

PROMOTING A CLIMATE-SMART & EQUITABLE FARMING SYSTEM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agriculture, a driver of rural prosperity, is also a significant climate solution when regenerative practices are applied. Regenerative principles include building soil health and fertility, increasing water percolation and retention, biodiversity, and ecosystem health, and reducing carbon emissions and current atmospheric CO2 levels. Small-scale pasture-based meat production is especially promising. Capturing this potential involves improving the information base to best frame solutions and target interventions, increasing investment in slaughter/processing and farmer capacity building, and framing and implementing policy and programs with an equity lens.

CHALLENGE

Agriculture accounts for 10% of total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Rising agriculture-related emissions are linked to the loss of carbon-sequestering pasture from the rise of concentrated animal feeding operations, crop production with chemical fertilizers to produce grain for animal feed, and liquid manure storage facilities.¹

Grass-fed meat production provides a lucrative reason to conserve farmland which benefits rural economies. Regenerative pasture-based farming systems sequester carbon and build soil health,² but are limited by processing capacity. Limited access to slaughter and processing keeps existing producers from expanding and new producers from entering the market. A key constraint mentioned by processors is a shortage of skilled meat cutters.^{3,4}

Pasture-based meat production is also an opportunity to address disinvestment in Black farmers. Because 48% of Black-owned farms in Virginia specialize in cattle and dairy production (almost all in beef production), small-scale, pasture-based operations are an opportunity to address inequities in land ownership.⁵

Land provides a source of intergenerational wealth, economic opportunity, and community historically denied to people of color. Since the high in 1920, the number of Black farmers in the United States has decreased from 925,000 owning 15 million acres to 50,000 owning 900,000 acres due to systemic discrimination, including unequal access to resources from public agricultural programs. Black-owned farms make up a minuscule 0.4% of acreage nationwide. In 2017, the average size of Black-owned farms was 132 acres. An estimated 1,300 farms in Virginia are Black-owned. These numbers understate the situation, as they are based on self-reporting and farm tract numbers assigned to applicants for USDA farm programs; people of color often do not have farm tract numbers.

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SOLUTION

The sustainable farming priorities outlined below, recommended by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, should be implemented into Virginia policy in order to ensure climate-smart agricultural practices:⁶

- Conservation of working lands
- Agricultural research to develop climate-adaptive crops, livestock, and management practices
- Renewable energy for rural communities and farms
- Practices that build soil health and sequester carbon – cover-cropping, low/no-till, grass-fed production, etc.⁷
- Fortified local and regional food systems, including urban agriculture
- Equity and inclusion – debt relief for socially disadvantaged farmers,⁸ ensuring farm programs are equally accessible to farmers of color

For grass-fed farming systems to scale and investment in processing to be feasible requires building the market for local grass-fed meat, increasing livestock production for local slaughter, and lowering the cost and risk of investment. The processing constraint requires addressing supply-and-demand factors and accessibility to capital, and includes grants or tax incentives to invest in local processing facilities, training of meat cutters, capacity-building of pasture-based farming systems, and marketing programs.

Comprehensive proposed federal legislation making available tools and resources to help people of color start farming, relieve farmer's debt, root out discrimination at USDA, and address past injustices provides the focal point for organizing initiatives at the state level to support farmers of color to launch and to succeed. An important place to start in addressing racial equity is data to ensure accountability and targeting of resources to farmers of color.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Climate-smart agriculture:

Add specific reference in VACS program guidelines to “climate-smart conservation activities and farming systems that increase organic matter and carbon sequestration in soil and store carbon in biomass” as a category eligible for agriculture cost share.

Generate new funding of \$250,000 for grants under AFID program for small-scale meat slaughter/processing capacity and meat cutter training.

Create a statewide asset map and gap analysis of slaughter/processing capacity and survey of processing barriers.

Generate new funding of \$1,000,000 for cooperative extension to help farmers implement climate-smart practices.

Support to farmers of color:

Conduct a census of farmers of color.

Set-aside 15% of funding in programs for agriculture, extension, land conservation, and water quality for farmers of color.

Develop an annual report to General Assembly on agency performance in serving farmers of color.

Community Farm Volunteers - Loudoun County, Va

Image credit: Hugh Kenny