

**‘A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: The Role of USDA Programs in Addressing Climate Change’
House Committee on Agriculture
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**Testimony of Shakera Raygoza
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Thank you to the Honorable David Scott and Glenn ‘GT’ Thompson for holding this important hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story. My name is Shakera Raygoza, and I, alongside my husband, am the owner-operator of Terra Preta Farm in Edinburg, Texas. I am also the local market manager and the wholesale sales manager on the farm, overseeing processing and packing, bookkeeping, and marketing. We are currently farming on 15 acres in wholesale production, with 1 acre in small-scale production for local farmers markets, and a community supported agriculture (CSA) program. I work with the National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers) providing technical assistance to young Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers applying for USDA Farm Service Agency loans and previously the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 2 (CFAP2). Because I have benefited so much from USDA programs, I want to help other farmers gain access to those programs.

When we first started farming in 2009, my husband had a bachelor’s degree in agriculture and I was a registered nurse with no farming experience. We began farming by borrowing a small tract of land from our neighbor to grow food for our young family, and then started selling the surplus produce at local farmers markets. It was a challenge to grow our farm business because we had to relocate three years in a row due to our leases being terminated because the owners were expanding into the land for development or they were being offered more from other growers to rent. In each location, we would invest in the soil by adding compost and organic matter to the soil but we were hesitant to implement more climate smart practices without secure land access. By 2012, we had a steady stream of customers at the farmers markets and 15 CSA members, so we decided to purchase our own land with an FSA Farm Ownership Loan. For the past eight years we have been growing Certified Organic vegetables for our local community through farmers markets and a CSA veggie box program, and for the past three years we have added wholesale accounts in the regional wholesale market, including a major grocery chain in Texas. We’ve directly benefited from FSA Farm Ownership Loans and Farm Operating Microloans, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding for high tunnels, cover cropping, land leveling, and irrigation systems with ponds. We also were recipients of the State of Texas Young Farmer Grants and CFAP1 and CFAP2.

Throughout our time farming, I’ve noticed how climate change has affected and changed our work. Living in the Rio Grande Valley, we’ve been hit hard by hurricanes that are becoming stronger and more frequent in the past five years. Hurricanes and heavy flooding have hit our area three years in a row from 2018 to 2020. The most recent hurricane, Hurricane Hanna, hit in July 2020, dumping more than nine inches of rain in the area in just two days. The floods damaged our cover crops, causing \$4,000 in losses. And even though we usually have very mild winters, we’ve had a lot of freezes recently, which are very

uncommon in this area. Last winter, during Winter Storm Uri — the record breaking storm that left millions without power, dozens dead, and caused \$24 billion in overall damages — we experienced a hard freeze, resulting in us losing a third of our crops. These losses totaled \$60,000 — more than half of our annual revenue. I'm currently still trying to navigate the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) to get help for those losses. Unfortunately, communication between the local office has been painfully slow and USDA staff and technical assistance providers aren't sure how to help a small-scale farmer like myself. Crop insurance is not affordable to farmers like me, and disaster relief programs are not accessible to small and diversified farms. To support the future of agriculture, USDA needs to change the way it serves young farmers. We would have benefited from having access to outreach programs, easily accessible online resources and tools, and technical assistance to help us apply for USDA programs. We also would have benefited from well-trained staff in county offices who were aware of our needs and could have guided us toward programs tailored for our small-scale farm. I would like to see more programs that provide upfront funding without placing the burden of financing projects onto the farmers who may not have access to credit.

Since winters are also getting warmer and temperatures are fluctuating more, we have faced an increasing amount of pest pressure. Over the past two to three years, we are seeing more and more cucumber beetles and aphids, which are challenging to manage and cause damage to our crops. Climate change is also affecting how our crops grow — as temperatures fluctuate, we have been trying to account for those changes by buying heat, cold, and drought resistant varieties. We are also adding organic matter to our soils to increase moisture retention and soil fertility. On the farm, we try to incorporate climate-smart agricultural practices and minimize tillage to allow the natural soil ecosystem to thrive. Small farmers are already doing many things to sequester carbon and preserve natural resources on a limited budget, but we need more help. We want to do so much more and increased access to cost-share dollars would make it economically feasible for us to invest in climate resilience.

To do my part in fighting climate change, I am interested in on-farm renewable energy and integrating more sustainable practices into my operation. For example, I would like to use a solar powered tractor and install wind turbines to harness the strong coastal winds we have here to provide energy for my farm. I'm also interested in conserving water by collecting rainwater from my farm buildings. We are currently using drip irrigation to conserve water, but the rise in prices on drip tape is prohibitive. We are also experimenting with biochar to sequester more carbon and add biomass to our soils, but the equipment needed to produce biochar is expensive and not accessible to small farmers. I need support to continue this project and others, like building a biodigester to convert food waste to fertilizers and renewable biogas. We need more support and increased funding for programs like Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grants to develop new technologies. SARE provides money for farmer-led research and outreach, and is critical for farmers like me who are committed to sustainable agriculture.

In my ten years of farming, I've been fortunate enough to have access to several USDA programs, but I know that this experience is not the case for all young, beginning, small, and BIPOC farmers. Because I've been working in South Texas for so long, my husband and I have developed relationships with our local USDA offices. Despite this, I've experienced challenges that make it difficult to use these programs. One significant barrier is the reimbursement model for EQIP. We didn't have any capital to buy materials and cover labor costs for the installation of irrigation pipes and a high tunnel, so we had to take out a

microloan through FSA to fund the project. EQIP programs have contract terms and farmers do not have the time to wait to go through a 3-4 month loan application process. For our most recent EQIP project we had to take out a personal loan from a commercial lender at a higher interest rate. We were fortunate to be approved for the loan in time to complete the project within the contract period, but I believe that was due to having off-farm income, great credit, and farm sales data to strengthen our application. The reimbursement model is a major challenge for beginning farmers short on capital, unaware of microloan programs, and those who have bad credit or no access to traditional forms of credit, have student loan debt, and don't have off-farm income to fall back on.

Additionally, when I have applied for programs with USDA, I've found that the process is long and requires a lot of paperwork. My husband and I were both working off-farm jobs to provide for our family, so it took us a long time to gather all the required documentation and place it in the required format. Having to explain our work using rigid terms and units was also difficult. Figuring out how to convert our production of over 40 crops to yields per acre and present proof of our market prices to justify our business plan required a lot of time that we just don't have. The applications are designed for large commodity farmers who grow one or two crops. We were on our own for this process and eventually had to send in several revisions, which took even more time. We could have benefited from technical assistance and staff more knowledgeable about small-scale, diversified farming, as well as streamlined applications for diversified farms.

Through my work with the National Young Farmers Coalition, I have the privilege of providing young BIPOC farmers technical assistance with accessing USDA programs like CFAP2 and FSA loan programs. I have found that many were unaware of the programs and very appreciative of the outreach. Young farmers that requested technical assistance didn't feel comfortable working with their local offices because of discrimination, didn't understand how to complete the forms or where to access online resources, and had language barriers. Many had misinformation and assumed that they weren't eligible because they were a small diversified farm. Others were interested in applying, but didn't have time to complete the forms and would have preferred a streamlined online application process. I was able to provide one-on-one bilingual support for the farmers, making connections between farmers and local offices.

When I first started farming, there were a lot of local producers who sold at my farmers market. Ten years later, only one or two of those original farmers are still farming. Young farmers are the future of agriculture, but we need the support from USDA in order to continue sustainably growing food for our communities while dealing with a changing climate. Despite being directly affected by climate change, we as farmers have the unique ability to sequester carbon in the soil by using climate-smart methods like planting cover crops, using no- and reduced tilling, and managed grazing. We often don't have the startup capital needed to get off the ground quickly, often don't have access to traditional forms of credit, and are not eligible for many of the programs that are out there and tailored to larger farms, like crop insurance and disaster relief. Young farmers and farmers of color are already more likely to use climate-smart agricultural practices, and USDA must focus on expanding programs and supporting farmers who are already doing this work. By incorporating these methods into our farming practices, we can continue providing healthy food to our local communities, but we can only do this with secure access to land. I would like to see USDA and Congress focus on land security for young and BIPOC farmers.

Passage of bills like the Agricultural Resilience Act (ARA) will be instrumental in supporting young farmers on the frontlines of the climate crisis. The policy changes outlined in the ARA should be used to reimagine conservation in the farm bill and how these programs can support young and BIPOC farmers to act on climate.

Thank you for listening and holding this important hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story and the story of so many farmers like myself.