After decades of discriminating against Black farmers and ignoring their complaints, the USDA is promising to do better. Again.
In the 1930s, after a life of sharecropping, the siblings’ grandfather, Berea “Burrie” Corbett, turned $40 worth of gold coins his parents had given him into a 3,100-acre tobacco farm in tiny Cedar Grove, becoming a pillar of the local Black bourgeoisie. He built a church and a school for the local Black community. Taylor and Stewart had helped run the farm during high school and college. After careers in law enforcement and pharmacy, respectively, they decided to return to the family business. In 2009, aided by a loan from the US Department of Agriculture, they launched a high-tech aquaculture operation in a 10,000-square-foot building that stood where their grandfather once grew tobacco. Taylor Fish Farm’s organic tilapia stood where their grandfather once grew tobacco. Taylor and Stewart is distressingly common among Black farmers, who have lost more than 50 percent of their land since 1910—16 million acres, a landmass roughly the size of West Virginia—in part due to widespread discrimination by USDA bureaucrats who refused them loans, acreage allotments, and other forms of support that white farmers in similar situations easily obtained.

Black ownership of farmland peaked in the early 20th century. And while you might assume the New Deal, the civil rights movement, and President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs would have made things easier for Black farmers, you’d be wrong. The USDA’s central role in this pattern of discrimination would earn it the nickname “The Machine That Eats Up Black Farmland.”

Renee Stewart, left, and her brother Valee Taylor right, stand in the building that used to house Taylor Fish Farm.

The modern USDA took shape under the New Deal, as Southern Democrats used the largest federal departments. It oversees the Forest Service and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (what used to be called food stamps), loans for rural businesses and infrastructure, farm credit, and even some low-income housing.

Yet the USDA’s first civil rights director was appointed to try to clean up its entrenched discrimination. A decade later, a gargantuan power structure that’s pretty in the hands of powerful white men. The USDA’s central role in this pattern of discrimination would earn it the nickname “The Last Plantation” among Black farmers.

by the mid-1960s, civil rights activists had trained their sights on this Jim Crow farm system, running Black candidates for spots on USDA county committees that distributed enormous amounts of farm aid. In 1966, the US Commission on Civil Rights released a scathing report that documented ongoing entrenched discriminatory practices throughout the USDA’s Southern offices. The same year, Agriculture Secretary Orville Freeman responded by appointing a special committee to study the department’s first civil rights director, William Seabron. It was mostly symbolic. Seabron drew up an aggressive reform plan, which included integrating the local committees, but department officials by and large ignored his recommendations.

Many of the USDA bureaucrats were under the sway of deep-seated Southern interests, personified by Rep. Jamie Whitten, a segregationist landowner from the Mississippi Delta who cultivated allies and spies within the department. As a powerful member of the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, he killed department reports on Black farmers and farmworkers and statistical agencies that studied poverty. When Congress debated expanding food stamps in Whitten’s deeply impoverished home state, he said if “hunger is not a problem, nigras won’t work.” He assured a USDA administrator in the county committee system that he could ignore integration orders from Washington and entered a passage in a congressional report arguing that Freeman couldn’t enforce civil rights laws. Lacking the appetite to challenge the lawmaker known as the “permanent secretary of agriculture,” Freeman told reporters that he had two bosses: “One is President Johnson. The other is Jamie Whitten.” With no
mandate or power, the office would later descend into mismanagement and chaos. President Nixon pushed for moderate civil rights reforms in part to drive a wedge between labor and ethnic groups. As part of that effort, he created the USDA office of civil rights. But this merely gave an official name to a body with little real power. Only a few years later, when Earl Butz was secretary, 80 percent of its staff was moved to unrelated work—an overt signal of the administration’s abandonment of civil rights. This established a pattern at the department. As Daniel puts it, since its inception, the office has “been told not to do anything and has the personnel within it that can ensure that nothing will be done.” The legacy of deliberate inaction persists. Local USDA offices originally established to defend white supremacy still garner hundreds of discrimination complaints against themselves every year, advocates and farmers say, and the department almost never resolves them in favor of the complainant or punishes employe- es for wrongdoing. The systemic attack on Black farmers is partly why 98 percent of the farmers who experienced it were by white people, and the agency’s loan pro- grams mostly enrich large, white-owned farms. The USDA even named its Washington- based program, the “Machine that Eats Up Black Farmland.”


dollar of immeasurable value.” Their white neighbors burned crosses in their yard, shot at them when they collected mail, and hung their German shepherds. This legacy of deliberate inaction persists. Local USDA offices originally established to defend white supremacy still garner hundreds of discrimination complaints against themselves every year, advocates and farmers say, and the department almost never resolves them in favor of the complainant or punishes employees for wrongdoing. The systemic attack on Black farmers is partly why 98 percent of the farmers who experienced it were by white people, and the agency’s loan programs mostly enrich large, white-owned farms. The USDA even named its Washington-based program, the “Machine that Eats Up Black Farmland.”

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The “Machine that Eats Up Black Farmland”

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tentionally delayed processing their loan restructuring, which constituted discrimi-
nation due to race, sex, disability, and their status as Pigford compliants—something Taylor and Stewart had made clear from their first communications.

That July, a bank loan they’d applied for was approved for $670,000—enough to get back on their feet and even expand. But according to Taylor and Stewart, the RSA blocked the new loan until its own loan was paid down. Subsequently, Taylor was diagnosed with prostate cancer. His doctor told him his body couldn’t handle the stress of fighting both cancer and the RSA. So the siblings let it go. In 2019, Taylor Fish Farm closed for good. It seemed like the history of what had happened to so many other Black farmers had repeated itself. “They take minority farmers [who] put up everything they have,” Stewart says. “They set you up for failure, and then they put up everything they have,” Stewart says. “They set you up for failure, and then they put up everything they have,” Stewart says.

Taylor and Stewart didn’t hear back from OASC in until May 2017, 11 months after they’d filed their complaint. After submit-
ting more information to an investigator, they didn’t hear anything until September 2018, when they were emailed a short list of follow-up questions and given four days to respond. The investigation appeared to be over. They wouldn’t receive a verdict until September 2019, more than three years after they’d filed their complaint. In OASC’s final decision, the agency’s judici-
ary took the loan officer’s word on virtu-
ally every point and dismissed the majority of their complaint.

The entire process struck the siblings as absurd. According to an internal memo we obtained, at least one OASC official thought so, too. In a 12-page document from No-

vember 2018, Queen Kavanaugh, a senior crim-
ineer who worked briefly under Vilsack before leaving in frustration, described OASC as functioning like a “closing machine,” ferret-

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and-file employees say that top managers hid the backlog of complaints that made the department look good. As one longtime employee remarked of how complaints came through the back door: “They’re not cattle, you know. They’re real people.”

Two former high-level OASC officials say Leonard personally pressured them and other supervisors to fudge the num-
ber. “Let’s say if I gave him the numbers and there were 350 cases,” says a career civil service administrator who held a number of high-level appointed positions in federal government before working for Leonard, “he would get upset. He would say that’s not accurate. And he would go [to one of my colleagues] to say it was 100 cases.” That sort of pressure, another official says, meant OASC’s statistics were ma-
nipulated at every stage of the complaint process. In an emailed statement, Leon-
ard said claims that he or any of his staff altered numbers of civil rights complaints “are an absolute falsehood.”

After I refused to hide those numbers, I was blackballed,” the first administrator adds, echoing grievances made by a number of other OASC employees who say they were sidelined for speaking out.

In its 2016 report to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, obtained through a Freedom of Information Act re-
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Much of the problem, according to every employee we interviewed—including Leon-
ard and other OASC officials—stemmed from the improper entangle-
ment of the Office of General Counsel (OOG) with OASC’s work. By definition, the OOG is the USDA’s legal defense arm, meant to defend the agency against lawsuits and complaints, including civil rights com-
plaints. That puts it in direct conflict with OASC, and it’s why federal law man-
dates a firewall between the two divisions.

THE “MACHINE THAT EATS UP BLACK FARM LAND”

But according to Taylor and Stewart, the de-
partment had cleared out the massive backlog of 14,000 complaints that had amassed during the Bush administration, and discrimi-
nation in the field. “Nobody is checking the law or trying to come to an understanding to see if this [employee] is telling the truth,” she says. “Nobody is trying to understand what hap-

pened. So based on the way we do inves-
tigations, by sending out these questions, it’s guaranteed to be a finding of non-dis-
crimination.” That might be a problem if OASC actually saw its mission as determin-
ing whether discrimination occurred. “But the purpose of our job isn’t that,” Kavanaugh says. “It’s to shuffle complaints through in 30 days or less so the numbers go down.”

Kavanaugh’s description echoes a common complaint among OASC employ-
es we interviewed. Civil rights enforcement during the past few administrations boiled down to a fixation on numbers. During the Bush administration, OASC made just one finding of discrimination among more than 14,000 USDA complaints from the public. Between 1999 and 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released at least 10 papers chronicling the USDA’s failure to manage and address complaints. Between 1999 and 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released at least 10 papers chronicling the USDA’s failure to manage and address complaints. Between 1999 and 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released at least 10 papers chronicling the USDA’s failure to manage and address complaints. Between 1999 and 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released at least 10 papers chronicling the USDA’s failure to manage and address complaints.

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THE “MACHINE THAT EATS UP BLACK FARMLAND”

Former USDA employee Queen Kavanaugh is skeptical of Vilsack’s promises of overdue reforms: “I don’t see why all of a sudden he’s going to fall in love with civil rights.”

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The agricultural industry and organizations representing large-scale farmers, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, were largely pleased with Vilsack’s nomination. His supporters have defended his selection, saying he is a friend of justice and will investigate the OASC’s alleged mismanagement. Vilsack has promised to prioritize civil rights, but others see little reason to believe Vilsack will change the course of USDA’s civil rights office.

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