



Esteemed members of the Senate,

As elder Lilla Watson once said, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

[The Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust](#) (NEFOC LT), which started in 2018, is a Black-Indigenous-driven land trust that embraces the covenants of collaboration to advance liberation for all. Today NEFOC LT staff and Board of Directors embody diverse skill sets in **cooperative development, climate justice, food and land sovereignty, farming and herbalism, education, and Global Indigenous ways of honoring the land and one another.** NEFOC LT was incubated by [Soul Fire Farm](#) until late 2020, and it is supported by a constellation of values-aligned allied and sibling organizations providing technical and legal support in New York, like [Black Farmers Fund](#), [Farm School NYC](#), [Black Farmers United NYS](#), and [Corbin Hill Food Project](#).

Through our work, we are positively impacting the health and wellness outcomes of BIPOC communities, lands, and non-human beings in the Northeast. We are advancing healing between our communities as a pathway to scalable equitable land access and food sovereignty. We are working to conserve land through protecting **native species ecosystems**, engaging in **regenerative farming and agroforestry**, and advancing environmental policy that upholds the **Rights of Nature, also known as Personhood.**

In our work we prioritize the complex interwoven healing work of honoring Indigenous sovereignty, advancing reparations for the descendants of enslaved people, and making welcome those like me, who have come to these lands out of a hope for a better life.



We are advancing permanent and secure land tenure through **rematriating land^{l1} and seeds**, and creating a safe space for our community through The Northeast Farmers of Color network. The NEFOC Network is an informal alliance of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian farmers making our lives on land in New England and Upstate New York. There are 21 founding member-farms of the network and a total of ~449 farmers of color, land stewards, and earth workers in our network **in which we collectively envision ways to be in reciprocity with land, and by redefining what the word “farmer” stands for.**

Currently, the NEFOC Network exists as a **BIPOC*-only place of exchange** (Black, Indigenous and other People of Color). Its purposes are:

- To break the isolation of being farmers of color in the Northeast by building relationships of mutual respect and joy, the foundation of all other movement work.
- To share skills, resources, and time with one another through mutual aid. To build collaborative projects and initiatives.
- To coordinate our policy demands and catalyze reparations for Black-Indigenous-POC farmers and land stewards.

Recently Betsy Ho, a farmer in Ulster County, said to me: “I’m feeling hopeful. I have to thank you and the NEFOC network for that. I am meeting BIPOC and LGBTQ growers out here because of it. I’ve been isolated from my peeps for so long in following this farm dream”.

Words like the ones that Betsy Ho shared with me show **Why NEFOC LT is necessary in NY.**

Food apartheid, environmental and climate racism, and the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic are symptoms of settler colonialism coupled with industrial capitalism, a chimera whose origin story is the theft, extraction, and subjugation of the land, knowledges, bodies, and resources of Black and Indigenous peoples for the benefit of profit and power.



Access to land is the number one barrier in New York State for people of color to feed our communities with healthy and fresh food. Dispossession and theft of land and labor from Indigenous nations, Black folks and other people of color built the foundation of this state, cutting us off from health, wealth, the use of our language, ancestral knowledge, and a sense of belonging.

Farmland is vanishing across New York as developments encroach on agriculturally viable land. What farmland is still left is threatened by second home owners looking for a safe place to do remote work while COVID-19 is still a threat, agricultural runoff from commodity farms, nutrient depletion in arable soils, shrinking in seed biodiversity, and skyrocketing land prices, all symptoms of late stage capitalism and settler colonialism.

White landowners currently control between 95-98% of the farmland in New York; and receive over 97% of agriculture-related financial assistance. The 2018 Farm Bill, like its policy predecessors, set aside hundreds of millions in commodity subsidies for technology, genetic manipulation, corporatized plant and animal varieties. Moreover, the 2021-22 State Budget in New York, reached record levels for funding agriculture. This record funding secured the work of almost exclusively white-led institutions and organizations that engage with us Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities with the purpose of consuming our knowledge without reciprocity. These organizations have historically used our labor, our stories, and our images to build the social capital that comes from being seen to being engaged with our needs. Their white saviorism also challenges organizations like NEFOC LT by taking up space and funds, tokenizing BIPOC, and disrespecting the concept of reparations by profiting off the process.



In NEFOC, 100% of our work is “For us, by us”. Doing, and knowing together with the self-determined generation of new knowledge is our innovation. By creating a holistic framework founded in relationships, governance, ancestral wisdom, and accountability to each other and the land, we carry forward the innovations and original instructions that informed our collective cosmologies through seed, story, song, ceremony, and food.

Our food is our technology to withstand changes that are beyond our control. By increasing access to fresh, culturally-appropriate food, medicines, and connection to land, our bodies will have an equal chance to adapt and survive. Our diets hold vast opportunities for **creative expression and joyful experiences** that are currently untapped. By reinvesting in an economy that is not only sustainable but regenerative and hyper-local, **we will feed our families, communities, and nations.**

At NEFOC LT we know that **reconnecting BIPOC with the land** fortifies the longevity of our communities’ elders and history holders, contributes to the school success and vitality of our young people, and carries our ancestors’ seed stories – of spirit ecology, resistance, intergenerational collaboration, agricultural ingenuity, and the indelible connection between healthy land and the sustenance it offers.

During the last three months in NEFOC LT we have been mapping the relationships and networks within the BIPOC ecosystem of farmers, land stewards, and change makers in the Northeast that are part of the NEFOC network.

Our early results show that 41% of our NEFOC Network members are in New York. About 45% of them are actively seeking land for human habitat and natural resources management. They are seeking a total of 1490 (Table 1) acres for rural farming within the 5 regions of New York, and about 12 acres for urban farms in cities like Buffalo, Troy, New York and Newburgh.



Table 1. Approximate acreage sought by Northeast Farmers of Color Network members in New York State.

	Black and/or Indigenous Farmers		Other Farmers of Color	
	Rural (acres)	Urban (acres)	Rural (acre)	Urban (acres)
Mid-Hudson^(a)	300	3	255	
Capital^(b)	200		180	4.5
Southern tier^(c)	145		75	
Central^(d)	130			
Western^(e)	120	1.5	55	
New York City^(f)		1.5		1.5
Total (acres)	895	6	565	6

Counties per region: a) Mid-Hudson: Dutchess, Ulster and Orange; b) Capital (including Mohawk Valley): Greene, Columbia, Schenectady; c) Tompkins and Delaware; d) Central: Oswego, Onondaga and Cayuga; e) Western: Erie and Cattaraugus; f) Borough: Bronx and Brooklyn.

They are interested in agricultural enterprises that require long term land tenure like homesteading, fruit trees, nuts, perennial medicinal plants and perennial culinary herbs. Only 11% of New York NEFOC Network members are food distributors or community food hubs, but when asked what are the elements that might support their current and future farming and food sovereignty goals, they mentioned access to cooperative BIPOC-owned spaces where tools, equipment, and technical advice and support could be shared.



In two years of work, we have been providing intersectional services to intersectional farmers of color. Our work embodies solidarity, and we call in our community to first heal together. This essential first step is where we aim to create and embody solutions that simultaneously center Indigenous sovereignty and land Rematriation alongside Reparations and Black liberation. With that work underway, we are then moving respectfully and ethically into collective and consensual land-based projects by building communities based in cooperative economics, regenerative agriculture, and cultural celebration. In the last three months since its creation, the land network program has been providing services to 8 Black Farmers in New York who are starting their farm business, or scaling-up their operation and 6 Spanish Speaking immigrants farmers who are actively seeking land to start their farm businesses after decades of work on other farms.

To us, success isn't only measured by the number of acres preserved or the increase of net income in a farm business, success looks like a willingness to sit together, to learn about each other, and to co-create a vision for success and wellness that includes all our communities. Success will be indicated by our shared capacity to bring together our ancestors' land-based knowledges in common projects, to rematriate lands where we can reconstitute territories of life. We hope in this way to realize our emancipatory vision of sovereignty as rooted in the original instructions for regenerating land and community as an integrated whole. Healing and nurturing BIPOC relations is key to enabling this common and coordinated approach to advancing rematriation and reparation through effective land access coupled with capacity building in terms of knowledge/practice sharing that actualizes the sustainable governance of land based communities.

We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors. Freedom Farm Cooperative^[2] taught us "nobody's free until everybody's free." New Communities Land Trust^[3] taught us that land can not only feed us, it can free us. Seed^[4] & Land rematriation^[1] provide pathways to



food sovereignty, conservation, and cultural preservation. Native Land Conservancy^[5] and First Light Learning Journey^[6] teach that cultural respect easements build bridges of cultural memory in communities. Soul Fire Farm's Land Stewardship^[7] Cooperative illustrates co-creative land relationships. Somatic Abolitionism^[8] is a practice that embodies racial healing from the virus known as white supremacy. The Yurok Tribe^[9] and White Earth Band of The Ojibwe^[10] are holistically conserving through Personhood. Co-creation of climate-resilient is essential^[11] Rematriation indeed rests with the land ^[12].

In NEFOC our ask is simple, 1490 acres (Table 1) to be stewarded by the land stewards of Color in the NEFOC Network that are in New York, and a budget line of \$ 1.1 million in the state Budget to cover the operational cost of our approach^[13], 1) Indigenous community consultation & partnership, 2) Policy and advocacy work, 3) Farmer services and trainings and 4) Land acquisition and linking. It is important to note again, that racial equity and healing begins with the self-determination of Black, Indigenous, and people of color ourselves. It is deeply problematic for "Allied" Organizations dedicated to reparations to use funding that can feed BIPOC to elevate their own social capital. This is a symptom of capitalism and colonialism, replicated as white supremacy culture by hoarding resources. We hope that our 100% BIPOC-driven model is the standard when it comes to racial justice and equity for land access and food sovereignty in New York.

Respectfully,

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