



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

## **Joint Legislative Roundtable on Soil Health**

**February 5, 2020**

Dear Senator Metzger and Assemblymembers Donna Lupardo and Steve Englebright,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written statements for consideration as part of this important and timely joint legislative roundtable on soil health.

**For more information, including collaboratively developed policy platform statements sourced verbatim for many of these recommendations, please see the following documents:**

- [Justice for Black Farmers Letter to the Elizabeth Warren campaign](#)
- [Soul Fire Farm Action Steps & Policy Platform for Food Sovereignty](#)
- [Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust](#)

I write as a representative of both Soul Fire Farm and as a founding Board member of the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust.

**Soul Fire Farm** is an Afro-Indigenous centered community farm committed to uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system. We raise and distribute life-giving food as a means to end food apartheid.<sup>1</sup> With deep reverence for the land and wisdom of our ancestors, we work to reclaim our collective right to belong to the earth and to have agency in the food system. We bring diverse communities together on this healing land to share skills on sustainable agriculture, natural building, spiritual activism, health, and environmental justice. We are training the next generation of activist-farmers and strengthening the movements for food sovereignty and community self-determination. Our food sovereignty programs reach over 10,000 people each year, including farmer training for Black and Brown growers, reparations and land return initiatives for northeast farmers, food justice workshops for urban youth, harvest distribution for people living under food apartheid, and systems and policy education for public decision-makers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Food apartheid is an alternative term for “food desert,” referring to geographical areas devoid of access to healthy, culturally-appropriate, affordable food resulting from systemic injustice.



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

The **Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust (NEFOC)**, fiscally sponsored by Soul Fire Farm Institute, Inc., serves the Northeast region of the U.S. (New England/upstate NY.) NEFOC is working towards a collective vision of advancing land and food sovereignty in the northeast region through permanent and secure land tenure for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) farmers and land stewards who will use the land in a sacred manner that honors our ancestors dreams - for sustainable farming, human habitat, ceremony, native ecosystem restoration, and cultural preservation. We are establishing a nonprofit land trust that will acquire land or easements for the purpose of conservation and permanent affordability/access for BIPOC farmers.

Soil health is directly correlated with the land's capacity to provide an abundance of nutrient-rich food, sequester carbon, conserve water, offer habitat for a diversity of living beings, resist pests and diseases, limit erosion, and provide food for New York's urban and rural communities, as well as to buffer farms against a changing climate and extreme weather effects and sustain them over time as sources of agricultural products, jobs, and economic vitality.

At the same time, BIPOC farmers face increasing challenges to implementing soil health frameworks and measures, as rising land costs, encroaching developments on agriculturally viable land, continued discrimination and structural barriers, and increasingly severe weather and pest patterns threaten farm viability. White landowners control between 95-98% of the farmland in the United States and nearly 100% of farmland in the northeast, as well as receiving over 97% of agriculture-related financial assistance.<sup>2</sup> Among 57,865 total agricultural producers in New York state, only 139 are Black producers. Despite comprising 17.6% of the total population of the state, Black farmers make up only 0.24% of New York's farmers.<sup>3</sup> Black farmers currently operate around 1% of the nation's farms, having lost over 12 million acres to USDA discrimination, racist violence, and inequities in the legal system. 85% of the people working the land in the US are Latinx migrant workers, yet only 2.5% of farms are owned and operated by Latinxs. People of color are disproportionately likely to live under food apartheid and suffer from diabetes, heart disease, and other diet related illness. Labor laws continue to permit the exploitation of farm and food workers. Access to non-predatory capital continues to be a primary barrier, leaving little support for farmers

---

<sup>2</sup> USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2017 Census. (<https://www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus/>)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Simon, Ethebra Social Change Network & Black Farmer Fund, [https://public.tableau.com/shared/G4X3WSYFG?:display\\_count=y&:origin=viz\\_share\\_link](https://public.tableau.com/shared/G4X3WSYFG?:display_count=y&:origin=viz_share_link)



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

---

of color who often work on a smaller scale and may seek to implement the frequently more labor intensive regenerative farming practices that have been documented to contribute to soil health.

Fortunately, the policy infrastructure that can support economic viability for farmers of color has the potential to offer the added benefit of leading to meaningful protections and investments in soil health. Many of the farmers who have experienced land loss, structural marginalization, and systematic discrimination over time have long been on the frontlines of soil and climate stewardship, practicing soil-beneficial, climate resilient, and climate change mediating agriculture that increases topsoil depth, protects biodiversity, and promotes carbon sequestration. Often developing business models that channel resources back into families and communities, these farm systems and models stand in contrast to some conventional agricultural models that may contribute to climate change, soil degradation, income inequality, and inequitable food distribution. Protections and supports for BIPOC farmers that address the U.S. history of land and labor theft, along with inequities in access to land, credit, training, technical assistance, and insurance, among other resources, will represent a corollary investment in the state's soil, ecological, and public health. There is an urgent need for state funding and policy supports for farming systems that make it possible for farmers to access land; secure land tenure that enables and incentivizes long-term investments in soil health; continue to work and steward the soil; pay workers a living wage; gain the knowledge, experience, and technical assistance needed to integrate climate-smart soil health measures into their operations; and access financial resources to offset the initial and ongoing costs of investing in sustainable agricultural systems. With this in mind, we offer our assessment of the following statewide challenges and proposed solutions related to soil health.

## **LAND ACCESS & SECURE LAND TENURE**

Investing in and witnessing the impacts of soil health improvements can be a decades-long process. Meaningful, long term investments in soil health require 1) land access for farmers and aspiring farmers willing to commit to such actions and 2) secure land tenure that incentivizes soil conservation and improvement over time, provides the security of a viable farm business that supports the necessary financial, labor, and whole systems investments in soil health, as well as a sustained relationship with land that fosters knowledge of how to encourage site-specific soil health. Land access and secure land tenure continue to be the number one barriers for Black, Indigenous,



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

and other farmers of color seeking to steward the land through regenerative, sustainable agricultural practices, and the primary impetus for farmers to exit the profession. The high costs of purchasing land and the relative insecurity of land lease arrangements threaten farmers' ability to implement soil health practices at the scale and scope that create soil health improvements over time. Meanwhile, thousands of farmland acres have converted to industrial and residential development over the past few decades in New York state, where there continues to be high risk of farmland transitioning through processes of gentrification, lack of succession planning, and commercial speculation. According to *The Future of Family Farms*, "Land ownership provides the stability, the autonomy, the opportunity for long-term planning and investment, and the wealth creation potential that is central to our agricultural history. Farmers who own their land have more security and autonomy."<sup>4</sup> Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color have historically faced racial exclusion and systems of discrimination that has prevented them from accessing and retaining stewardship of land. Not only do many such farmers intend to implement soil health practices on their hoped-for future farms, but their participation buoys local agricultural economies and often leads to the production of nutritious, culturally relevant foods that meet the needs of communities that may not currently have access.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

- Create and support pathways to secure, long-term land tenure for farmers practicing agriculture that promotes soil health, including programs that specifically address land access for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color farmers.
- Expand land link programs that match available land or land in succession planning with farmers that pledge to protect and improve soil health.
- Build in tax incentives for aging and retiring farmers to sell land to the rising generation of farmers practicing regenerative agriculture that promotes soil health.
- Look to California's AB 989—the Regional Economies and Equity in Agricultural Lands (REEAL) Act—for guidance on the creation of state funds that conserve farmland and offer access to financial supports such as down-payment assistance and capital for infrastructure

---

<sup>4</sup> Neil Hamilton, Teresa Opheim (Ed.), *The Future of Family Farms: Practical Farmers' Legacy Letters Project*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016.



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

---

improvement to Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color seeking to steward land using soil-friendly agricultural methods.

- Explicitly incorporate soil conservation practices into such measures as the Working Farm Protection Act. Designate NY Farmland Protection Implementation Grants Program (FPIG) funding toward supporting updates for such protections as working farm easements (with preemptive purchase rights and compensation for the land’s future agricultural use value) to ensure affordability for protected farmland and its maintenance and improvement using sustainable farming practices rather than passing into residential use.
- Ensure that Black, Indigenous, and other people of color supportive of and knowledgeable about regenerative agriculture are included as navigators in the *Farmland for a New Generation* New York “Regional Navigator” program – coordinated by American Farmland Trust in partnership with the State of New York, agricultural organizations, land trusts, and others – which aims to match farmland owners who hope to keep their land in farming with the next generation of farmers seeking land.
- Fund BIPOC-led land link programs to connect farmers with land that will be stewarded in accordance with evidence-based, documented soil health promoting practices.
- Update and develop state-funded avenues to enact the primary tenets of the Endangered Black Farmer Act of 2007, which would have addressed ongoing racial discrimination by creating new conservation, credit, and land protection programs for Black farmers, among other necessary steps.

## **LAND TRUSTS & SOIL HEALTH STEWARDSHIP**

Along with pathways to equitable access to land and supportive structures for protecting and strengthening land tenure and farms’ economic viability, community land trusts, such as the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust, have the potential to foster collective soil stewardship and positive health and wellness outcomes for BIPOC communities in New York state. Through the promotion and mandate of carbon-neutral, regenerative agriculture on NEFOC land holdings, we honor the vital roles our ancestors had in innovating and upholding agriculture as a practice of soil



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

---

and climate stewardship and a means toward food sovereignty, dignity, and self-determination. Soil health-protective farming as supported by community land trusts contributes not just to the immediate well being and prosperity of urban and rural communities, but represents a long term investment in New York's future economic, ecological, and health benefits. In this age of climate crisis, agriculture that sustains the land, strengthens resilience, and sequesters soil carbon holds powerful urgency.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

- Strengthen and expand state conservation programs that facilitate affordable land access and transfer to community land trusts, such as the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust.
- Provide funding for a network of BIPOC-led land trusts that absorb Black farmland and transfer it within the black community. Set aside agricultural easement dollars for Black farmers. (Proposed by [Black Land and Power Coalition](#))
- Invest in succession planning programs for retiring farmers that set aside land for beginning farmers of color practicing regenerative, soil-friendly agriculture—with specific benchmarks for Black farmers, who are most underrepresented in NY state.

## **ECONOMIC INCENTIVES & SUPPORTS FOR SOIL HEALTH IMPROVEMENTS, CLIMATE RESILIENCE, AND CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE**

Investments in the labor, equipment, and practices that promote soil health can present prohibitive costs, especially for farmers transitioning from conventional or other systems. Reduced tillage equipment, cover crop seeds, mulches, biodiversity restoration resources, and increased labor hours for soil preparation and weeding are just some of the many upfront and ongoing costs that may arise in soil health-oriented farming systems. In addition to supporting



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

---

conversion models that favor farmland affordability, state government can invest in programs that expand access to credit, capital, and business planning assistance for current and aspiring farmers seeking to implement soil health practices on their farms.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

- Via increased taxation on conventional, industrial agriculture for documented negative environmental and soil health externalities (pesticides, carbon emissions, pollution runoff), generate public funds to pay farmers for preserving and enhancing ecosystem services and guarding the public trust (water purification, carbon sequestration, pollination, biodiversity) and prioritizing soil health.
- Secure and protect non-predatory credit and capital for independent producers utilizing regenerative agricultural practices, particularly farmers of color.
- Address historical inequities in lending and zoning by providing no-interest loans to beginning farmers of color with specific participation benchmarks for Black and Indigenous farmers, disaggregating any programmatic designations of “socially disadvantaged farmers,” since access to land and resources varies by race even among farmers of color.
- Invest in the Black Farmer Fund of New York, a nonprofit investment vehicle that acts as a collective resource by providing start-up capital to farms and food businesses in the Black community.
- Create financial supports and state-funded grant programs to support smaller and independent producers so that they can pay a living wage to farmworkers, ensuring farm viability over time, secure livelihoods, and worker retention, and enabling greater labor and capital investments in soil health measures.
- Equalize and expand access to crop insurance, equipment sharing, and low interest credit for independent producers, particularly producers of color. Fund free legal and accounting clinics for farmers.
- Increase access to markets for farmers of color through funding food hubs, processing centers, farmers markets, and farm to institution programs. Provide funding for BIPOC-led food hubs.



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

---

Create targets and clear incentives for the farmer income benefits of market access to be re-invested in on-farm soil health systems.

- Provide capital, credit, and tax breaks to worker and community-owned cooperative food enterprises that generate wealth for BIPOC communities and incentivize purchasing from farmers practicing regenerative agriculture.
- Institute farmer debt forgiveness programs in cases of discrimination. Stronger farmer livelihoods can in turn benefit and enable sustainable farming and soil health practices.
- Secure fair markets, fair prices, and fair wages for all farmers and farmworkers to enable economically stable livelihoods.
- Include urban farms practicing soil-friendly agriculture in conservation easements.
- Create added incentives through the New York State Young Farmers Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program for farmers to obtain training in and pursue professional careers in sustainable agriculture.

## **AGRICULTURAL TRAINING & RESEARCH**

Many BIPOC farmers seek to practice methods proven over generations to support soil health, sequester soil carbon, and fortify resilience to climate change and severe weather effects. Despite the focus of some farm advisors and technical assistance providers on promoting and disseminating information about soil health practices, there continues to be a distinct lack of farm advisors that reflect both the diversity of farmers in New York state and the full range of research and technical assistance that might support farmers' capacity to enact such measures. Often, existing training programs fail to meet the needs of or enable access for BIPOC farmers seeking BIPOC-led, culturally relevant training in regenerative agriculture. Along similar lines, a shortage of trained, skilled farm labor impedes the successful implementation and sustained innovations of small and mid-scale farmers seeking to put into practice concrete plans for improving soil health over time.



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

---

## Proposed Solutions:

- Incorporate consideration of specific benchmarks for soil health and regenerative agricultural practices into grantmaking through the Farmland Protection Implementation Grants (FPIG) Program.
- Increase funding for soil health-focused on-farm, farmer-led research initiatives in partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension and the county extension offices.
- Designate funding for public interest research specifically focused on the declining numbers of Black and Indigenous farmers, the unique technical needs of farmers practicing integrated soil health management, and farmers' growing needs for information about climate resilient and climate-friendly methods.
- Promote and fund professional development pathways for farm advisors that reflect the diversity of the next generation of farmers, as well as the agricultural knowledge and research they seek.
- Ensure funding for community-based, culturally relevant, BIPOC-led training and technical assistance programs for the next generation of Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color seeking to implement soil health measures. Offer credit-bearing arrangements through partnerships with community colleges and Cornell University, and fund salaries and scholarships for on-farm certificate programs led by BIPOC soil stewards.
- Drawing on California AB 838 for recommendations, create a coordinated statewide program to prioritize technical assistance for small-scale, limited resource farmers and new farmers, including increasing the number of small farm advisors in the state, expanding applied research on regenerative agriculture, and tracking racial demographics of program participants with a focus on engaging Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color and supporting their economic viability.
- Create supportive pathways for guestworkers, migrant workers, and undocumented farmworkers to become land and/or business-owning farmers/owner-operators.



1972 NY HWY 2  
Petersburg, NY 12138  
(518) 880-9372  
love@soulfirefarm.org

---

- Strengthen statewide protections for labor laws that support a living wage, day of rest, health insurance, overtime, workers compensation, and collective bargaining rights for farmworkers as future soil stewards.
- Invest in an “urban to rural” farmer pipeline by funding training and technical support for urban farmers, many of whom – through necessity, innovation, and/or agricultural orientation – are already practicing farming methods protective of soil health and regeneration.
- Establish scholarships and commit funding streams to support agricultural education and training for BIPOC students attending SUNY institutions.
- Improve statewide data collection on BIPOC farmers practicing regenerative, soil-protective agriculture, for the purposes of strengthening mutual support networks.

Thank you for your consideration of this feedback. I am happy to address any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

The teams of Soul Fire Farm and the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust

*Compiled and adapted by Larisa Jacobson*

*Co-Director & Partnerships Director, Former Farm Manager, Soul Fire Farm*

*Founding Board Member, Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust*