

The Plight of Black Farmers
Racism in the US Farm Program
(Atlanta Constitution) October 10, 2006

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In 1999, black farmers in the United States reached a \$2.8 billion settlement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in a class-action discrimination lawsuit. But the problems are ongoing. In fact, under various farm bills and trade agreements, discrimination has expanded to farmers throughout the world.

Most farmers in the world are, in fact, people of color, from Africa to Asia to the Americas. Abuse of the agriculture program was rampant in the American South in the past century. Examples abound.

Early in the 20th century, cotton plantation owners convinced the U.S. Department of Agriculture that allotment payments should be filtered through them, rather than go directly to their black tenant farmers or sharecroppers. This resulted in as little money as possible going to those farming the land. It set a pattern of abuse.

We've seen in recent years Farm Service Agency county supervisors totally disregard loan applications from black farmers. Information about farm programs is not always made available to black farmers. If loans are approved, the payments often come too late to plant the season's crops. County committees that determine farm loan qualifications often lack black representation.

The United States now wants to expand these devastating discriminatory policies throughout the developing world. The subsidy commodity program is a prime example. Congress and corporations wanted to increase U.S. exports so they lowered the guaranteed minimum price for U.S. commodities such as cotton.

Prior to this devastating legislation, farmers were guaranteed a minimum price that was close to the cost of production. No more. Congress also stopped the acreage set-aside program, under which cotton farmers were paid not to plant on some of their land. This opened up an additional ten million to 14 million acres into production, some of which went into cotton.

Without regulations that set a fair price, corporations can purchase cotton below the cost of production in the United States, driving down prices in the developing world. And the higher production has increased demand for chemicals and seeds. It's been a corporate windfall.

So where are farmers in this picture? Because there are virtually no regulations to offer a fair price for commodities, the government pays farmers a subsidy to make up for their

loss. It usually just barely covers the cost of production. Black farmers and small family farmers in the United States depend on subsidies in an attempt to break even.

In a recent survey of African-American cotton farmers we conducted throughout the Southeast, it was found that the subsidy program is essential for their survival. But when asked if subsidies would be as important if the farmers received a fair price for their cotton, the answer was "no."

The subsidy program is a scapegoat for failed agriculture and development policies that are bolstered by the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that force the governments of developing countries out of agriculture. This enables corporations to control the global agriculture system.

World governments should instead be encouraged to create an agricultural system that supports small farmers and protects borders through fair trade and not free trade.

Policies that would go a long way toward resolving the current corporate agriculture welfare system would include a "Farmer Living Wage Program" so that corporations would have to pay a fair price to farmers and supply management that would reinstitute the acreage set-aside program.

We believe farmers in the United States and all over the world would benefit from these reforms. With these recommendations, the United States would be taking the lead in defining the role of government in agriculture and moving the debate toward the establishment of an "International Living Wage" policy for farmers. Food and fiber are far too important to be left in the hands of the private sector.

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