# Black farmers face systemic exclusion and decline in the US agricultural landscape



For generations, Black farmers in the United States have faced systemic exclusion from agricultural support programs, leading to a significant decline in their numbers and land ownership. Once comprising 14% of U.S. farmers in 1920, Black farmers now make up only about 1.4%, with figures dropping below 1% in states like Ohio. The decline reflects a long history of neglect, discrimination, and active displacement by institutions such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), banks, and courts.

The USDA historically failed to serve Black farmers adequately, often denying them loans and pushing them off their land. This exclusion is underscored by personal accounts and activism from leaders within the Black farming community. For example, in 2012, a Black farmer in Ohio remarked, “Black folks aren’t allowed to farm anymore,” highlighting the systemic nature of exclusion in agricultural industries. This sentiment aligns with research showing a dramatic erosion of Black-owned farmland — from 16 million acres at the start of the 20th century to a mere fraction today.

Urban food justice advocates like Anton Seals Jr., a leader of Grow Greater Englewood in Chicago and board member of the Trust for Public Land, have framed these issues within a broader context of "food apartheid." In conversations with Forbes, Seals emphasised that the issue is not just about natural food deserts but rather about a systematically planned exclusion. He stated, "We had over a million Black farmers in 1910. Now we have 20,000. That’s not a decline. That’s theft.” He critiques federal funding which often benefits large box stores rather than creating lasting infrastructure that supports Black farmers and their communities.

Seals played a significant role in shaping the Illinois Grocery Initiative, launched in 2023 by Governor J.B. Pritzker, a $20 million program focused on supporting independent grocery stores and cooperatives in underserved Black and brown neighbourhoods. However, this initiative and others face threats from proposed budget cuts by the Trump administration, which would slash billions from the USDA. These cuts target nutrition, rural development, and food programs, jeopardising efforts to bring fresh, affordable food to vulnerable communities and the charitable systems supporting food pantries.

Karen Washington, co-founder of the Black Farmer Fund and a prominent food justice activist, echoes this perspective, focusing on shifting power dynamics. Growing up in New York’s Jacob Riis Houses, she witnessed the impacts of exclusion on health and nutrition firsthand. Washington has said that the food system is not broken but working as designed to exclude Black communities. Her activism centres on empowering people to recognise and reclaim control over the food system, framing it as a matter of human rights.

The decline in Black farming is linked to broader patterns of racial segregation and economic disadvantage, including the Great Migration and continued housing discrimination through redlining, which relegated many Black families to urban areas with limited access to land and economic opportunities. Despite these barriers, Black communities have historically built economic resilience through entrepreneurial ventures in food, such as community-run kitchens, fish shacks, and church fundraisers, which also supported broader civil rights movements.

The struggle over land and food access remains a critical issue in economic justice debates. As civil rights leader John Mack stated in interviews, foundational solutions to economic disparities begin with "Land. Food. Housing. Access." Anton Seals summarised the challenge facing the Black community today: "You want a resilient Black economy? Start with who controls the land, who feeds the people, and who owns the stores. If we don’t control any of those things, then what are we really building?"

The Forbes article reporting these insights is part of the "Vanilla is Black" series and draws attention to how systemic racism in agriculture continues to shape economic outcomes and opportunities for Black Americans today.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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