of farms that are turning into condos and that's a really bad thing."***
>
> **Vicki Morrone**
> Organic Farming Specialist, Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems

Interviewees emphasized that identifying ways to provide for farmers' retirement plays a critical role not only in supporting farmers themselves, but also in determining the future structure of farms and rural communities. State-level tax incentive programs and the Federal Conservation Reserve Program's Transition Incentive Program (CRP-TIP) help incentivize farmers to transfer their land to beginning farmers. However, more direct policy is needed to successfully transition farmland on a large scale. Interviewees suggested a variety of ways that tax credits could be used to support land transition including crediting people who rent land to beginning farmers (e.g., the Minnesota Beginning Farmer Tax Credit), people who donate land or conservation easements to agricultural land trusts, and landowners who offer long-term leases to farmers. They also suggested engaging trade organizations, "Buy Local" programs, and food policy councils to support land transition.

Land owned by farmers who pass away without a succession plan often meets a similar fate. Interviewees mentioned how difficult it is to have conversations about retirement because farm succession is a highly emotional topic. Many farmers deed land to family members without determining if they'll continue to farm, resulting in heirs selling the property to other interests. Even farmers fortunate enough to have family land face challenges due to family dynamics. Farmers shared stories of women in the family being prevented from inheriting land, having to rent land from non-farming family members at market rates or buy back land from siblings, and disagreeing with parents over the value of sustainable farming practices.

When farmers die without a will, family members who wish to farm are often deprived of the opportunity through a legal issue known as heirs' property. Land under heirs' property isn't eligible for USDA loans or disaster relief and cannot be used as

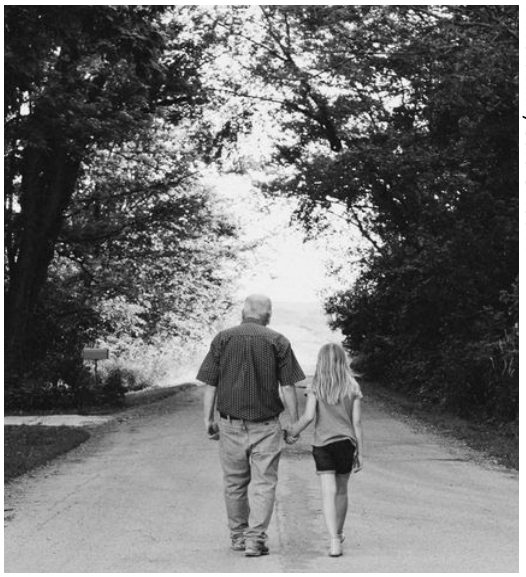


Photo: Emily Sara Creative

Interviewee Bryce Reimer's father, Loren, walks with grandaughter, Caroline

collateral for FSA loans in some states,[61] making it difficult for farmers to keep their land. Moreover, the inheritance structure for heirs' property can create property titles co-owned by hundreds of people. This makes it difficult to clear titles but easy to sell land without the consent of other heirs. For this reason, predatory developers often target financially vulnerable heirs and encourage them to sell out without the consent of heirs who are farming the land.[62] Due to historic and ongoing discrimination in the court system, a large number of BIPOC farmers, and particularly Black farmers, die without wills, perpetuating historic legacies of land theft and dispossession. There is a critical need to create more positions for people who can support succession planning and resolve heirs' property disputes, as well as a need to amend the laws governing heirs' property. Departments of Agriculture in some states, e.g., Vermont, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Connecticut, provide technical support for succession planning. Nineteen states have implemented the Uniform Partition of Heirs' Property Act (UPHPA), which protects property owners who are facing a forced sale of their land.[63] In 2021, Congress allocated $67 million to the Heirs' Property Relending Program which was authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill. The program provides low-interest loans to producers seeking to resolve heirs property issues.

Improve infrastructure to connect beginning farmers and marginalized groups to land

> ***"He said to me, 'when it comes to having farmland, it's either you marry it or you inherit it, there is no other way'…Those words…have followed me for the rest of my life and I find it to be true…especially given the fact that as a child of immigrants, my parents don't own land in the US…The thought of your parents who are trying to make ends meet investing in land for you to do something, that's unreasonable. It's not practical." --Brittany Isidore, Agroecology PhD Student & Aspiring Farmer, WI***

People also expressed frustration with how difficult it is to locate available farmland, particularly for those who are marginalized within rural communities. It's common for land to get passed down within families or sold by word-of-mouth and records of who owns land are difficult to find in many areas, making it challenging to identify who to ask about land sales or rentals. Racism and sexism complicate this process even more.

> ***"Another big issue is racism. There are people who…can't find someone to buy land from because they're not white. Elderly farm owners who are no longer working their lands or working in their farms don't want to sell to minorities." –Wilber De La Rosa, Manager of Farm Outreach and Technical Assistance, Regenerative Agriculture Alliance & Diversified Grazier, Jubilo Farm, MN***

Addressing racism and sexism, developing widely-available and digitized records on landholdings, and creating programs that support land access navigators and land-linking services (e.g., the Midwest Grazing Exchange) could help address these issues.

---

61 Note: *This was changed in the 2018 Farm Bill, but only farmers in states that have implemented the Uniform Partition of Heirs' Property Act (UPHPA) can take advantage of the change. See: https://www.governing.com/archive/sl-black-farm-family-land-protections.html*

62 Presser, L. (2019). Their family bought land one generation after slavery. The Reels Brothers spent eight years in jail for refusing to leave it. https://features.propublica.org/black-land-loss/heirs-property-rights-why-black-families-lose-land-south/

63 Uniform Laws Commission. Partition of Heirs Property Act https://www.uniformlaws.org/committees/community-home?CommunityKey=50724584-e808-4255-bc5d-8ea4e588371d

Shift dominant ways of thinking about land and support community land management

> ***"Community ownership to me is starting to return back to an understanding of land not just as a financial asset, but as something that actually provides for community and that a community has responsibility to steward."***
>
> **Neil Thapar**
> Co-Director, Minnow

Importantly, a number of interviewees voiced that to solve these issues, there needs to be a fundamental shift away from thinking about land as a commodity and a financial asset. The idea of land as a commodity that could be bought, owned, and sold, came to the U.S. with European settlers and was one of the ideas used to enable colonial land theft worldwide. There are many ways to think about land beyond a tool for wealth-building. In many other countries, land reform is a common discussion and in other communities, land is seen as something that should be stewarded by communities and for communities, as a vital source of life, as a resource critical to our survival, and as a living being. Yet in the U.S., land as a financial commodity remains the dominant paradigm. This is compounded by financial speculation in farmland. When land is concentrated in the hands of distant individuals and institutions, communities lose control over what happens to the land around them. This has exacerbated inequities in farmland ownership and further concentrated wealth and power outside of rural areas.

To address this issue, interviewees stressed the importance of returning jurisdiction over land to farmers and local communities. Many farmers were interested in cooperative or collective land stewardship and several non-profit employees shared that they'd heard many farmers in their networks express a similar interest ***(see Alternative Markets, Processing, and Essential Workers)***. Cooperative ownership can decrease costs per farmer, reduce risk in financing, and enable farmers to share infrastructure, and build community. Other interviewees emphasized the role that land trusts can play in removing land from the market and placing it under community control. They also discussed policies that are being implemented elsewhere in the world, like community rights of first refusal on land sales. Purchase of development rights and conservation easements are common tools for protecting farmland and reducing its cost. Ian McSweeney, Director of Agrarian Trust, pointed out that while these tools are helpful, they don't address the root causes of the affordability problem. However, they could be used to promote more transformative change if they enabled land trusts or communities to acquire land and remove it from the market in perpetuity.

Tribal Lands

Colonial land theft and subsequent government policies have forced Native people from their homelands and dispossessed them of land even within reservation boundaries. Under the Dawes Act of 1887, reservation land was allotted to Native individuals under the condition that they adopt practices in line with the government's idea of a "family farmer." Land that was not allotted to individuals was considered "surplus land" and sold off to white settlers, railroads, and large companies. The requirements for farming and individual land ownership were used as a weapon to destroy Native American culture and ways of life. Those who did not assimilate lost their allotments and many others were forced to sell their property at absurdly low prices. Overall, the Dawes Act resulted in the Federal government confiscating 90 million acres of Native land, or two thirds of the Native land held in 1887.

The loss of allotments has produced a checkerboard pattern of land claims. This lack of a contiguous land base makes it difficult for many Tribes to use their land for land-intensive farming practices such as grazing. Some Tribal land is also held in trust by the Federal government. The Secretary of Interior must review nearly all land use decisions on trust lands, creating additional red tape for land management.

The Dawes Act has also created an issue called 'fractionation' where land titles (rather than the land itself) are subdivided among the descendants of allotment holders. Some titles have now been split between thousands of heirs. To farm that land, heirs must have the consent of half their co-owners, which is a near impossible task. While the federal government is working to resolve these claims, the pace is far too slow. Many people die waiting for a resolution and never get to use their land.

During the 1950s-60s, over 100 Tribes were 'terminated' or stripped of their legal status by the federal government. When this happened, some or all of their land was confiscated. While some Tribes have regained federal recognition, many are still struggling to restore their legal status and even more have been unable to regain the land they lost.

It is important to note that the situation for each Tribe is unique. A small number of Tribes like the Menominee Nation in Wisconsin have retained nearly all their reservation land, while others such as Standing Rock in the Dakotas retain as little as 2%. Specific factors such as the extent that a Tribe's reservation land can support agriculture are also highly variable. However, a priority for many Tribes is to recover land within their reservation boundaries, regain control over sacred sites, and to reconstruct native food systems to build sovereignty and well-being.

Photo: Anders Gurda

Social Norms

Social Norm: A standard pattern, especially of social behavior that is typical or expected

Needs at a glance

- Normalize profitability instead of productivity as the economic metric of farm success
- Develop metrics of farm success that center farmers, communities, and the environment
- Understand food as medicine
- Expand notions of what agriculture looks like
- Normalize grazing by building communities of graziers and supporting the next generation

Social norms about agriculture and food production underpin many of the other issues outlined in this report, both reinforcing unsustainable agricultural practices and disenfranchised people and knowledge systems. Norms about what farming looks like were used to justify the colonization of sustainable Native food systems ***(see Land Access)***, conceptions about the types of farms and farmers that constitute a credit risk underpin lending practices that exclude sustainable and BIPOC farmers ***(see Capital)***, ideas about what a farmer looks like devalue the labor done by farmworkers ***(see Essential Workers)***, and the commodification of land and food prevents more equitable land access ***(see Land Access).***

On the flip side, revising these norms could support transformative change toward a more ideal future. Interviewees suggested shifting norms about farm success to reflect a central tenet of the vision – that a successful farm should support farmers, communities, and the environment. Some expressed a desire to decommodify food and farming – viewing farms as a means of providing those benefits and honoring the ways in which food sustains us physically and spiritually. Finally, interviewees talked about shifting the dominant type of agriculture in a community and supporting BIPOC farmers and the next generation as a means of facilitating this change.

Normalize profitability instead of productivity as the economic metric of farm success

> ***"Farmer success is measured by their level of production, so if…production [decreases], it feels like a failure…Most grazing farms would blow other farms away in terms of profit per cow, especially over the lifetime of a cow, but it's a little bit gauche to talk about profit [while] it's completely socially acceptable to talk about production. [This norm is] reinforced by ag media, by all of the consultants and sales professionals…and it's reinforced by the University through research focused on [questions like] how to get more milk per cow." –Kara O'Connor, Government Relations Director, Wisconsin Farmers Union, WI***

Interviewees emphasized the necessity of moving toward farm profitability rather than production as the primary economic measure of farm success. Agricultural media, agribusiness, farm consultants, universities, lenders, and even conservation groups often emphasize production, influencing what farmers are advised or incentivised to do. The emphasis on production is often justified as a means of "feeding the world." Yet in most cases, hunger comes from an inability to afford food rather than from not having enough of it.[64,65] When hunger is an issue with production, it's often a problem of producing too much, rather than too little. Highly-subsidized U.S. commodities can flood markets abroad, outcompeting local farmers, and hindering their ability to make a living ***(see Capital)***. When commodities are exported below the cost of production, a phenomenon sometimes called 'trade dumping,' it can exacerbate issues with hunger and cause farmers abroad to lose their livelihoods.[66] Trade dumping under NAFTA has forced many Latin American farmers to migrate to the U.S. where they end up as farmworkers, struggling to afford food on unlivable wages ***(see Essential Workers and Land Access)***.[67]

These problems affect U.S. farm owners as well. The overproduction of corn and soy decreases farmers' prices (forcing reliance on government subsidies), undermines grazing, and fuels the consolidation of smaller farms into CAFOs ***(see Consolidation, Capital, and Land Access)***. Dairy overproduction leads to low and unstable prices which, in Wisconsin, have driven an average of a dairy a day out of business ***(see Consolidation and Capital)***.[68] Focusing on profitability would emphasize what really matters for farm viability and could create avenues for discussing overproduction and the role that subsidies play in dictating the profitability of different kinds of agriculture.

---

64 Bassermann, L. & & Urhahn, J. (2020). False Promises: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Biodiversity and Biosafety Association of Kenya (BIBA), Brot für die Welt, FIAN Germany, German NGO Forum on Environment and Development, INKOTA-netzwerk e.V., Institut de Recherche et de Promotion des Alternatives en Développement (IRPAD), PELUM Zambia, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southern Africa, Tanzania Alliance for Biodiversity (TABIO), Tanzania Organic Agriculture Movement (TOAM). https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/42635

65 International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAAKSTD). 2009. Global report: agriculture at a crossroads. Island Press, Washington, D. C., USA.

66 Murphy S, Hansen-Kuhn K (2020). The true costs of US agricultural dumping. Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems 35, 376–390. https://doi.org/10.1017/ S1742170519000097

67 Wise, T. (2010). In Subsidizing Inequity: Mexican Corn Policy Since NAFTA. Chapter 8: The Impacts of U.S. Agricultural Policies on Mexican Producers. Ed. Fox, J & Haight, L. Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/Subsidizing%20Inequality.pdf

68 Peterson, T. (2022). 'We lost a lot more than that': The toll of losing 40K Wisconsin dairy farms in 4 decades. Wisconsin Public Radio. https://www.wpr.org/we-lost-lot-more-toll-losing-40k-wisconsin-dairy-farms-4-decades

Develop metrics of farm success that center farmers, communities, and the environment

Many farmers defined 'farm success' far more broadly than profitability. They talked about how successful farmers produce food in a way that benefits communities and the environment in addition to making a living. While most farmers talked about profitability as an element of success, many viewed it as one metric among many, acknowledging a much broader range of benefits that farms can provide.

> ***"It's a lot more than just money…It's building community…making your community better than it was before, making the environment better than it was before, and being able to be financially sustainable…to be successful is to have what I'm doing improve rather than harm my health." –Jane Hansen, Sheep Grazier, Autumn Larch Farm, WI***

Still other interviewees felt that the better approach would be to decommodify agriculture completely, measuring farm success purely by how much it supports farmers, communities, and the environment, rather than how much money it can make.

Understand food as medicine

> ***"I have a [hope] that food becomes less of a commodity and more of a cultural experience where we celebrate around food, where we heal with food, that we recognize that it is a part of the gift of where we're living…I think our relationship with each other and our relationship with the earth can be healed immensely if we focus on food." –Rick Adamski, Beef Grazier, Full Circle Organic Farm, WI***

Some interviewees also talked about decommodifying food itself. While food is conceptualized by many as a product that is bought and sold, it's also seen as a cultural experience, a medicine, and a gift from the earth. Many expressed that the way we steward land and produce food is linked to our health, and Native interviewees in particular, talked about the idea of food as a medicine. Food is medicine in that the food we put in our bodies affects our physical health outcomes. But for some communities of color in particular, food is medicine in a more holistic sense that encompasses cultural and spiritual well-being. Just as depriving Native communities of access to their traditional foods was a tool of colonization, Vanessa Miller, Food & Agriculture Area Manager, for the Oneida Nation, shared how reconnecting with these foods provides a means of healing and reclaiming her culture.

Photo: Gabriel Jimenez

> ***"Food just offers this incredible way to connect and reconnect people back to our lands, our community, our waters, our air, your neighbor, your aunties and uncles, and your identity and culture…[By] promoting...cultural identity, you're going to see... enhanced mental health, enhanced behavioral health, spiritual health...providing a preventative approach to future issues that may come about...Food should be recognized comprehensive approach to overall wellness."***

The concept of food as medicine also has important consequences for the way some Tribes are thinking about agriculture and food systems planning. Within the context of Tribal government, it has opened opportunities for collaboration across departments of environment, health, and agriculture. This idea could be implemented within the context of the U.S. government as well, and has important ramifications for building connections across movements ***(see How do We Make Change?)***.

Expand notions of what agriculture can look like

Through the process of colonization, Europeans sought to replace Native ideas about food and agriculture with their own vision of what agriculture should look like. Gary Besaw, Director of the Menominee Department of Agriculture talked about how many Tribal members don't see themselves as farmers because they don't "milk cows or slaughter pigs" and how colonialism has influenced their conceptions about what foods are considered part of their food culture:

> ***"When [Native people] were given this highly processed flour and sugar [through colonial government programs], they did their best with what they had and they made fried bread in grease…It's understood in a lot of people's minds that that's cultural [but] that…wasn't [part of our culture before colonization]. It sure as heck isn't healthy for you…we were one of the healthiest peoples. We'd like to get back to that."***

Many Tribes are now reclaiming what agriculture means to them. Decolonizing agriculture means understanding food as medicine and acknowledging the many benefits it can provide. It also requires making space for the many forms that agriculture can take, from raising bison, to cultivating wild rice, to tapping maple trees for syrup. Some tribes have made inroads with NRCS in terms of recognizing these practices, but far more work is needed to create equitable support for Native agriculture ***(see Education)***.

Normalize grazing by building communities of graziers and supporting the next generation of farmers

Photo: Finn Ryan

Meagan Farrell milks a cow with her daughter at Grassland 2.0 partner, Paris Farm, WI

Many interviewees mentioned that social norms about the type of agriculture done in a community often dissuade farmers from grazing. On the flip-side, reaching a critical mass of graziers can persuade other farmers to alter their practices. Many people were hopeful that both the next generation of farmers and farmers of color could bring new norms to agriculture. New farmers are less constrained by debt and infrastructure investments than many row crop or CAFO farmers and people emphasized that the next generation seems more open to doing things differently. Moreover, many communities of color hold cultural conceptions of farming that counter the Euro-centric norms that shape the dominant food system. Farm programs generally support current farmers, and while these programs are important, there is a critical need to address issues like land and capital access and to develop more programs to support farmers of color and the next generation ***(see Essential Workers, Capital, and Land Access)***.

Art: Liz Anna Kozik

How do we make change?

Address deep-seated issues

Interviewees and workshop participants shared many examples of critical work being done to address issues in agriculture. However, they also emphasized that much of this work has focused on education, technical support, and market development, and that it's crucial to shift collective effort to address deeper-seated issues: racial inequity, labor justice, consolidation, land and capital access, and social norms.

Many organizations have expertise in education and network-building that could be leveraged to address such deep-seated issues. Interviewees emphasized the need to create more spaces for people to share and process their struggles within the food system, including historic and ongoing violence against BIPOC communities and the struggle of rural poverty. There is also a need to build transparency and trust by bringing together rural neighbors, farmers, urban farmers, and consumers to discuss the current food system and to envision a better future. Because the current system benefits few, there is an opportunity to build coalitions across political boundaries around farm and industry consolidation; the ability to make a living; access to healthcare and retirement; and transitioning land to the next generation.

> *"I think most Americans will agree the system just doesn't work…[My family is politically divided], but that's something we all agree on…People in that profession (agriculture and food) just don't feel respected." –Austin Frerick, Deputy Director, Thurman Arnold Project*

Photo: Robb Klassen

Meghan Filbert and son, Owen de Kok-Filbert

> *"Honoring Indigenous knowledge and tradition and making space for…people who are not white – I really want to pay particular attention to that. It's really, really easy to talk about technical barriers, not enough fence - it's too expensive. It's not easy to start breaking down the actual looming barriers that have prevented so much of what we want to see… to figure out the action to take on these…very deep-rooted issues."*

Meghan Filbert
Small Ruminant Grazier & Livestock Program Manager, Practical Farmers of Iowa, IA

Some interviewees and workshop participants emphasized the need to broaden current advocacy efforts. While advocacy around the Farm Bill is crucial, many of the deeper-seated issues within the food system are not part of the Farm Bill. Moreover, some interviewees were skeptical of the role the U.S. government could or would play in solving these issues, particularly those related to racial justice. For people who have been repeatedly marginalized by government policy, it is difficult to trust that the government will rectify the injustice it's caused, and there is significant repair and trust-building that needs to happen ***(see Education)***. As a result, some interviewees emphasized the need to seek change outside of government policy. Cris Stainbrook, President of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation emphasized that *"the federal government isn't going to [create change]. Indian country is going to have to step up and say, 'We're on our own. We're going to do this stuff. We don't need the federal government anymore.'"*

For these same reasons, both the Regenerative Agriculture Alliance and the Milk with Dignity Program do not address government policy and instead seek to build their own support structures. Marita Canedo, Program Coordinator at Migrant Justice, the parent organization of Milk with Dignity Program, shared that *"we are seeking to create our own system in response to lack of (governmental) protections and recognition [for] our communities."* Likewise, Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, diversified grazier and Founder and Co-Director of the Regenerative Agriculture Alliance emphasized:


Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin

"The systems are owned, controlled, and designed to be unjust. Exploitation is central to making a profit off people and the environment in the conventional agriculture system. We [will] coordinate ourselves [so that we can] make things change. [We will] collect capital [and] deposit [it] into the common investment funds [to] get the scale of capital that builds a system that is just."

Broaden coalitions & build connections across movements

Interviewees also voiced that building broader coalitions is important to achieving change. This includes restructuring institutions to prioritize and empower BIPOC voices and centering BIPOC communities and farmers in developing solutions. In the workshops we conducted, a number of people expressed a specific desire to learn more about how they could best support farmworker movements. Work around processing, supply chains, and co-ops were mentioned as specific points of connection between these movements and existing or aspirational projects.

There are also many connections between stated needs and opportunities and other areas of advocacy. These include health, the climate and conservation movements, as well as campaigns around immigration policy, Indigenous rights, fair wages, housing, retirement, and healthcare. Similar connections could also be made across government agencies – there are many opportunities for better coordination across departments of labor, agriculture, health, and environment.

> ***"Transformational work…is not going to come from Congress or state legislatures without a significant movement…on the ground. I think [there's] a cross movement opportunity with labor and racial justice and environment and animal welfare." –Jessica Kochick, Federal Policy Organizer, Land Stewardship Project, MN***

Connecting Agriculture, Health, and Environment: The Oneida Nation's Food Sovereignty Plan

One of the challenges of food systems change is coordinating governance around agriculture, health, and the environment, which are often artificially siloed. A lack of cross-agency coordination within governments is a major driver. The Oneida Nation's food sovereignty planning is an excellent example of how these can be coordinated more holistically. Their approach stems from a shared belief that food is medicine and a commitment to agriculture that provides healthy, sustainable food and supports community well-being rather than prioritizing short-term profit gains.

Oneida people always viewed health, agriculture, and the environment as interrelated, and the Nation has long integrated these values into their programs. Beginning in the 1970s with the opening of the Oneida Nation Farm and the Oneida Harvest Cannery, the Nation invested in traditional foods that would combat the diet-related diseases caused by colonial policies and the industrial agriculture system. In 1994, they created the Oneida Community Integrated Food Systems (OCIFS) to increase access to traditional foods, tackle nutritional issues, and create economic opportunities for Oneida growers.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as impetus for Oneida to coordinate and formalize these various efforts within the Tribal government. Representatives from Tsyunhehkwa, the Oneida Farm, the elder food distribution program, the emergency food pantry, and others collaborated with the Oneida Tribal Council to create an integrated food sovereignty plan. They also developed a rights of nature proclamation to further codify Oneida's commitment to being caretakers of the land and ensure the health of current and future generations. As Councilman Guzman-King remarked, these policies *"are really connecting those dots between what we do with our environment, our food, and our agriculture, which affects our health. We want to bring it all together at once… I feel that in everything that we do, we should be self-sustaining as a nation, as a people, including food."*

Among many food sovereignty efforts, Tsyunhehkwa, meaning "life sustenance," is an 83-acre organic farm with grass-fed beef, traditional Oneida white corn, beans, squash, and many other healthy vegetables. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the farm donated all their production to the Oneida emergency food pantry, including over 18,000 pounds of beef and over 9,000 pounds of produce. As Kyle Wisneski explains, *"People have really noticed Tsyunhehkwa was able to step up and provide really, really healthy indigenous grown beef and produce medicine during that pandemic time."* Although Tsyunhehkwa's focus had always been centered on education and community outreach, they showed how traditional indigenous agriculture and understanding food as medicine can fulfill a spectrum of critical community needs from health to environmental stewardship to culture.

Through all these efforts, the Nation is staying true to Oneida values as people that take care of the land and their community. Reaching across administrative silos within the nation, Oneida is overcoming historical challenges, becoming *"happier and healthier"* as a community, and attaining self-governance and food sovereignty.

Resources

Alternative Markets

- FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Project
- Tribes gain power to rethink commodity foods (Civil Eats)

Processing

- What's the Beef? How the Beef Packing Cartel Hurts Producers and Consumers and How Independent Cattle Producers and Processors Can Help Restore Competition and Choice

Essential Workers

- Farmworkers:
  - Milk with Dignity Biennial Report
  - Voces de la Frontera - farm labor organizing in Wisconsin
  - The Hands that Feed Us: Challenges and Opportunities for Workers Along the Food Chain
  - Weeding out abuses: Recommendations for a law-abiding farm labor system
  - Cultivating Fear: The vulnerability of immigrant farmworkers in the U.S. to sexual violence and harassment
  - Overworked and Underpaid: H-2A Herders in Colorado
- Workers in processing plants:
  - Unsafe at these Speeds: Alabama's Poultry Industry and it's Disposable Workers
  - "When we're dead and buried, our bones will keep hurting": Workers' Rights Under Threat in US Meat and Poultry Plants
- Cooperatives:
  - University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives
  - Cooperative Farming: Frameworks for Farming Together
  - The Chicken And The Egg: Stop Linear Farming And Embrace Circular Agriculture

Consolidation

- Three Decades of Consolidation in U.S. Agriculture (USDA-ERS)
- The U.S. Farm Bill: Corporate Power and Structuralized Racialization in the United States Food System
- Food and Power: Addressing Monopolization in America's Food System
- Big Ag and Antitrust Conference
- The Hog Barrons
- Research and infographics from Philip H. Howard
- The Takeover: Chicken Farming and the Roots of American Agribusiness
- Food Barons 2022: Crisis Profiteering, Digitalization and Shifting Power

Capital

- Barriers For Farmers & Ranchers to Adopt Regenerative Ag Practices In The US: A Roadmap for Funders and Stakeholders
- A Funder Toolkit on Climate, Health, and Equity
- Investing in Regenerative Agriculture Infrastructure Across Value Chains
- Indian Land and Capital Company

Land Access

- Background
  - Land policy: toward a more equitable farming future
  - Racial, ethnic and gender inequities in farmland ownership and farming in the U.S.
  - Indian Land Tenure Foundation Publications
  - 100-Year Timeline of USDA Discrimination Against Black Farmers (1920-present)
- Thinking differently about land
  - Black Belt Justice Center and Acres of Ancestry Initiative/ Black Agrarian Fund
  - Agrarian Trust – Commons Alliance
  - Using property law to expand agroecology: Scotland's land reforms based on human rights
- Tools and technical resources
  - Directory of organizations providing land-linking services by region
  - Farm Commons legal resources on land ownership structures, land purchases, and leases
  - Enactment toolkit and other resources on the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act (UPHPA)

Social norms

- The HEAL Food Messaging Guide: Uplifting a BIPOC-led Vision for Crisis Proof Food Systems
- Identifying and Countering White Supremacy in Food Systems
- An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System
- Gender and Social Norms in Agriculture: A Review
- Decolonizing Indigenous Agriculture: An Indigenous Perspective
- Agroecology, Regenerative Agriculture, and Nature-Based Solutions: Competing Framings of Food System Sustainability in Global Policy and Funding Spaces


grassLAND 2.0