



Testimony in Support of the Land Access and Opportunity Board Funding Request  
By Chelsea Gazillo, American Farmland Trust, New England Policy Manager  
April 14, 2023

Dear Members of the Vermont General Assembly:

On behalf of American Farmland Trust, I write to you in full support of appropriating \$1.2 million dollars in the state budget to support baseline funding for the Land Access and Opportunity Board (LAOB).

My name is Chelsea Gazillo, and I am American Farmland Trust's New England Policy Manager. American Farmland Trust (AFT) is the only national conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. As an organization, we understand that achieving a resilient agricultural system depends on equity and inclusion for all groups who have been, and still are, marginalized. We know social and racial injustices are entrenched in our nation's history and agricultural system. However, we cannot fully appreciate either without acknowledging genocide, land theft, enslavement, and other injustices perpetrated against Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized peoples. To learn more about our organization's approach to addressing systemic inequities in agriculture, we encourage you to read American Farmland Trust's full equity statement [here](#). We support policies that we know will start to rectify the harm that systemic racism inflicted on Black, Indigenous, and Other Farmers of Color (BIPOC) across the region and in Vermont.

Land ownership has historically been a means to income and growth opportunities, sales and market expansion, and generational wealth for the landowners. Yet the opportunity to own the land that farmers steward has and continues to be taken away from marginalized communities. Farmland access and ownership is not a privilege afforded to only those with significant financial means but is also a vital step towards equitable access and opportunity to Vermont's historically marginalized people.

According to the 2017 National Agricultural Statistic Service (NASS) Census of Agriculture, there are 142 Black, Indigenous, and Other Farmers of Color (BIPOC) that own farms in the state of Vermont. This is in comparison to the 4,561 White farmers that own 99% of Vermont's farmland.<sup>1</sup> AFT recognizes that the 2017 NASS Census data may be limited in capturing data that accurately depicts the number of BIPOC farmers in the state due to many reasons, including the history of discrimination and distrust of USDA and NASS by many BIPOC producers. However, this stark disparity reflects centuries

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<sup>1</sup> Vermont Farm to Plate (2023, April 14). 2021-2030 Vermont Agriculture and Food Systems Strategic Plan [https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/sites/default/files/202203/vermont\\_agriculture\\_and\\_food\\_system\\_strategic\\_plan\\_2021-2030.pdf](https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/sites/default/files/202203/vermont_agriculture_and_food_system_strategic_plan_2021-2030.pdf)

of land and agricultural policies, planning practices, and other forms of systemic racism that have prioritized White producers.

The 1910 US census recorded over 219,000 land-owning Black farmers in the entire country. The Land Loss and Reparations Project, a report involving a multi-university research team as well as several investigative reporters, looked at census data between 1920 and 1997 and conservatively estimated that during that timeframe, the amount of Black-owned farmland lost can be valued at \$326 billion. This estimate does not include many of the benefits that cannot be calculated from receiving generational wealth. Nevertheless, it is hard to calculate what has been completely lost, and \$326 billion is considered a very conservative number.

Today, the results of this land loss are still felt by BIPOC communities across the region despite the growing number of BIPOC that are becoming new and beginning famers. According to AFT's [Farms Under Threat](#) report, non-White farming populations are increasing throughout the region. New England's BIPOC farming population has more than tripled since 2007 and has grown five times since 2002. Supporting access to land and resources for successful farming is key to ensuring farm viability for these producers and will sustain this growth. At the same time, only 30% of new and beginning farmers (defined as those who have farmed for 10 years or less) identify as White, 79% of Black farmers in New England meet this definition.

The Vermont Land Access and Opportunity Board (LAOB) was established during the 2022 legislative session “to promote improvements in access to woodlands, farmland, and the land and home ownership for Vermonters from historically marginalized or disadvantaged communities who continue to face barriers to land and home ownership.” As an organization that cares deeply about promoting farmland access opportunities and keeping farmers on the land, AFT applauds the legislature for this critical first step toward building better relationships with historically marginalized producers and communities. H.273, the legislation introduced to create the board, was drafted in close collaboration with BIPOC leaders in the state to increase home and farm ownership and farmland stewardship opportunities for BIPOC communities.

In a National Young Famers Coalition report released in 2022, access to land is cited as the single largest barrier to new and beginner farmers, many of whom identify as BIPOC.<sup>2</sup> Financial, linguistic, and cultural barriers and biases exacerbate typical challenges facing new and beginning farmers. Furthermore, both housing and farmland prices increased during the pandemic in Vermont. Vermont's housing prices increased by an average of 15% in 2022 and the average value of farmland per acre increased by 7.7% from 2021 to 2022.<sup>3</sup> This is due to a range of factors, including a significant increase in development and real estate pressure from out-of-staters looking for more space during a time of restrictions and lockdowns.<sup>4</sup>

This \$1.2 million dollar request to support the ongoing efforts of the Land Access and Opportunity board will do the following:

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<sup>2</sup> Ackof, S., Flom, E., Polanco, V. G., Howard, D., Manly, J., Mueller, C., Rippon-Butler, H., & Wyatt, L. (2022). *Building a Future with Farmers*. National Young Farmers Coalition.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), “2017 Census of Agriculture,” last updated April 2019, accessed August 2022, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census\\_Farm\\_Producers.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2019/2017Census_Farm_Producers.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Minadeo, D. (2023, February 16). A ‘Vermont perfect storm’: Statewide data shows record spike in housing prices. VT Digger. <https://vtdigger.org/2023/02/16/a-vermont-perfect-storm-statewide-data-shows-record-spike-in-housing-prices/>

- Ensure the board continues to receive administrative support from VHCB in FY' 2024
- Create critical resources to conduct an equity assessment and recommend improves to increase access to state investments and support housing, land access, and land-based enterprises;
- Increase the amount of technical assistance and/or grant organizations to provide technical assistance to increase land access and housing opportunities for VT's historically marginalized communities;
- Continue Analysis and Fact-Finding, and Develop Key Partnerships with Parallel Programs in and out of Vermont, in order to Establish a Viable Reparative Grant Program to Support Vermonters from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities to access housing, land, and land-based enterprises;
- Compensate and provide access to public facilities to the Vermonters who offer to volunteer time to support the board.

The allocation of funding to the Land Access and Opportunity Board is an investment in the future of Vermont's BIPOC communities. American Farmland Trust is committed to supporting the efforts of the LAOB and connecting board members to regional partners who are working on similar initiatives. This is an opportunity for Vermont to lead the way and undo the many injustices historically marginalized communities have faced across the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this vital budgetary request. Please feel free to contact me at [cgazillo@farmland.org](mailto:cgazillo@farmland.org) or my colleagues at American Farmland Trust if you have any questions about our support for the LAOB to be funded in Vermont's FY 2024 budget.

Sincerely,

Chelsea Gazillo  
New England Policy Manager  
American Farmland Trust

*American Farmland Trust is an agricultural non-profit organization with a mission to save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. AFT is the only national agricultural organization that approaches its work in this comprehensive, holistic manner. We recognize the connection between the land, forward-looking farming practices, and the farmers who do the work.*