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REVITALIZING FARM COMMUNITIES WITH A GREEN NEW DEAL

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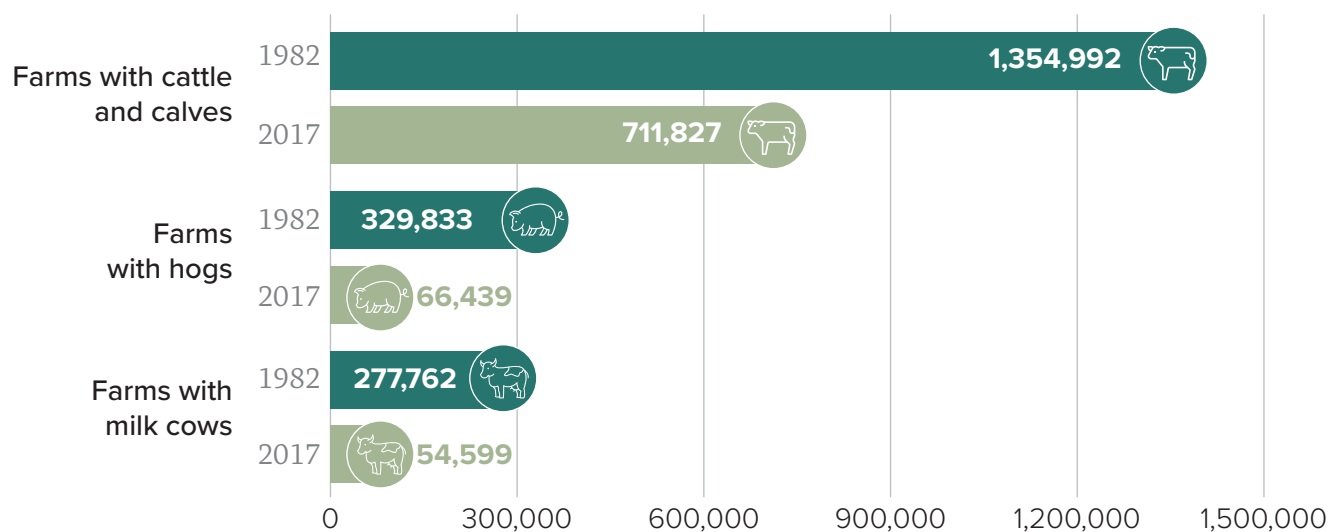
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A GREEN NEW DEAL WILL ALLOW AMERICAN FARMING COMMUNITIES TO THRIVE IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

The Green New Deal is an ambitious plan to build broad-based prosperity and foster environmental justice while tackling the climate crisis. In a series of memos, Data for Progress is laying out a comprehensive vision for how a Green New Deal can transform food and agriculture systems in the United States. This particular memo focuses on the policies needed to support and nurture diversified, resilient food and farm markets for a thriving rural America.

Right now, America's rural farm and food communities are in crisis. In the past 40 years, 50 percent of cattle operations, 90 percent of hog producers, and 80 percent of dairy farms have folded.^{1,2} The decimation of independent farms has distributed economic opportunity to a small number of players: Today, one percent of poultry and egg producers sell 99 percent of the industry's output, and 17 percent of hog producers account for 96 percent of sales in the sector.³ Feedlots housing more than 32,000 cattle sell about 40 percent of finished cattle,⁴ and broadly, five percent of farms sell 75 percent of US agricultural products.⁵

NUMBER OF FARMS, 1982 VS. 2017



Source: "1982 Census Publications." USDA Census of Agriculture, Albert R. Mann Library, http://agcensus.mannlib.cornell.edu/AgCensus/getVolumeOnePart.do?year=1982&part_id=51&number=51&title=United States. "2017 Census Volume 1, Chapter 1: U.S. National Level Data." Census of Agriculture, USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/.

The hyper-concentration of the American farm economy coincides with ecological and climate crisis. Soil erosion threatens the viability of future harvests⁶ while drought and flooding disrupt planting schedules and harvests;⁷ synthetic fertilizer and manure runoff kill marine life in the Gulf of Mexico, contaminating entire watersheds, incurring massive ecological and human health hazards;⁸ greenhouse gases are emitted from animal feeding operations crammed with tens of thousands of confined animals;⁹ air pollution from factory farms and pesticides harms workers and communities,¹⁰ and pesticide use has pushed pollinators, on which food crops depend, to the brink of collapse.^{11,12}

These dramatic changes to America's food system have exacerbated economic hardship throughout rural America. More than a third of rural counties have experienced sustained population loss in the last generation,¹³ and despite being home to 14 percent of the nation's population, rural America has experienced an employment growth of only 4 percent since 2013.¹⁴ Farm bankruptcies have increased by 24 percent in the last

year alone, and total farm debt is at an all-time high of more than \$400 billion.¹⁵ Rural children suffer higher poverty rates than urban children,¹⁶ and in the past three decades rural areas have experienced disproportionately high hospital closures, barriers to healthcare access, rates of opioid deaths, and other factors that have widened the urban-rural mortality gap.¹⁷

RURAL COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Rural Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities suffer the highest poverty rates in the country,¹⁸ while farming is the second largest industry on Indian reservations behind gaming. Likewise, Black farming communities have suffered systemic discrimination from government agencies—including from the USDA—resulting in devastating loss of land,¹⁹ and Latinx communities perform a heavy proportion of farm and slaughterhouse labor, work that is largely rural and dramatically oppressive and underpaid.²⁰ Rising temperatures are making these jobs even more dangerous.²¹ As a matter of principal and practice, these communities should be treated as major stakeholders in rural, agricultural, and farming policy decisions. Correcting for historical discrimination and inequity in USDA programs must be central to food and agricultural policy.

This economic and environmental emergency must be addressed with transformative policies centered on ecological food and farming. The future of rural America depends on nurturing a sustained wave of small and mid-size farms, food processors, and grocery stores that meet high ecological standards, keep profit and investments in their communities, and support a nourishing food supply.

This transformation has already begun. Despite markets and policies that favor multinational corporations, local and regional food networks are growing. In the past 20 years, directly marketed food sales, an indication of local farms selling directly to their customers, have sky-rocketed from almost nothing to about \$3.5 billion in commerce in 2015. Between 2007 and 2014, regional food hubs building the “Agriculture of the Middle” connecting small and mid-scale producers with retailers, institutions, and restaurants grew by nearly 200 percent. In that same time, farmers’ markets almost tripled in number, and farm to school programs increased north of 400 percent. In 2014, over \$18 million in SNAP benefits were used at farmers’ markets,²² reaching \$22 million by 2017.²³

Even as these programs show promise, they need to scale-up rapidly in order to meet the environmental and economic crisis in the rural United States. The following section outlines policy recommendations for the proper investment in research, infrastructure, training, and financial assistance for rural Americans to develop creative solutions that will restore diversity and resilience to the American farm economy.

VOCABULARY FOR PROGRESS: AG OF THE MIDDLE

Agriculture of the Middle is the intermediate supply chain between commodity markets and direct sales. This small- and mid-scale commerce, which is dependent on access to appropriate credit, distribution, processing centers, and buyers, will be a key element of the resilient and sustainable supply chains required to feed America this climate century. Public and private rural institutions, and independent and regional grocery stores are vital to this supply chain.

SUPPORT RESILIENT FARMING COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS

Problem: Agriculture and food supply chains dominated by multinational agribusiness firms siphon profits and investment out of rural America and impose practices that accelerate environmental degradation.

Solution: Build regional prosperity through the support of independent, locally-controlled, and ecologically sound food and farm enterprises to promoting rural employment and entrepreneurship alongside ecological and community resilience.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ▶ Increase funding for USDA’s “2501” program, which provides training to minority, veteran, and otherwise underserved farmers.²⁴
- ▶ Fund programs that facilitate farmer led, community-based, and sustainability-focused farmer-to-farmer education to creating strong, supportive agricultural communities. The Farm Beginnings Collaborative is a nationally recognized network of such programs, alumni of which are far more likely to remain in business through the difficult, early years of farming.²⁵
- ▶ Increase support for existing working lands conservation programs, such as the Conservation Stewardship Program and other Natural Resource Conservation programs.
- ▶ Launch new research, technical assistance and funding initiatives supporting support healthy soil practices for farmers, ranchers and forest owners.
- ▶ Increase the portion of USDA’s research, extension and training dedicated to regenerative agriculture and sustainable food systems.
- ▶ Support food leadership at all levels of government, including cities, counties, states, and regions. Already, over 300 food policy councils operating in cities all over the U.S. build relationships and networks across the public and private sector to meet goals for workforce development, local food sales, farm succession, food security, and public health.²⁶ In Vermont, a state-commissioned network has contributed to the generation of over 6,500 new jobs and 700 new businesses, local food purchasing has nearly tripled and food security significantly improved.²⁷
- ▶ Respect and protect the reservation lands and treaty rights of Indigenous nations by obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of tribes for all decisions that affect their people and traditional territories; honoring all treaties and agreements with Indigenous peoples, and protecting and enforcing the sovereignty and land rights of Indigenous peoples.

VOCABULARY FOR PROGRESS: FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

Food Policy Councils are public sector organizations that operate around the world at various community scales community scales, most prominently in cities. Their purpose is to unite disparate representatives from across the food system in order to research, develop, advocate for, and implement policies that promote food security, ecological resilience, and economic development.

RURAL AUTONOMY

Policies should allow rural communities the autonomy to determine their own metrics for success and create their own solutions that respond to local conditions. Alternative forms of knowledge and measurements of prosperity, especially those emphasized by Indigenous cultures that have endured on the land for centuries, should have equal or higher priority against the traditional growth model of development. These activities, such as knowledge sharing and community organizing, improving access to Indigenous and traditional foodways and seeds, and other community-focused creative solutions deserve robust support—without the promise of immediate or measurable economic benefit.

FUND INFRASTRUCTURE TO DEVELOP DIVERSE SYSTEMS OF EXCHANGE FOR FARM AND FOOD PRODUCTS.

Problem: Small- and mid-size independent businesses face steep barriers to scale and disadvantages accessing reliable markets.

Solution: Use public, private, and community institutions as levers to strengthen local, mid-size, and regional food exchange. Dramatically reforming and investing in creative solutions that close gaps in spending structure and kitchen operations will be necessary to see institutions and sellers benefit. Extensive training and support from USDA extension and land grant institutions are necessary in facilitating ecological transitions for farms, and farmers who participate in government purchasing must be ensured a living income at all times.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Radically increase funding for USDA's LAMP (Local Agriculture Market Program) and USDA Rural Development to invest in the "Agriculture of the Middle," creating new businesses and employment in processing, slaughter, transportation, and other links in the mid-size and regional food economy. Support for this infrastructure improves producer access to institutional markets and grocery stores, helping independent businesses prosper and increase employment opportunities.^{28, 29}
- ▶ Expand and build on both tax credits and direct investment initiatives geared at strengthening and increasing independent grocery stores in rural communities and urban food deserts.
- ▶ Require state and Federal institutions that purchase food to set bold purchasing goals that meet criteria for economic and ecological contributions that promote resilience. School districts, hospitals, prisons, and state colleges and universities can make a substantial difference building diverse and prosperous food and farm economies. The Good Food Purchasing Standards serve as an exemplary model.³⁰

- ▶ Guarantee every child free school meals. Not only does this reduce stigma and boost school meal participation to allow for more consistent buying power,³¹ it would correct the reductive federal income standards for free meals that neglect dramatic differences in living costs across America.³²
- ▶ Make FDA and USDA food safety regulations scale-appropriate for processing, abattoir, and distribution business on the local and regional level. This critical infrastructure is often hampered by one-size-fits-all safety rules and procedures that encompass the smallest and largest processing facilities.

A GREEN NEW DEAL CAN BRING THE INVESTMENT NECESSARY TO HEAL AND REGENERATE RURAL COMMUNITIES AND ECOLOGIES, BEGINNING WITH FOOD AND FARMING. NOT ONLY DO THESE POLICIES ADDRESS URGENT NEEDS, THEY ALSO SERVE AS A FOUNDATION FOR BROAD AND LASTING PROSPERITY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES.

ENDNOTES

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