

Young Farmers Federal Policy Platform



About the Process

The National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers) has historically created federal policy platforms and campaigns by surveying young farmers nationally and gathering informal feedback from our members and chapters. In 2018, in order to more directly engage our farmer members, we began developing a process to ensure young farmers, especially BIPOC 1 farmers, have a formal voice in setting our federal policy platform and that our platform reflects the on-the-ground needs of our farmer members.

The Young Farmers' Federal Policy Setting Process is the result of months of research, consultation, and conversation with partners and other farmer-centric organizations. Led by former Federal Policy Associate, Michelle A. T. Hughes, we interviewed organizations about their participatory and membership-engaged policy setting processes, sought guidance on centering BIPOC farmers from the AORTA Collective, and received a tremendous amount of leadership and development from a democratically-elected ad hoc committee of Young Farmers members 2. The Young Farmers Policy Setting Process was launched at Convergence 2019 through a presentation to members, and was approved through a member voting process.

As per the Federal Policy Setting Process guidelines, the work to build this platform included regional and affinity group calls 3 for farmers in our network and a national policy priorities survey to gather information, and nomination and voting on Policy Committee members. The information was reviewed by the elected Policy Committee and staff to draft this platform for the next two-year Congressional session. Members will vote on whether or not to accept each pillar, which requires a majority vote (51%) in favor.

About the Young Farmers Policy Committee

The Young Farmers Federal Policy Setting Process created the Policy Committee, made up of 15 dues-paying representatives: ten regional members (one general seat for each region and one BIPOC seat for each region), five representatives from newly-created affinity groups, and one non-voting Board liaison. The Committee is responsible for providing guidance on the design and feasibility of the policy survey, and the development of the platform, based on the results of the policy survey, affinity groups discussion and committee meetings. The Committee also leads the presentation of the final platform and conducts listening sessions at Convergence.

What is a Policy Platform?

A policy platform is a document meant to clarify the policy stances and priorities of a given organization. The National Young Farmers Coalition's federal policy platform will be made up of a maximum of five pillars, or issue areas, with policies included as a subsection of each pillar. It will exist as a living document, with rigorous review every two years.

The platform will serve as an overall guide to Young Farmers' federal policy work. Each platform will be written with a focus on specific outcomes, but will allow for flexibility in strategy. Coalition staff will use the pillars to prioritize and guide their policy work, but will be given some flexibility in navigating the details of implementation in consultation with the Policy Committee.

We recognize that this platform is not exhaustive; rather, it helps us prioritize areas of work for the next two years based on farmer needs and staff capacity. Further, we recognize that these pillars are not silos, and that in practice these issue areas may overlap with each other and other related issues.

Voting Process: Your Vote Establishes our Priorities!

Remember, this is a draft platform. We want our farmer members to have the final say in what is most important to tackle during the next Congress. Between November 16 and December 16, dues-paying members can vote on each pillar of the federal policy platform. Each pillar will need a majority (at least 51%) affirmative vote to be included in the final platform. Your vote will confirm our policy priorities and help the Federal Policy Team and Policy Committee implement your priorities in our D.C. work. After the voting closes, staff will release the final platform and begin implementation in D.C.

Don't forget to renew your membership and make your voice heard by December 16th!

Building The Future Young Farmers Want: 2021-2023 National Young Farmers Coalition Policy Priorities

Racial Equity: The Base for our Policy Pillars

The National Young Farmers Coalition centers racial equity in our programs, policy, and advocacy campaigns. The federal policy platform is no exception. The federal policy setting process that guided the creation of the first Federal Policy Priorities Platform is an example of how, as an organization, we aim to share power and prioritize BIPOC farmers' voices.

We know that federal agricultural policies have reinforced the systemic racism that encumbers BIPOC farmers in almost every aspect of life, and we commit to advocating for anti-racist policy change.

"The contributions to agriculture made by BIPOC in the United States are immense. At its founding, this country's wealth was built on the agricultural labor of black slaves. Latinos, Latino immigrants, and other foreign-born farm workers currently undergird the U.S. food system and produce the majority of the food we eat. More than 60% of the world's food supply comes from crops originally cultivated by Native American farmers. Chicano farmers have led the charge for farm worker rights and continue to be leaders in grassroots farmer organizing. African American farmers modeled today's intensive and profitable small farms fifty years ago, and pioneered farmer cooperatives and community land trusts. And Hmong American farmers are now at the forefront of popularizing local food in the Midwest. However, these vital contributions to agriculture by BIPOC go largely unacknowledged within the dominant narrative of farming in this country."

National Young Farmers Coalition's 2016 Equity Statement



While we recognize that individuals in the food and agriculture system don't have the same protections and rights based on structural inequalities beyond racism (ableism, sexism, xenophobia, colorism, classism, ageism, homophobia, etc.), we affirm that starting with and prioritizing racial equity helps us dismantle other systems of oppression in our society.

For these reasons, we recognize racial equity not as a pillar, but as the base upon which all of our other policy work must stand. It is a necessary value to successfully implement and advocate for the other policy pillars in this platform.

Programs that were created to directly address racial inequities must remain adequately funded, and all programs and policies must move towards centering racial equity in their programmatic design.

Access and Accountability

Since the founding of the Coalition in 2010, significant progress has been made in expanding young and beginning farmer access to critical federally-funded farm programs and services. Yet farmers over 65 outnumber farmers under 35 by more than six to one, and many U.S. farmers are set to retire in the coming decade. To support the next generation of farmers and ranchers, transition productive farmland, and revitalize our nation's rural communities, considerable progress must still be made in how federal agencies, including USDA, serve young farmers and farmers of color.

USDA should continue to address historic and current racial disparities and discrimination in federal farm programs. A lack of demographic data collection and transparency across many programs makes proper evaluation of program implementation and outcomes difficult. The start of a new presidential term brings an opportunity for a fresh look at training opportunities for USDA staff and for administrative changes to programs so that they better incorporate the business models and farming practices that young farmers and farmers of color tend to use most.

Beyond USDA, there are many federal policies and programs that can be made more equitable and accessible for young farmers and farmers of color. For example, the Affordable Care Act, which was identified as the most helpful program, policy, or institution in our 2017 National Young Farmer Survey, should be protected or expanded to ensure access to healthcare for young and BIPOC farmers.

Policy Goal: Federal programs should be implemented in the most accessible and equitable way possible for young and BIPOC farmers, with mechanisms that provide transparency and accountability.

Examples:

- Hold USDA accountable to implementing programs that work for young and BIPOC farmers, including by increasing the collection and release of demographic information.
- Increase USDA technical assistance staff capacity, and improve staff knowledge of programs that benefit young and BIPOC farmers.
- Build USDA programs that work for small, diversified operations, including by streamlining program applications.
- Protect young farmers' access to healthcare by protecting the Affordable Care Act and similar legislation.
- Modernize USDA programs (have applications and other materials online, provide more user friendly customer experiences).
- Increase funding for key young and BIPOC farmer programs, including the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Grant Program (known as the 2501 program), which funds organizations specifically working to address the resource needs of historically underserved communities.

Land Access and Tenure

Secure land tenure is a fundamental component of a viable farm business. And yet, whether young farmers come from a farm family or are first-generation farmers, land access—particularly finding and affording land on a farm income—is most often their top challenge. It is also the top reason why farmers quit farming and why aspiring farmers haven't yet started. Land access is a particularly acute challenge for BIPOC farmers because of farm succession challenges such as heirs property.

The National Agricultural Statistics Service estimates that over the next five years—the lifespan of the farm bill—nearly 100 million acres of U.S. farmland are expected to change ownership and will need a new farmer. This represents an incredible opportunity for young producers to enter the field, the legacy of land use laws and farm policy has created daunting barriers to entry for young farmers and puts this acreage at risk of being developed or purchased by non-farmers, especially as a corporate investment.

BIPOC farmers experience many of the barriers young farmers face in accessing land more acutely as these challenges intersect with structural racism and discrimination. The inherited wealth gap between white and BIPOC individuals is particularly challenging in agriculture, which is a capital intensive career dependent on access to land. These challenges are built on a long history of structural socio-economic inequity that has included centuries of violent intimidation, disenfranchisement, and discrimination in lending, policy, and public farm programs. We must seek policy solutions to eliminate inequities in land ownership and access; protect farmland; facilitate appropriate, affordable, secure land tenure; and farmland transition.

Policy Goal: Advocate for national farmland access and transition initiatives and incentives for the next generation of farmers with prioritization for BIPOC farmers.

Examples:

- Create a national farmland access and transition initiative funded through both public appropriations and private dollars to support land transition to the next generation with prioritization for projects that resource BIPOC farmers.
- Support bills that seek to address past discrimination and land loss, such as H.R 40 that establishes the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans.
- Support the creation of tax incentives to encourage the sale or lease of land and assets to young, beginning, and BIPOC farmers.
- Advance programs and policies that allow for resolution of heirs property and fractionated land issues, and increase the ability of these property owners to participate in other federal programs.



Climate Action

We are running out of time to take collective policy action before the most dire climate change scenarios become a reality. Climate change is, and will continue to, spell disaster for farming communities and communities of color who are on the frontlines of climate change impacts and highly vulnerable to unpredictable weather, severe storms, drought, pests, and disease.

But young farmers are also an untapped resource in combating climate change. In our 2017 National Young Farmer Survey, three out of every four young farmers were already using sustainable practices. These land-based practices have been named by the National Academy of Sciences as some of the most cost-effective practices for carbon removal that are available today.

As recognition grows for the benefits of land-based climate solutions, so too does the need to support the next generation on the land who will keep implementing climate-smart agriculture into the future. Young farmers and BIPOC farmers need secure land tenure and better access to new and existing federal conservation programs to do their part, and they need farmers and ranchers to work towards climate solutions that will lessen the impacts of climate change for all.

Policy Goal: Push for comprehensive climate legislation that provides resources to young farmers and farmers of color who will combat climate change and build farm resiliency into the future.

Examples:

-Ensure that increased land access (and related water access in the West) for young farmers and BIPOC farmers is a key piece of climate mitigation legislation, so that these farmers can grow sustainable businesses and implement conservation practices that will lead to long-term climate stability.

-Increase incentive payments for implementation of climate-resilient practices, including increased funding for conservation programs and reforms to make them more accessible to young farmers and farmers of color.

-Prioritize climate research, including research that helps small-scale, diversified farmers implement conservation practices and measure their climate mitigation impacts.

-Support climate justice solutions that target resources to BIPOC farmers and protect farmworkers from hazardous working conditions due to climate change.

Labor and Immigration

The future of agriculture in this country is interconnected to immigration and labor issues. Immigrant farm workers and other food systems workers provide essential services while bearing the weight of a system that exploits their labor with little compensation. Immigrant farm workers, often undocumented, face poor working conditions including physical hardships, exposure to chemicals from pesticides, low wages and repeated incidents of wage theft, sexual assault, poor housing that can lack basic utilities or meet federal requirements, lack of breaks, and lack of access to shade, water, or bathrooms.

Immigrant farm workers and food systems workers have a plethora of skills and knowledge that will be necessary in our fight against climate change and to keep farmland as working land. Supporting the transition of immigrants, farm workers, and food systems workers to farm ownership and other agricultural roles will keep agricultural production stable and revitalized as a large population of farmers retire and transition their farms. Meanwhile, we must provide immigrants, farm workers, and food systems workers with dignified and safe working conditions, and provide workforce development opportunities to fill these valuable roles. Being allies and advocates for labor and immigration issues is an extension of our mission to support young farmers, not a different one.

Policy Goal: Act as an ally and advocate for immigrants rights and better labor conditions in agriculture and in the food system.

Examples:

- Support comprehensive immigration reform legislation, including a path to citizenship for undocumented farm workers, food chain workers, and their families.

- Ensure farm and food chain workers have a living wage, days of rest, access to healthcare, overtime, childcare access, support services for survivors of gender-based violence, workers compensation, and collective bargaining rights.

- Encourage the enforcement of labor standards that protect the dignity, income, and health of immigrants and workers.

- Uplift policy initiatives that support pathways for immigrants, farmworkers and food chain workers to become land-owning farmers running their own businesses.

- Create a workforce development program to support apprenticing farmers, especially to work and learn on BIPOC-, women-, and veteran-owned farms and farms that follow environmentally sound practices.

- Develop pathways to legalization for all undocumented people and stop deportations until a comprehensive policy is in place.



Student Debt Relief

Young people should not have to choose between a career in farming and earning a college degree. Farming is a capital-intensive and risky undertaking, and accessing credit for farming is already difficult. When saddled with thousands of dollars of student loan debt, many young farmers are denied loans to launch or grow their farm businesses because of their existing debt burden.

Black and Latinx borrowers are bearing the brunt of the student debt crisis. This leads BIPOC communities to disproportionately face very punitive consequences for default, like the garnishment of wages or seizure of tax refunds. In some states, it's even worse: default can lead to the suspension of driver's licenses or professional licenses.

For young farmers and especially BIPOC farmers managing credit-intensive farming businesses and rising healthcare costs, student debt cancellation or forgiveness can be transformative towards a successful transition to a career in agriculture.

Policy Goal: Support student debt relief and reforms that will reduce the financial burden of higher education for young farmers and BIPOC farmers.

Examples:

- Work in coalition to advance proposals for student loan debt cancellation.
- Pursue options to manage student loan debt in conjunction with USDA loan programs.
- Classify farmers as public servants, making them eligible for existing student loan forgiveness.

Amending the Policy Platform

We recognize, in 2020 more than in most years, that unforeseen events and changes in the political climate may lead to the need to adopt other areas of focus. The Federal Policy Setting Process also lays out a way to formally consider new policy priorities as "emerging issues." These issues must be new, meaning they cannot be an issue presented in a policy meeting or survey, and not exist in any form already in the platform.

In order to be considered for adoption by the Policy Committee, any member can draft a one page memo for an emerging issue and have it reviewed by their peer group (staff will have to present their memo to all staff, chapter members will have to present to the National Leadership Council, affinity group members will have to present to their affinity group, etc). A template for submitting an emerging issue will be made available on the Young Farmers website.

Footnotes

1. Black, Indigenous, and people of color
2. Thanks to ad hoc committee members Rhyné Cureton, Andy Brieter, Rachel Sannerud, Stephanie Henry, Nate Looney, Bari Zeiger, Greta Zarro, Brian Estes, and Rachel Schell-Lambert.
3. Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, Northwest, Women's, Veterans, BIPOC, LGBTQ, and At Large.