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To Senator Michelle Hinchey, Senator Jessica Ramos, and Senator Roxanne Persaud:

Thank you again for offering the Cornell Small Farms Program the opportunity to give testimony for the joint public hearing on April 13, 2021, on "Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice Alongside Continuing Inequities on our Food Systems."

Attached are the testimonies by Anu Rangarajan, director of the Cornell Small Farms Program, and by Dean Koyanagi and Nina Saeli, veteran program associates for the Cornell Small Farms Program's Farms Ops project.

If there are any additional questions, or materials you would be interested in, please do not hesitate to contact us.

I am grateful for your thinking and commitment to this issue, and offer our full support to the cause.

Sincerely,

Dr. Anu Rangarajan
Director of the Cornell Small Farms Program

Testimony of Anu Rangarajan

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I want to thank you, Senators Hinchey, Ramos and Persaud, and all of your supporting staff, for the opportunity to testify today. I speak on behalf of Cornell University and the Cornell Small Farms Program, which I direct. I open with this acknowledgment: Cornell is located on the traditional homelands of the Gayogóhó:nq' people (the Cayuga Nation) that precedes the establishment of the University, New York State, and the United States of America. We acknowledge the painful history of Gayogóhó:nq' dispossession and honor the ongoing connection of these people to these lands and waters.

The Cornell Small Farms Program envisions a future where NYS agriculture is made up of diverse and vibrant urban and rural farms. Our program is deeply committed to diversifying who is farming in NY. Thank you again for the first-time state support of our Equitable Farm Futures Initiative. This new funding will allow us to expand our efforts to grow the number of diverse new farmers in NY, including those who identify as farmers of color, women, LGBTQ+, or with other underrepresented groups.

There is an amazing lineup of thoughtful leaders on your agenda today who will share more deeply about their efforts to support diverse farmers. We as a program stand in solidarity with their vision and leadership. I will focus on our efforts to increase the number of LatinX farmers.

Based upon the recent Census of Agriculture, less than 2% of the 57K+ farmers in New York State are farmers of color. A mere 1% of agricultural producers identify as LatinX (606 in total). Yet, more than 55,000 LatinX farm employees work in New York State agriculture as the essential backbone of our farm businesses. They are highly experienced, skilled, have managed large farms, and most plan on a lifetime career in agriculture. And yet few have transitioned to farm ownership.

To start a farm, we tend to focus on access to these core assets: land, capital, training, and supportive networks. What is missing from this list is the critical need for a supportive surrounding community. Almost every diverse farmer that I have spoken to has shared this story: I want to farm, but I do not feel 'safe' to farm.

Consider facing the myriad challenges of starting a farm as a person whose first language is not English and whose ethnicity and agricultural role has been categorized as worker, not owner.

Our Master Class program is designed to meet the expressed training needs of LatinX beginning farmers and farm employees. We use an ESL framework to build English language confidence while strengthening financial and business management skills. It serves as a mini version of an English immersion school for farm business management, adapted to accommodate busy farmer schedules.

To date, the Master Class Pilot Series has graduated three separate classes, 29 LatinX farmers in total from NYS (ratio: 55% Male, 45% Female). On the farm, each graduate is responsible for the management of large, multilingual and multicultural work crews and the complex coordination of their farm's harvest.

Sergio and Sylvia Rosario, who operate Rosario Bros Farm in Albany, NY, were participants in our Master Class. They found the training and subsequent support critical to positioning their farm business for growth. During the Master Class, they built their personal confidence in communicating their farm goals. Afterwards, a consultant on our team helped them review their own finances and prepare for application for an USDA Farm Services Agency loan. They made strategic decisions on how to invest to grow their business. They feel optimistic about their farm's future.

While we are thrilled to be expanding our LatinX farmer training efforts over the next year, it is only one example of how we must pivot to meet the unique needs of diverse farmers.

If we are truly committed to a NY agriculture that upholds diversity as a core value, a systemic change is needed on how we think about agricultural development. The tools and levers of the state could advance this work by increasing the commitment of our entire agricultural community to this value. For example:

- How can we connect 'right to farm' with 'safe to farm' efforts at every level in our rural communities and across many different allies and institutions?
- What if we took the Climate Smart Communities (CSC) program framework and created a "Welcoming Communities" program? This could help local governments take action in supporting the diverse farmers and residents in their communities through assistance, grants, and other state support. The state might frame a strategy for 'safe to farm' that then directs funding for rural-focused anti-racist organizations and networks.
- What might it look like for NYSDAM to dedicate at least 10% effort, across all functions, towards creating a transparent accountability platform for agricultural diversity goals, initiatives and collaborations?
- How might all of our ag agencies and the funding directed towards agriculture issues, regardless of scale or commodity, include a lens of increasing diversity in NY agriculture?
- What might it look like for NY state to commit funding to support land access and acquisition by underrepresented farmers? An Equitable Farm Futures Land Grant Program could link efforts to protect farmland in trusts to support these diverse farmers growing in NY. The funding request by Black Farmers United is one example that targets resources and support for more Black farmers in NY.

Below are some other NYS legislative opportunities to support more diverse farmers:

- Farmland Protection Funding

- Set earmark (25%?) for projects targeting or farms being transferred to BIPOC farmers
- Change eligibility and to create a set aside RFP to enable BIPOC farmer organizations/land trusts to purchase land for farmers and to create farm incubators (see Black Farmers United 9 Solutions)
- Adapt portions of the proposed Justice for Black Farmers federal legislation to NY, to create a land-grant program for black farmers.
- Re-authorize the Empire State Development New Farmer Grants Fund.
 - Simplify the application process.
 - Develop alternative funding strategies that do not require reimbursement- many underrepresented farmers lack capital.
 - Prioritize a portion of funds to go to BIPOC farmers.
 - Engage an advisory group of BIPOC farmers to support grant review and support of grantees.
- Redirect REDC dollars to force a regional prioritization for BIPOC-led farmer or food entrepreneur grants and capital assistance.
 - Reduce the matching requirements for BIPOC projects (50/50 match requirement is difficult for BIPOC grantees with less family wealth)
- Examine existing farmer grant programs to redirect resources to BIPOC Farmers
 - Climate Resilient Farm
 - Grown and Certified
 - Integrate training for MWB certification
- Supplement existing federal cost share for organic certification to cover 100% of fees for BIPOC farmers.
 - Federal dollars currently available for partial offset of this expense. This targeted funding would create a pool available for the remaining fees.
 - NOFA NY, as a primarily NYS organic certifier could be recruited to manage these funds.
- Fund on-farm internships and training ‘fellowships’ for new BIPOC Farmers
 - Must pay a living wage and housing expenses to allow full participation
 - Consider changes to NY STEM scholarship program to ensure BIPOC farmer access is prioritized
- Create a student loan forgiveness program for BIPOC farmers.
- Fund Black Farmer Training Programs
 - Soulfire Farm
 - FarmSchool NYC

Many of the organizations and individuals working diligently to increase the diversity of agriculture are doing so on slim budgets with mostly volunteer labor. This is not sustainable. The work of systemic change requires us all leaning into the future we want. I am so grateful for your thinking and commitment to this issue and offer our full support to the cause.

Testimony of Dean Koyanagi

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Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Dean Koyanagi, my wife and I have been farming for 11 years on 40 acres in the Town of Ithaca and I also work part-time as a veteran program associate for the Cornell Small Farms Program. I am a former US Marine of Japanese-American descent, who served from 1987-1991. Included in our written testimony we have included Farm Ops' history, our partnerships, and some of our accomplishments through the Department of Agriculture and Market's "Veterans in Agriculture" continued funding and encouragement.

Most Farmer Veteran advocates will eagerly tell you that "Veterans are uniquely suited for farming". Because of course we're familiar with working physically demanding jobs, for long hours, through inclement weather, and under adverse challenging conditions. Which sounds a lot like farming. It can be easy to stereotype what "a veteran looks like" or where they come from. The reality is, our veteran population is becoming as diverse as the rest of our nation. Military veterans may have enlisted from other nations, served in the different branches, have been trained in very different military occupational specialties, and there are far more women veterans leaving the services today than ever before. And that veteran may have served for just a few years or a span of several decades. But each of those individuals has left a clearly structured, very team-oriented supportive community, with a strong mission and purpose, and a lifestyle where they may not have even cooked for themselves in a few years. Some may be facing physical disabilities or have suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury. They may carry hidden emotional wounds from deployments overseas or having experienced sexual military trauma. From VA data, we know that veterans suffer a disproportionate amount of food insecurity, and minority veterans again at higher rates.

So not surprisingly, enabling pathways into agriculture for veterans, either for self-sufficiency or commercial production, requires a variety of approaches, ways of reconnecting with some of that lost camaraderie, and reigniting that sense of service within our communities and to our nation. An effective learning and transformative veteran training may include breaking bread with fellow veterans and letting them discuss their own health issues while eating something they helped grow, or through hands-on workshops. For example, we helped support 4 workshops throughout the growing season at Rise and Root Farm last year. Working with Heroic Food and the Orange County CCE Gleaning team. Those veterans got to work side by side with Karen Washington and the Rise & Roots team, and were motivated in-part by knowing that the crops they helped care for were destined for local food banks. I believe it is that sense of service, and what connects us as veterans, that can make us well suited to agriculture.

To further illustrate this, I would like to introduce my colleague, Nina Saeli to speak about her own transition from soldier to farmer.

Testimony of Nina Saeli

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Good Afternoon. I am Major (Retired) Nina Saeli, Medical Service Corps, United States Army. Although I live and farm in Locke, NY, which in the Fingerlakes, I am currently in New York City, where I have been for the past month to help start up and operate a COVID vaccination clinic in a place called Spring Creek Towers in Brooklyn, with a goal of ensuring the fair and equitable distribution of the vaccine. My husband, Jeffrey, is a Marine and a Soldier, also retired and graciously holding down the farm while I am in the city. Today I'd like to briefly describe how farming has changed our lives.

My husband and I moved to Central New York after spending the majority of our adult lives among a tight network of friends and comrades. We were searching for that place that we might reside and call home for one final time. I do not have time to describe to you what a career in the military was like, but I can tell you that when I retired, I felt as if I had lost my identity and my sense of purpose. This struggle still haunts me today, but farming has helped to change that. Farm Ops provided us opportunities to explore agriculture and farming as a way to regain a sense of purpose and to connect with a community.

In 2015, my husband and I received an invitation to a weeklong event called Armed to Farm, sponsored by the Cornell Small Farms Program. I have to say that if same email invitation had come to us, advertising the exact same opportunity, but not specific to veterans, I am not sure that we would have accepted it. The idea of beginning this exploration with a group of our peers is what caused us to take that initial step to learn more about farming opportunities. At that time, I only gardened for therapeutic reasons, something that I began to do at the request of my husband and my surgeon after two spine surgeries, due to injuries I incurred during my time in the military. In five years with the support of the Cornell Small Farms Program and their Farm Ops project we have grown from gardeners to farmers.

In those 5 years, we have learned about soil health and crop rotation. We have learned to drive and maintain a tractor. We have learned to grow vegetables that we have never eaten before, and we now eat healthier than we did when we were in service. Farming activities have replaced early morning military physical training, and farm work is just as rigorous. Since farming my husband has been able to manage his blood pressure without medication, and I no longer take cholesterol medicine; my physician tells me most likely due to my new diet composed of mainly fresh fruits and vegetables. We have learned how to sell our produce at three farmer's markets and on a farm stand, and these activities have been critical as an opportunity for us to become part of a community, who now seek us out for our fresh produce and gardening advice.

Through the Farm Ops Project, we have been able to share our experiences with other interested veterans and we tell them, you joined the military to serve your country, but you can

become a farmer to serve your community...and that prospect is what Cornell Small Farms and the Farm Ops Project has provided my family.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Supplemental Materials

Hear more about the Rosarios' experience as farmers in NY and participants in our Master Class in this video: https://youtu.be/8AHZ_tSH_0Q

Read more about our veterans' project Farm Ops in this story:
<https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2018/11/cornell-farm-ops-sets-nys-veterans-success>

For more information about the Cornell Small Farms Program's work, visit our website:
<https://smallfarms.cornell.edu/>