COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHTS

Justice on the Menu

Legal & Policy Strategies to Address Structural Discrimination in the US Food System





Community Spotlights

Law and policy can often feel overwhelming when viewed in the abstract. The following examples illustrate how communities across the United States have been working at the intersection of food justice, health justice, and racial justice. Their stories underscore the importance of advocacy, community leadership, and policy implementation in successful, equitable policymaking.

LEARN MORE

You can explore additional community stories and examples through the following resources:

- Heirs' Property Case Studies (Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law and Graduate School). Heirs' property that is, property passed to family members by inheritance, usually without a will "is most predominant among African American landholders in the South and has been a significant driver of African American land loss in the United States." These case studies provide community examples as well as legal and policy strategies for navigating heirs' property issues. This article from Inside Climate News offers additional information on how some organizations are using sustainable forestry and conservation programs to keep heirs' property owners on their land.
- Farmer Stories (Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law and Graduate School). These stories are a part of a larger Farmland Access Legal Toolkit and describe creative ways that farmers have found to access and afford land.
- <u>Case Study: Illinois Limited Worker Cooperative Association Act</u> (Pathways to a People's Economy). This case study explains how the Illinois Coalition for Cooperative Advancement successfully advocated for passage of the Illinois Limited Worker Cooperative Association Act, which "works to provide more pathways for workers to maintain control of their businesses."
- Voices of the Food Chain (Food Chain Workers Alliance and Real Food Media). This project shares "stories of the country's 20 million food workers in their own words" including "a video on the current challenges and victories at the intersection of labor and food."
- Procuring Food Justice: A Case Study of Rural Community Workers Alliance (Food Chain Workers Alliance and HEAL Food Alliance). This case study "highlights an opportunity to use [the Good Food Purchasing Program] as leverage to hold suppliers for publicly-funded institutions accountable."

Enabling Tribal Food Sovereignty by Reclaiming Rights to Land

Native Americans have lost nearly 99 percent of their ancestral lands in the United States due to colonialist tactics, unfair treaties, and centuries of oppressive policies! Among other harms this land dispossession has caused, it has significantly limited access to ancestral lands for hunting, fishing, farming, and gathering food. Indigenous communities have responded by pursuing strategies to promote food sovereignty, such as reclaiming and protecting traditional foods and foodways that dominant, corporate food systems often do not provide. These strategies also provide opportunities for economic self-determination.^{2,3}

For example, the Land Back movement is an Indigenous-led effort to reclaim rights to stolen land, food, and other aspects of tribal culture.^{4,5} Many organizations are engaging in the Land Back movement at local and state levels. One of these organizations, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, an urban Indigenous women–led land trust, has been facilitating the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.⁶ The trust sponsors projects and practices to revitalize cultural and spiritual traditions that were lost to colonization and forced assimilation – such as harvesting and gathering wild plants for food and medicine. Similar efforts for land returns and rematriation are being pursued in other local communities across the country.⁷



Indigenous communities across the United States have also been reclaiming rights to stolen land and foodways through hunting and fishing agreements with state natural resources and land management agencies. In 2023, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife made historic agreements with five tribes affirming their rights "to issue [their] own hunting and fishing licenses to tribal members for subsistence and ceremonial harvest [purposes]."^{8,9} These agreements are intended to "increase opportunities for tribal members to harvest fish and wildlife consistent with tribal values rather than state values" and will also allow tribes to pool finances for habitat restoration or do so jointly with states for cooperative restoration projects.¹⁰

While many tribal members view these agreements as a positive step, they are not perfect. Licensing agreements like these raise complex legal questions related to tribal treaty rights, including rights for tribes to continue using their accustomed fishing and hunting locations away from their reservations. Which tribes hold these rights, and at which locations, can be contested. The issues are also often related to whether and when a tribe has received federal recognition as a sovereign nation – an issue that is currently playing out in Oregon.¹¹ Plus, in an ever-changing political climate, the agreements can be fragile and depend on whether new administrations choose to honor and enforce them. Ensuring that they work over the long term will require careful monitoring by local champions.

Yet as Janie Hipp, a long-time advocate and member of the Chickasaw Nation, shared during a conversation in June 2024, there is promise in seeing that these types of agreements "occur in a variety of political contexts[;]... it shows momentum... [and that] a clear alignment of parties and principles [is not necessary] to actually pull these off." She says that it is encouraging to look across the country and "see that elsewhere these relationships are replicable."

KEY THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

- Food sovereignty or peoples' right to define and control their own food choices and food system¹² is an important concept when it comes to correcting histories of land dispossession, forced assimilation, and the erasure of ethnic identities. While this story focuses on tribal groups, food sovereignty is also important for immigrants living in the United States, who have a right to culturally appropriate foods and should not be forced to assimilate their foodways.
- Secure land tenure or stable rights to access or own land for a variety of uses, including food production, hunting, and gathering¹³ is also a key strategy for Indigenous people and other BIPOC groups who have faced a long legacy of racist land policies and discrimination in real estate sales and lending. A variety of strategies to promote secure land tenure have been shown to be viable across the United States in a wide range of political contexts.

Ensuring BIPOC Agency & Representation in Food Systems Governance

Ensuring BIPOC representation in governing bodies that make decisions about local and regional food systems is integral to successful advocacy and changemaking to address structural racism, as demonstrated by the following examples:

Charlottesville Food Justice Network (Virginia)

Cultivate Charlottesville – a nonprofit focused on food justice in the local food system – houses the Food Justice Network program, which is a collaborative of individuals and over 30 organizations that have been working together to build a healthy and just food system in their city.¹⁴ In 2018, the network successfully advocated for the Charlottesville City Council to support a Food Equity Initiative and allocate \$65,000 toward coordination of its activities.¹⁵ One of the initiative's goals is to provide a vehicle for community members to inform policy decisions.¹⁶ Its policy platform was developed with input from hundreds of community members, dozens of local organizations, and 10 city departments.¹⁷ They also led "community engagement cohorts," through which 21 Charlottesville residents aged 14–67 contributed over 6,600 of paid advocacy hours.¹⁸

Aleen Carey, co-executive director of Cultivate Charlottesville, described the persistent advocacy and collaboration that underpinned this policy win during a conversation in June 2024, stating, "We had to prove that we weren't just any old nonprofit [but rather] that we were led by people of color." She explained that being truly grassroots and community-led – as opposed to being a "grass tops" national organization – was key to gaining city council support. "We hired community advocates and elders from specific neighborhoods to lead our informed community engagement process, which is what made it successful," Carey said. The decision to partner with other organizations stemmed first from "always running into each other in the same spaces and then just deciding that we should work together – pooling our time, knowledge, and resources to make sure we're not re-doubling efforts." Yet, the team notes, "We can't do everything by ourselves;... food security and food justice are not just about food, and we can't be the experts on everything."

Cultivate Charlottesville is now in its second three-year partnership with the city council, and support and budget allocations have only grown; \$155,000 was allocated in fiscal year 2023.¹⁹

Farmer Equity Act (California)

In 2017, California passed the Farmer Equity Act, which requires representation from "socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers" on government boards and commissions, where they can provide input on "the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of food and agriculture laws, regulations, and policies and programs."^{20,21} This legislation is an example of racism-conscious policymaking in action. The act defines a "socially disadvantaged farmer or

rancher" as one who "[has] been subjected to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as [a member] of a group without regard to their individual qualities. These groups include [African Americans, Native Indians, Alaska Natives, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders]."²² In this way, the act acknowledges and seeks to address structural racism within the prevailing constraints of state and federal civil rights legal doctrines; the act has also spurred innovation in other states!

The act has achieved some measure of success: California's 2020 Farmer Equity Report provided evidence that the policy has increased BIPOC representation on California Department of Food and Agriculture boards and commissions, including the newly formed BIPOC Producer Advisory Committee.^{23,24,25} This increased BIPOC representation in decision-making bodies has translated directly into food justice wins. For example, with the committee's support, one food justice leader, Nelson Hawkins, successfully advocated for state funding to acquire farmland for the Ujamaa Farmer Collective, which seeks to secure access to resources for Black farmers in the Greater Sacramento region.^{26,27}

KEY THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

- Ensuring BIPOC decision-making authority over meaningful aspects of the food system can begin to address long-standing racial disparities in access to resources and opportunities and can itself improve health and well-being.^{28,29}
- Strategies to increase BIPOC representation in food system governance do not need to be costly; they can leverage small investments and policies that are cost-neutral to government. That said, it is important to compensate BIPOC community leaders for sharing their lived experience and expertise.

In 2021, Washington passed "Ensuring equity in farming" using similar identifying language. See H.B. 1395, 67th Leg., 2021 Reg. Sess. (Wa. 2021). https://lawfilesext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2021-22/Pdf/Bills/House%20Bills/1395-S.pdf

Achieving Justice for Black Farmers

Black-led organizations across the country, including the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFRA) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), have been advocating for legislation to restore land rights for Black farmers. In the decades since the Civil War, Black people have lost about 70 percent of the land that they formerly owned, in large part due to discrimination in federal financial assistance programs.^{30,31} Today, Black farmers are still more likely than white farmers to be denied USDA financial support and private bank loans.³² Economists have estimated that this history of displacement represents \$326 billion in lost earnings.³³ These pervasive policies have pushed many farmers of color into debt or to give up farming entirely.³⁴

NBFRA and the NAACP have been engaging legislators at multiple government levels to counteract these historical and ongoing wrongs. At the national level, they successfully worked with senators Cory Booker and Elizabeth Warren to introduce the Justice for Black Farmers Act in 2020 and 2023.^{35,36} This action prompted state legislators to pursue parallel efforts, including North and South Carolina's Black Farmer Restoration Programs and Illinois's Black Farmer Restoration Act.^{37,i} Each of these bills aims to restore agricultural land to Black farmers and "encourage the growth of Black farmers in the field of agriculture."³⁸ Although advocates and policymakers have not yet been successful in passing these bills, they have helped to start a national conversation about possible solutions to address a legacy of discrimination that has negatively affected Black farmers.

Many remain dedicated to the cause and continue to put in long hours to gain support for these bills and others like them. North Carolina state senator Natalie Murdock and state representative Ray Jeffers have been working with farmers and advocates across the state to call for increased investment in Black-owned farms.³⁹ In 2023 and 2024, the two legislators teamed up to host a Black Farmer Lobby Day at the State Capitol. They also organized tours of four Black-owned farms for state legislators, who had an opportunity to hear firsthand about the barriers to opportunity that Black farmers face and build trust with their constituents.⁴⁰

KEY THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

- Using policymaking to address structural discrimination in the US food system is a long game. It can be easy to get discouraged, but even legislation that is not passed can help to move an idea into public discourse, shift mindsets, and soften the ground for changes in other jurisdictions or at other government levels.
- The policy process is iterative. It requires identifying a policy and then refining it over time to home in on an approach that is broadly replicable. So, getting the conversation started in one community can inform policymaking in other communities down the road. It's all part of the process!

i The same Illinois legislator who introduced the Black Farmer Restoration Act, Rep. Sonya Harper, also introduced an amendment to the Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Act to ensure that 20 percent of state food procurement came from socially disadvantaged farmers. See A.B.3089, 2021-2022 Reg. Sess. (III. 2021). https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/102/HB/PDF/10200HB3089.pdf

Expanding Agricultural Worker Protections at the State Level

Agricultural workers were intentionally excluded from the federal Fair Labor Standards Act, which established prohibitions on child labor and protections for overtime pay and minimum wage, and the National Labor Relations Act, which established protections for unionizing and labor organizing.^{41,42,43} Following the adoption of these laws in the 1930s, many states emulated the exclusions in their own minimum wage and labor laws. These exclusions are known as *agricultural exceptionalism* and are rooted in historical efforts to maintain a system of labor exploitation established during slavery.^{44,45} Agricultural exceptionalism has perpetuated racial wealth gaps, poverty, and exploitative labor practices related to farmworkers and people working in other agricultural industries, such as meatpacking.^{46,47}

In response to grassroots advocacy, some states have now adopted their own laws to establish overtime pay and other labor protections for farmworkers.⁴⁸ In 2O21, Washington adopted the strongest overtime law for farmworkers in the nation. Advocacy efforts had begun in 2016, when a group of approximately 300 dairy workers successfully sued the state, arguing that denying a largely Latine workforce the same overtime pay protections guaranteed to other workers constituted racial discrimination, which was in violation of the Washington constitution.^{49,50,51} The litigation sparked a heated debate in the Washington



legislature and among labor rights advocates, including dairy workers involved in the lawsuit, unions like the United Farm Workers and Familias Unidas por la Justicia, advocacy groups like Community to Community, and the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO.^{52,53} Despite pushback from agricultural industry representatives who argued that an agricultural overtime law would be economically burdensome and raise prices for consumers, advocates eventually won passage of Senate Bill 5172.^{54,55} President Biden issued a statement in support of the legislation, asserting,

For too long – and owing in large part to unconscionable race-based exclusions put in place generations ago – farmworkers have been denied some of the most fundamental rights that workers in almost every other sector have long enjoyed, including the right to a forty-hour work week and overtime pay.... It is long past time that we put all of America's farmworkers on an equal footing with the rest of our national workforce when it comes to their basic rights.⁵⁶

Washington followed in the footsteps of several other states, including California, Oregon, New York, and Colorado, which have also passed legislation to establish basic labor protections for agricultural workers. In the long term, these state-level wins may spur the adoption of federal protections to extend rights to farmworkers across the nation. Congress has already considered such proposals; the Fairness for Farm Workers Act, first introduced in 2021 and reintroduced in 2023, would end the denial of overtime pay and other exemptions for agricultural workers under the Fair Labor Standards Act.⁵⁷

KEY THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

- Labor organizing is a tried-and-true strategy for winning worker protections. Unions can be a tool not just for negotiating with employers but also for building a power base to advocate for community-wide policy changes.
- In addition to working across multiple jurisdictional levels, advocates can move policy ideas across multiple branches of government by pursuing public interest litigation. When legislators and government agencies are unwilling to act, litigation wins can spur or even require legislative or regulatory changes to address structural racism or secure fundamental rights.

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