

# USDA announces inaugural equity commission appointees

By Ximena Bustillo

02/10/2022 05:01 AM EST

The Agriculture Department appointed 28 educators, farmers, advocates and agriculture leaders to positions on its first-ever equity commission.

The commission, born out of a presidential executive order and funded by the [March 2021 Covid-19 package](#), fulfills a campaign promise by President Joe Biden. The panel is tasked with reviewing the Agriculture Department's programs, which have historically discriminated against farmers of color. But some advocates remain skeptical about whether tangible change can come out of the newly formed group.

"I do not expect the USDA Equity Commission to produce anything of value for the Black Farmer community," said Tracy Lloyd McCurdy, executive director of the Black Belt Justice Center and co-organizer for the Black Farmers' Appeal: Cancel Pigford Debt Campaign, in a statement to POLITICO. "It has taken USDA more than a year to appoint a commission that's focus is so broad that it will only serve to divert attention from the lack of real progress by USDA to end systematic disparities in treatment of Black farmers and ranchers. At best, the Commission will produce some general findings and recommendations to be published at the end of this 4-year presidential term."

Agriculture Department Deputy Secretary Jewel Bronaugh told POLITICO that the commission will perform "additional forward-thinking work" to gather external input on how to address the legacy of bias.

**How we got here:** The idea of an equity commission first gained traction in Sen. [Cory Booker's](#) (D-N.J.) [Justice for Black Farmers Act](#). Sen. [Elizabeth Warren](#) (D-Mass.) proposed the idea [during her presidential bid](#) and [it was later adopted by Biden](#).

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is under pressure to address historical discrimination by USDA. Critics charge that he failed to address the issue when he served as Agriculture secretary during the Obama administration.

Black farmers [owned 14 percent of all farms in 1920](#). Today, they own up 1.6 percent of all farms, according to the U.S. Agricultural Census. And throughout his first year in office, Vilsack and the Biden administration have reiterated that they are dedicated to right the historical wrongs of the department.

"I am really anxious to see how they have it laid out," said Igalious "Ike" Mills, a third-generation Black farmer in Texas and a former member of USDA's Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers. "What are they going to do differently than the Minority Farmers Advisory Committee? We have enough committees already. We need to see some action."

The Biden administration has taken positive steps, according to Mills and McCurdy, including restarting the USDA Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers meetings that were paused during the Trump administration.

But advocates for Black farmers remain skeptical.

"At best, some findings will be published. At worst, they will be placed in a filing cabinet and lost until the next report and commission," Waymon Hinson, a Black farmer advocate, told POLITICO in a statement.

**How it works:** Fifteen members have been appointed to the equity commission with 13 others named to an agriculture subcommittee. There are two open spots on the subcommittee for members of the overarching equity commission, who will be selected after the first meeting.

“This equity commission is probably the first time we have brought in an external group to really look deeply at all of our policies, programs, all of our actions to address racial equity within the department,” Bronaugh said, adding that the group will also look at changing statutes and laws.

Within a year, the commission will create an interim report and provide recommendations, and a final report will be made within two years.

Bronaugh said that the department will not wait until the full two years are over to enact changes. Outcomes can include changing how employees are trained, recruited and hired, as well as expanding access to USDA programs.

**In the lineup:** Bronaugh and United Farm Workers President Emeritus Arturo Rodriguez will serve as co-chairs.

Derrick Johnson, NAACP president, is slated to be the “civil rights expert” on the commission. Shirley Sherrod, Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education executive director and former Georgia state director of rural development for USDA, is appointed in a “discretionary role.”

Sherrod [was forced out](#) of her job during Vilsack’s previous tenure after a deceptively edited video falsely suggested she made racist statements against white farmers.

On the commission's agriculture subcommittee, Black farmer advocates Savi Horne, Land Loss Prevention Project executive director, and Philip Johnson Haynie III, a Black farmer from Virginia, hold positions. The pair have spent the last year advocating for Black farmers by [testifying in front of Congress](#) and speaking out in favor of debt relief for farmers of color.

Here are the other nominations:

- Hazell Reed, National Black Growers Council executive director
- Toni Stanger-McLaughlin, Native American Agriculture Fund CEO
- Ronald Rainey, University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture assistant vice president
- Mireya Loza, Georgetown University associate professor
- Charles Rawls, former Farm Credit Administration and USDA general counsel
- Shorlette Ammons, Center for Environmental Farming Systems community food systems outreach coordinator
- Poppy Sias-Hernandez, Global Michigan executive director
- Todd Corley, Carhartt senior vice president of inclusion and sustainability
- Yvonne Lee, former U.S. Commission on Civil Rights commissioner
- Elizabeth Lower-Basch, director of income and work supports at the Center for Law and Social Policy
- Ertharin Cousin, Food Systems for the Future CEO and chair
- Rick Smith, Dairy Farmers of America president

Agriculture Subcommittee:

- Shari Rogge-Fidler, Farm Foundation CEO
- Alexis Racelis, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley associate professor
- Gina Eubanks, Louisiana State University Ag Center nutrition and food sciences associate vice president
- Michelle Hughes, National Young Farmers Coalition operations and impact director

- Kari Jo Lawrence, Intertribal Agriculture Council executive director
- Russell Redding, Pennsylvania Agriculture Secretary
- Janssen Hang, Hmong American Farmers Association executive director
- Erica Lomeli Corcoran, United Farm Workers Foundation systemic change director
- Sarah Vogel, lawyer
- Gary Matteson, Farm Credit Council executive vice president of beginning farmer programs and outreach
- Jennie Stephens, Center for Heirs' Property Preservation CEO

**What's next:** The commission will hold its first public meeting on Feb. 28 and will meet quarterly. There are plans to launch an additional panel focused on rural communities and economic development in the future.

“We know this is the right work to do and we are going to move forward and we are not going to hesitate to move forward,” Bronaugh said. “The secretary has indicated he's not going to stop and I am surely not going to stop.”

Bronaugh told POLITICO the department will be issuing an equity action plan and a diversity and inclusion strategic plan as soon as March in addition to the efforts of the equity commission.