

## ***‘You Can Feel the Tension’: A Windfall for Minority Farmers Divides Rural America***

A \$4 billion federal fund meant to confront how racial injustice has shaped American farming has angered white farmers who say they are being unfairly excluded.

Shade Lewis at his cattle farm in LaGrange, Mo., on Friday. Mr. Lewis has spent the past decade scratching out a living as the only Black farmer in his corner of northeastern Missouri. Neeta Satam for The New York Times

**By Jack Healy**

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LaGRANGE, Mo. — Shade Lewis had just come in from feeding his cows one sunny spring afternoon when he opened a letter that could change his life: The government was offering to pay off his \$200,000 farm loan, part of a new debt relief program created by Democrats to help farmers who have endured generations of racial discrimination.

It was a windfall for a 29-year-old who has spent the past decade scratching out a living as the only Black farmer in his corner of northeastern Missouri, where signposts quoting Genesis line the soybean fields and traffic signals warn drivers to go slow because it is planting season.

But the \$4 billion fund has angered conservative white farmers who say they are being unfairly excluded because of their race. And it has plunged Mr. Lewis and other farmers of color into a new culture war over race, money and power in American farming.

“You can feel the tension,” Mr. Lewis said. “We’ve caught a lot of heat from the conservative Caucasian farmers.”

The debt relief is redress set aside for what the government calls “socially disadvantaged farmers” — Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and other nonwhite workers who have endured a long history of discrimination, from violence and land theft in the Jim Crow South to banks and federal farm offices that refused them loans or government benefits that went to white farmers.

The program is part of a broader effort by the Biden administration and Democrats in Congress to confront how racial injustice has shaped American farming, which is overwhelmingly white. Black farm advocacy groups say that nearly all the land, profit and subsidies go to the biggest, most powerful farm operations, leaving Black farmers with little. But in large portions of rural America, the payments threaten to further anger white conservative farmers.

The plans have drawn thousands of enraged comments on farm forums and are being fought by banks worried about losing interest income. And some rural residents have rallied around a new slogan, cribbed from the conservative response to the Black Lives Matter movement: All Farmers Matter.

Mr. Lewis is part of a new generation of Black farmers venturing back into urban plots and small rural farms, driven by a desire to nourish their communities with healthy food and create wealth rooted in the land.

Growing up in LaGrange, a city of 950 along the Mississippi River, Mr. Lewis would scoot a toy John Deere tractor through his mother’s apartment and pretend he was farming the carpet. He joined 4-H, farming and business groups in high school. He started farming at 19, with a few cows and dreams of ending the day with his own dirt on the soles of his boots.

“I worried about him,” said his father, Kevin Lewis. “I watch him and shake my head and say, Is it worth it?”

It can be a tough, lonely life. In 1920, African-Americans owned some 14 percent of the farms in the United States. But after a century of racial violence, foreclosures, migration into cities and farm consolidation, there are just under 49,000 left, representing 1.4 percent of American farmers. Most are concentrated in the Southeast and Texas.

These days, Black farmers have forged online networks that function as their own digital homemade farm bureaus. They celebrate first turnip harvests, ask whether fertilizer made from fish can revive wilting plants and commiserate about navigating government programs and the isolation of being the only Black farmers in their counties.



A \$4 billion fund is part of a broader effort by the Biden administration to confront how racial injustice has shaped American farming, which is overwhelmingly white. Neeta Satam for The New York Times

“You don’t have a network. You don’t have an infrastructure. There’s nothing,” said Sandy Thompson, who started an online directory of Black farmers in 2019 after abandoning a three-year quest to convert a five-acre plot outside San Antonio into a vegetable farm.

Ms. Thompson spent \$20,000 on equipment only to have her mower get stuck in the sandy soil. She called university extension offices, a vital source of guidance for farmers, but said she never got any help.

“We are not competitive with white farmers,” she said. “We need any help we can get.”

Nonwhite farmers, who make up about 5 percent of farmers, say they struggle disproportionately to get loans and government grants. They received less than 1 percent of the billions of dollars in subsidies that flowed into farm country last year under former President Donald J. Trump to compensate farmers hurt by the coronavirus pandemic and the trade war with China.

Mr. Lewis said he spent years struggling financially and searching for credit as he built his cattle herd from a few cows on rented ground to about 200 cows and calves on more than 100 acres of his own land. At first, he said, farm agents did not return his calls. Banks scoffed at his plans. Some days, he could not afford to gas up the red pickup truck that would stall out as he went to fix fences and spread manure in his alfalfa fields. Like many farmers, he works a second job, on power transmission lines.

Getting his government loan paid off now could change everything: He said he could pay down other loans on his livestock. Expand the patchwork of fields he owns to compete against established farmers. Get financing to build a home so he and his wife can escape their one-bedroom apartment.

“It’ll open up a whole lot of doors,” he said. “Maybe these local banks that didn’t have time for minorities will open up to us.”

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Updated May 26, 2021

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- [The mother of a Capitol Police officer who died lobbies G.O.P. to drop their opposition to an inquiry.](#)

But several of his white neighbors in Lewis County, where 77 percent of voters supported Mr. Trump in November, see it differently.

Now, raw conversations about discrimination in farming are unfolding at farmers' markets and on rural social media channels where race is often an uncomfortable subject.

"It's a bunch of crap," said Jeffrey Lay, who grows corn and soybeans on 2,000 acres and is president of the county farm bureau. "They talk about they want to get rid of discrimination. But they're not even thinking about the fact that they're discriminating against us."

Even in a county that is 94 percent white, Mr. Lay said the federal government's renewed focus on helping farmers of color made him feel like he was losing ground, a sign to him of the country's demographic shifts.

"I can't afford to go buy that 5,000-acre piece of ground," he said. "Shade Lewis, he'd qualify to get it. And that's fine. That doesn't bother me. But I can't."



“They’re not even thinking about the fact that they’re discriminating against us,” said Jeffrey Lay, president of the Lewis County Farm Bureau. Neeta Satam for The New York Times

Mr. Lewis senses the tensions when he swings into the gas station to get a Mountain Dew before feeding his cows in the morning and when he scans comments on Facebook or the news on RFD-TV, a kind of CNN for rural America. Conversations with white farmers around LaGrange become strained when they veer from corn prices to the challenges of being a Black farmer in a white industry.

“You can sit here and talk about race and things you’ve been through,” Mr. Lewis said. “They don’t understand. They’ll never understand.”

Many farmers of color have welcomed the debt relief, which was tucked into the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief act, as well as even more ambitious measures proposed by Democrats to grant plots of up to 160 acres to Black farmers.

The Agriculture Department has a longstanding series of programs to serve socially disadvantaged farmers, and estimates that nearly 16,000 will have loans paid off that were made or backed by the government. The agency has sent thousands of letters to eligible farmers, and expects that money could start flowing by early June.

But rural residents upset with the repayments call them reverse racism.

White conservative farmers and ranchers from Florida, Texas and the Midwest quickly sued to block the program, arguing that the promised money amounts to illegal discrimination. America First Legal, a group run by the former Trump aide Stephen Miller, is backing the Texas lawsuit, whose plaintiff is the state’s agriculture commissioner.



Mr. Lewis with his wife, Taylor Lewis, and dogs at their farm. Neeta Satam for The New York Times



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“It’s anti-white,” said Jon Stevens, one of five Midwestern farmers who filed a lawsuit through the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, a conservative legal group. “Since when does Agriculture get into this kind of race politics?”

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack defended the debt-repayment program at a White House briefing this month, saying that earlier coronavirus relief had gone disproportionately to white farmers. He also said the government had never addressed the cumulative effects of years of racial discrimination against farmers.

“We know for a fact that socially disadvantaged producers were discriminated against by the United States Department of Agriculture,” he said. “There is a very legitimate reason for doing what we’re doing.”

The use of race in federal programs has been a subject of litigation for decades, with a narrow majority of the Supreme Court deciding in 1995 that it is permissible only if the programs are “narrowly tailored” to accomplish a “compelling governmental interest.” The courts have generally held that institutions have a compelling interest in remedying their own past discrimination.

Still, the lawsuits have sowed concern and anger through networks of Black farmers. Some have spent decades fighting unsuccessfully to get their share of legal settlements over past discrimination by the Agriculture Department. Now, they are worried that the money set aside for debt repayment could get delayed for years in legal challenges.

“We’re getting the short end,” said John Wesley Boyd Jr., a Virginia bean and grain farmer who is also founder of the National Black Farmers Association. “Anytime in the United States, if there’s money for Blacks, those groups speak up and say how unfair it is. But it’s not unfair when they’re spitting on you, when they’re calling you racial epithets, when they’re tearing up your application.”

Mr. Lewis has about 200 cows and calves on more than 100 acres. Neeta Satam for The New York Times

Mr. Lewis says he tries to look beyond issues of race and has a white wife, white in-laws and white family on his mother's side. But ignoring race can be impossible in a small town like LaGrange, he said. He hunts, fishes and holds conservative views, and curses by saying "son of a buck." He has voted Republican in past elections, but unlike most of his neighbors, he voted for President Biden.

One recent afternoon, a friend, Brad Klauser, who runs his family's large cattle and grain farm, swung by Mr. Lewis's barn to catch up. As they talked bills, rising fuel costs and sky-high land prices, the conversation turned to the debt relief that only one of them was eligible to receive.

"Everybody should have the same option," said Mr. Klauser, who is white, leaning on the flatbed of Mr. Lewis's pickup. "Do you think you're disadvantaged?"

"There's definitely disadvantages," Mr. Lewis replied, saying that officials scoffed when he first tried to get a federal farm loan. "They didn't take me serious."

After Mr. Klauser headed home, Mr. Lewis thought about how the two friends were both trying to reap a profit from the land. "Everyone should have a chance at farming," he said.