

June 2, 2021

Secretary Thomas Vilsack  
Attention: Chief of Staff, Katherine Ferguson  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Secretary Vilsack:

We wish to acknowledge your presence last Friday morning along with key USDA personnel Katherine Ferguson, Chief of Staff; Dr. Dewayne Goldmon, Senior Advisor for Racial Equity; and Monica Rainge, Esq., Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Civil Rights (OASCR); David Grahn, acting General Counsel; Chris French, Associate Deputy Chief, Forest Service/Acting Deputy Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Conservation; and perhaps others. We hope that this is the first of an ongoing series of meetings between you, your staff, and representatives from the USDA Coalition of Minority Employees and the Justice for Black Farmers Group.

We were dismayed and disappointed by several things: 1) we were not informed as to the length of the meeting; 2) we were informed of the mode of technology at the last minute, i.e., 7:37 pm EST on the day prior; 3) the shift in technology from Zoom to Microsoft Teams proved problematic for some of our rural farmers; 4) we did not have sufficient time to ask our questions nor have our questions answered; and 5) misleading information was provided by the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights.

We are of the opinion that good leadership begins by asking questions. As we had previously stated in our letter to President Biden on May 11, 2020 and our correspondence with you and your office on May 12, 2021, we had a list of issues and concerns for us to discuss. Given the meeting's brevity and focus, we were not able to present them. We did, however, appreciate Ms. Ferguson and Dr. Goldmon extending the meeting by an additional 15 minute per our persistence. Because of our insistence to get questions answered, we were told by your Chief of Staff to email our concerns. The courtesy of an additional meeting time was refused.

We were obviously concerned regarding debt relief, and your team managed that well; however, we remain disturbed that this process is apparently going to be complicated and lengthy, prolonging the economic suffering of Black farmers. We were also deeply disturbed by the report from Deputy Assistant Secretary Rainge. She stated that OCR does not have a backlog of cases. This does not explain the enormous number of civil rights complaints that have been in her office for decades. As we stated, historically the USDA's Office of Civil Rights has been called "a closing machine." We have no evidence to suggest the contrary. In fact, several farmers on the call currently have ongoing cases within OCR. We are led to believe, then, that Deputy Assistant Secretary Rainge was providing us false information. Based on her response, we are also not convinced that there is indeed a "fire-wall" between OGC and OASCR as stated by Deputy Assistant Secretary Rainge.

Our concerns go beyond debt relief. The major purpose of the meeting was what the Secretary's plans were to address the decades of systemic discrimination at USDA that harms especially Black farmers and USDA employees. Many of the items that were offered during the Secretary's presentation do not get to the solution/resolution of the many systemic concerns that we had previously addressed in our communications. Recent reports and investigative news articles confirm our allegations of continued widespread racism and other abuses at USDA. For clarification, we were also concerned about cases that were not processed timely and are still sitting at USDA. And we clearly expressed our concern about the county committee system that still inflicts pain and suffering on Black farmers.

Accountability, transparency, and other matters are found within The Justice for Black Farmers Act of 2021 and could easily be enacted under your leadership. There are many other matters that we have and, therefore, we respectfully request a follow-up meeting with you or your top staff. A half hour is by far an inappropriate amount of time to resolve our issues and concerns.

In short, the meeting left us frustrated, disappointed, and insulted. We believe we can be allies in the effort to root out racism at USDA.

We are extremely proud of the work our Coalition put into the passage of Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock's bill, "Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act of 2021," and Senator Cory Booker's legislation, "The Justice for Black Farmers Act of 2021" and should not be penalized by USDA for it. Please remember it was the Biden/Harris transition team that you headed up that told us that debt relief for Black farmers was "unconstitutional."

Silence is not an option for us.....

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lawrence C. Lucas".

Lawrence Lucas, President Emeritus  
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