

April 16th, 2021

Dear Committee Members,

Our names are Yolanda Gonzalez and Sam Anderson. We are Urban Agriculture Specialists with Cornell Cooperative Extension's Harvest New York team. Our program provides leadership, technical assistance, and delivery of educational programming for a target audience of over 40 commercial urban farms in NYC, with particular emphasis on underserved communities.

Over the past three years, we have conducted informational interviews with farmers, gardeners, city officials, and non-profit leaders, acquiring first-hand knowledge of urban agriculture and food system needs, issues, and opportunities in New York. As the Covid-19 pandemic took over New York City in March 2020, food insecurity rose sharply from 1.2 million New Yorkers to 1.6 million. Black and Latinx communities suffered the highest mortality rates among New Yorkers, often linked to preexisting medical conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, which are in turn linked to a lack of access to affordable, fresh food. During this unprecedented public health and economic crisis, urban agriculture played a crucial role in providing marginalized communities fresh, healthy food – and, importantly, the opportunity for autonomy over their food source. Several groups, like the Milk Crate Gardens initiative, distributed over 2,700 crates along with seedlings and informational material on DIY container gardening to BIPOC communities. Other groups like the **BronxCommunity Farm Hubs**, a collection of 18 neighborhood gardens and farms spread over the Bronx, came together to support the production and distribution of life-saving, nutritious fresh food. These initiatives are just two among dozens of grassroots efforts all across NYC, including over 50 volunteer-led mutual aid networks, dozens of community fridges, and educational gardens providing emergency food relief.

Despite the amazing ways that these food-based community gardens responded to the crisis by maximizing food production, one aspect that has remained unchanged in NYC is the lack of land tenure opportunities for agricultural uses, and the complete absence of opportunity for urban farmers to own the land beneath their farms due to prohibitive land costs and intense development

pressure. Compared to our Upstate urban counterparts, such as 2nd Street Farm in Troy—situated on land bought for \$300 from an auction—the ability to purchase farmland in New York City is simply not economically accessible. This makes it very difficult for urban farmers to gain equity in their own farms, while leaving them vulnerable to displacement depending on the interests of the landowner.

A comprehensive land use plan for New York State that promotes farm entrepreneurship among BIPOC communities would pave the way for economic empowerment, as well as improved health and wellness outcomes in underserved neighborhoods. Neither the state’s farmland protection program, nor the agricultural districts program, provides access or land protections to urban centered growers. As a matter of policy, including urban growers into programs that traditionally serve the needs of upstate farmers would assist our BIPOC urban growers and foster additional equity into the food system. In addition to intentional urban ag land use policy that directly addresses the racial inequities of our food system, our office would like to express our strong support for continued funding all across New York State for urban agriculture, including increased funding for city government support, and statewide grants like the NYS Community Growers Grant.

Thank you for your consideration of our written testimony. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have of our education and training programs centered in New York City.

Sincerely,

Sam Anderson
Urban Agriculture Specialist
Cornell Cooperative Extension



Yolanda Gonzalez
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