

POLICY BRIEF

Racial equity and the USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture granting program and urban offices



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Summary

Urban agriculture (UA) has long been practiced in the U.S. by socially disadvantaged and low-income people for the purposes of subsistence, community and resilience. Government support for UA, however, has waxed and waned, including in city and federal policy. The 2018 farm bill established the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP) with the mission to encourage and promote “urban, indoor, and other emerging agricultural practices” (Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, Title XII, Sec. 12302). The inclusion of UA in federal agriculture policy was a welcome change for many urban farmers and gardeners who had long sought recognition of urban production. Yet, historical discriminatory policies and practices on the part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have led some farmers and advocates to be wary of

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Author Note

The full study findings were previously published as a publicly available final report (Reynolds et al., 2024).

the department, and may suggest reticence to engage with USDA programs. This brief shares key findings and policy recommendations from a study that sought to understand the roll-out of the OUAIP and connected programs through a racial equity lens. We used a multimethod data collection approach that included national surveys of UA stakeholders; in-depth interviews with UA stakeholders in two case study cities, New York City and Atlanta; informational interviews with Urban Service Center (USC) Leadership in cities with urban county USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices; GIS mapping of publicly accessible data; review of relevant policy documents; and participant observation, including meetings of the federal-level Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Advisory Committee (UAIPAC). The study was supported through the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center (The Policy Center) at Alcorn State University. In this policy brief, we introduce the urban agriculture provisions in the 2018 farm bill in the context of historical discrimination within the USDA. We then provide a short overview of our 2023–2024 study exploring the establishment and outreach of these provisions among Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFRs) urban stakeholders followed by the key findings. We conclude with a set of policy recommendations, and reflection on how these recommendations may be relevant in 2025 and beyond.

Keywords

urban agriculture, food policy, agriculture policy, USDA, Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, racial equity, farm bill, New York, Atlanta

Abbreviations

Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production.....	OUAIP
Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers.....	SDFRs
Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center at Alcorn State University	The Policy Center
United States Department of Agriculture	USDA
USDA Farm Service Agency.....	FSA
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.....	NRCS
Urban agriculture	UA
Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Advisory Committee.....	UAIPAC
Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production grants	UAIP grants
Urban Service Center	USC

Introduction and Overview of the OUAIP

Over the past 20 years, state and city policies supporting urban agriculture (UA)—the growing of food and nonfood products and the raising of livestock in and around cities (Mougeot, 2006; Smit et al., 1996)—have been gaining momentum. These include the California legislature’s 2013 act to allow cities to provide incentives for commercial production (Reynolds & Darly, 2018) and citywide UA plans in Baltimore in 2013 (Baltimore Office of Sustainability, 2013) and Philadelphia in 2023 (Philadelphia Parks & Recreation, 2023). A handful of cities, including Atlanta in 2015 (R. Stephens, 2019), Philadelphia in 2019 (Jaramillo, 2019), Washington, D.C., in 2020 (Maryland Department of Energy & Environment, 2020), and New York City in 2023 (City of New York, 2022) have also recently created UA director positions in city government.

These city and state policy moves follow a history of waxing and waning government support for urban food production. This includes the Pingree Potato Patches supported by Detroit’s mayor in the late 19th century, Victory Gardening programs during both world wars, such as that at Spelman College (Reese, n.d.), that were supported by the U.S. federal government, and the creation of municipal urban gardening programs beginning in the 1960s. It also includes city administrations’ attempts (at times successful, at times not) to sell city land made previously available to urban gardeners and farmers to the highest bidders, including real estate developers (Reynolds & Cohen, 2016).

In terms of support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), urban agriculture historically has been supported by two key programs. These are the long-standing Master Gardener Program, which since the 1960s has provided horticultural education for home horticulturalists and community gardens, and the now-defunct Urban Gardening Program (UGP), which provided broader support for urban food production in low-income communities from the 1970s to the mid-1990s (Hynes, 1996; J. M. Stephens et al., 1996). However, between the defunding of the UGP (in 1996) and 2018, urban food producers did not have access to a broader scope of services and programs provided by USDA (Reynolds, 2010, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2024).

This changed in 2018. The 2018 farm bill established the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP), with the mission to encourage and promote “urban, indoor, and other emerging agricultural practices” (Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, 2018, sec. 222(a)(3)). The bill also established an Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Federal Advisory Committee (UAIPAC), a competitive grant program for UA, and 10 pilot “urban and suburban county committees” (UCOCs). Seventeen initial UCOCs were announced between August 2020 and June 2022 (USDA, 2020a, 2020b, 2022a). Subsequently, 10 additional UCOCs were announced in July 2023 (USDA, 2023a, 2023b). It was also announced in July 2023 that Urban Services Centers (USCs) would be established and jointly run by the USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in the cities where the 17 first UCOCs are located.

The inclusion of UA in federal agriculture policy in 2018 was a welcome change for many UA practitioners, who had long sought recognition of urban production as legitimate agriculture (Reynolds & Darly, 2018). Yet, historical discriminatory policies and practices on the part of the USDA have led some farmers and advocates to view the department as the “last plantation” (Hoffmann, 2009) and may suggest that these groups may be reticent to engage with USDA programs. Recognizing such dualities, this policy brief explores certain racial equity implications of the 2018 farm bill’s UA provisions, drawing from a study conducted in 2023–2024 and supported by the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center at Alcorn State University (Reynolds et al., 2024).

In this policy brief, we introduce the UA provisions in the 2018 farm bill in the context of historical discrimination within the USDA. We then provide a short overview of our 2023–2024 study exploring the establishment and outreach of these provisions among SDFR urban stakeholders, followed by the key findings. We conclude with a set of policy recommendations, developed prior to the November 2024 general election, and brief reflection of how these recommendations may be relevant in 2025 and beyond.

USDA and Urban Ag through a Racial Equity Lens

The historical context of USDA discrimination has been well documented in legal and formal policy contexts. Examples include several class-action lawsuits against USDA on behalf of Black farmers (Pigford I and II; Cowan & Feder, 2013), Hispanic farmers¹ (Garcia v. Vilsack; Treviño, 2009), Native American farmers (Keepseagle v. Vilsack; Martin, 2010), and women farmers (Love v. Vilsack; Bennett, 2011). Additionally, findings from the USDA’s National Commission on Small Farms in the late 1990s identified discrimination as a significant driver in the decline of small farms in general and “socially disadvantaged” farmers and ranchers—largely U.S. minorities²—in particular (USDA National Commission on Small Farms, 1998). And while the above examples are well-known among many farmers, advocates, and academic researchers, discrimination within USDA also runs deeper than these high-profile cases. This includes histories of the FSA County Committee system being used to maintain white control of farmland alongside the heirs property system (Daniel, 2013; Gilbert et al., 2002), and the offering of agricultural extension services at locations that can be difficult to access by farmers without easy transportation and/or in environments that require access to and comfort in white-dominated spaces (Penniman, 2018; White, 2018).

¹ Current usage in many spaces is Latinx or Latine, but the cited legal cases use the term Hispanic.

² We use the term “minority” in this brief to include diverse groups that are minoritized in U.S. society.

The USDA itself has commissioned dozens of studies and working groups to address discrimination and equity in the department (USDA Equity Commission, 2024), yet policy measures and public contestations pertaining to USDA discrimination and racial equity continue. Notably, after the Biden Administration in 2021 established a loan forgiveness program for Black farmers as recognition of past USDA discriminatory practices (USDA, n.d.-d), a lawsuit was filed against the Biden Administration (also in 2021) on the behalf of white farmers claiming that the loan forgiveness program was discriminatory against white farmers, which ultimately resulted in its repeal (Associated Press, 2024). In 2022, a class action lawsuit was filed on behalf of minority farmers for the repeal of the 2021 program. In recognition of past discrimination, the 2023 Discrimination Financial Assistance Program was created, as part of the Inflation Reduction Act, and allocated US\$2 billion in financial assistance to farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners who reported discrimination in USDA farm lending prior to 2021 (USDA, n.d.-a).

In February 2022, the USDA launched an Equity Commission to “advise the Secretary of Agriculture and provide USDA with an analysis of how its programs, policies, systems, structures, and practices that contribute to barriers to inclusion or access, systemic discrimination, or exacerbate or perpetuate racial, economic, health and social disparities and recommendations for action” (USDA, n.d.-b, para. 3.³ In February 2024, the commission issued its 91-page report (USDA Equity Commission, 2024), which included 66 recommendations to advance equity in the USDA, the first of which is to “institutionalize equity.” While the findings of the 2024 Equity Commission report are not specific to UA, its report provides important context regarding contemporary efforts, during the Biden Administration, to address racial equity in USDA as they may be relevant to the OUAIP. And, while the subsequent administration may not continue the Biden administration’s equity initiatives, the historical precedent is important to document, particularly given the previous Trump Administration’s actions to reorganize the USDA (e.g., by moving the USDA Economic Research Service from Washington, D.C., to Kansas City in 2019 [USDA, 2019; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022]).

Examining This Urban Agriculture Policy Landscape

Within the political, legal, and policy contexts above, we conducted a study (Reynolds et al., 2024) that sought to understand the roll-out of the OUAIP programs through a racial equity lens. A key goal of the study was to propose research-based recommendations to inform future improvement of USDA UA programs such that they contribute more thoroughly to social and economic equity for socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, communities, and landowners in and around urban areas. The study was supported through the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center at Alcorn State University (The Policy Center) via a USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA NIFA) subaward.

At the time of this study, many of the 2018 farm bill UA provisions had been put in place: three cycles (2020, 2021, 2022) of UAIP grants, administered by the NRCS, had been awarded (USDA, n.d.-e); UCOCs had been formed and leadership staff hired to direct USCs within the USDA FSA offices in 17 cities (USDA, 2024)^{4,5}; partnerships with community-based organizations had been established; and the UAIPAC had been formed. However, data were needed on outreach and equity dimensions of the OUAIP’s implementation,

³ The Equity Commission was established following Executive Order 13985 from the Biden Administration in 2021. A subsequent direction in the same year via the USDA in Section 1006 of the American Rescue Plan created the Equity Commission in the department.

⁴ Note that the 2018 farm bill did not mandate or prescribe which agencies should house the UAIP grant program or the UCOCs. These decisions were made upon roll-out, and in terms of legislative statute could in theory change over time. However, this section notes that “Nothing in this paragraph requires or precludes the establishment of a Farm Service Agency office in a county in which a county committee is established under subparagraph (A).”

⁵ In summer 2023, USDA partnered with the nonprofit organization To Improve Mississippi Economics (TIME., Inc.) to spearhead establishment of UCOCs in 10 additional cities, including one tribal government. Given the timing of this development, our study, which was designed prior to this date, did not examine details pertaining to the 10 additional cities.

particularly in light of the USDA's historical discriminatory practices noted above, as well as a potential gap in common contemporary understanding about what UA is. (The 2018 farm bill does not provide a clear definition of UA, and previous research has observed a lack of understanding of the practice, especially as it relates to federal agricultural policy [Reynolds, 2010, 2011]).

The research objectives were organized along two focus areas. First, we aimed to document and understand the county-based USCs as well as understand Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers' (SDFRs', defined below) awareness of and access to the USC services. Second, we aimed to understand SDFR's awareness of and baseline information about the implementation of the UAIP grant program at the national level, study the public lists of grantees, and map the distribution of awardees to date.

The study took place over a one-year period, from June 2023 to May 2024. We used a multimethod data collection approach consisting of an online survey of urban farmers and additional stakeholders, nationally; in-depth interviews with UA stakeholders in two case study cities, New York City and Atlanta; informational interviews with USC leadership in cities with urban county FSA offices; geographic information systems (GIS)-based mapping of publicly accessible data; review of relevant policy documents; and participant observation, including that of UAIPAC meetings. Building on the principal investigator's (PI's) previous work (Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2020; Reynolds & Cohen, 2016), the study used an action research approach that centered racial equity, which included engaging as active participants in professional and social movement settings supporting racial equity in agriculture; and in situ learning (e.g., through field visits) about UA in New York City and Atlanta. The research was approved by The New School's Institutional Review Board.

Terminology

We used the following groupings in our analysis:

Socially Disadvantaged Farmer and Rancher (SDFR). Following the NRCS definition, SDFRs are farmers and ranchers who are "members of a group who have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of that group without regard to their individual qualities. This includes the following groups: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Hispanic" (USDA, 2022a, p. 5).

SDFR/Minority. After consultation with The Policy Center, we use the word "minority" to broadly describe racial and ethnic minority groups discussed in the study.

USC Leadership or USDA Interviewee. We use "Urban Service Center Leadership" and "USDA Interviewee" interchangeably to refer to the USDA USC staff members we interviewed.

Non-USDA Interviewee. We use "Non-USDA Interviewee" to refer collectively to UA stakeholders in this study not representing a USDA agency. Among the *Non-USDA Interviewees* and survey respondents, we make specific reference, where relevant, to "*SDFR/Minority*" or "*Non-SDFR/Minority*" interviewee/respondents.

What This Study Was Not

Many previous studies have documented what UA is; its potential benefits and challenges; and city policy and planning strategies to support it (Bailkey & Greenstein, 2024; Cohen et al., 2012; Cohen & Reynolds, 2015; Draper & Freedman, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 2023; Ilieva et al., 2022; Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds & Gottfried, 2024; Smit et al., 1996). Our study did not further examine characteristics or municipal policy needs of UA.

Key Findings from Our Study on the OUAIP and Racial Equity

Our research uncovered findings ranging from administrative challenges to more structural ones, particularly related to the acknowledgment of the legacy of discrimination on the part of the USDA, summarized as follows:

- Across the surveys and Non-USDA interviews, SDFR/Minority participants were less connected to USDA agencies and programs than were Non-SDFR/Minority participants. This included SDFR/Minority participants having applied proportionately less for USDA grants in general, and for UAIP grants in particular, than had Non-SDFR/Minority participants; and SDFR/Minority participants reporting more negative experiences with USDA and more hesitant attitudes toward the USDA than did Non-SDFRs/Minorities. We also found that SDFRs/Minorities in the surveys and Non-USDA interviewees less frequently reported attempting to contact USDA and that they were more aware of histories of USDA discrimination than Non-SDFRs/Minorities, with many relating personal, family, or community experiences with USDA discrimination.
- We also found that representation on UCOCs and in USDA agency staff was a concern among survey and Non-USDA interviews, including racial and ethnic representation in these bodies and a desire for USDA representatives with “cultural competence” working in specific racial or ethnic urban agriculture communities.
- Among USC Leadership in this study there was awareness of and attitudes about historical USDA discrimination, although at different levels, with some taking proactive steps to confront these legacies. Some interviewees mentioned the need to confront what one characterized as the “sordid history” of the USDA when it comes to discrimination and another expressed a need to “[lean] in” to this history in order to rebuild trust. Others avoided expressing strong views about the historical discrimination.
- We learned about constraints placed on USC outreach to urban SDFRs/Minorities and urban producers by USDA guidelines on external communications, as well as specific outreach strategies used by individual USC Leadership. Constraints were characterized by a reliance on exclusive channels of communication (such as email newsletters that only reach those subscribed to them) and restrictions on the use of social media despite the reality that such channels are increasingly important in reaching diverse audiences. Some USDA interviewees expressed frustration that the limitations hindered their outreach efforts given their hopes to reach more urban farmers, and they engaged in community-based strategies and/or collaboration with local community-based organizations to reach these populations.
- Multiple barriers were discussed by survey respondents and Non-USDA interviewees when applying or considering to apply for USDA UAIP grants and/or attempting to access assistance from USDA. This included grant application and management processes being confusing and/or onerous, especially for farms or organizations with limited staff resources. And among those smaller, SDFR/Minority-led organizations who had learned how to navigate these USDA processes, several reported providing pro bono assistance to other SDFR/Minority farmers in their areas.
- In our observations of the UAIPAC and in the interviews with USC Leadership, we observed a lack of clarity in terms of how UA is defined by USDA, how the FSA (where UCOCs are currently situated) can best serve UA, and whether situating the USCs within FSA is the most effective arrangement. We also observed a disconnect between federal and local levels of the OUAIP and related USDA urban agriculture programs, illustrated by a lack of frequent, consistent communication or collaboration between the USCs, UCOCs, and the UAIPAC and/or OUAIP director.
- Finally, in line with the action research approach in this study, we learned from Non-USDA interviewees and survey respondents about their suggestions for improving USDA’s outreach to SDFRs in urban areas. These suggestions ranged from the very specific (e.g., more transparent deadlines for grant applications) to on-the-ground (hoping for more involvement on the part of USCs in day-to-day UA activities and policy) to structural (e.g., fully confronting the historical legacy of USDA discrimination).

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings above, we developed a set of policy recommendations to improve UA and USDA programs, including as they intersect with the imperative for racial equity. Writing in mid-November 2024, we acknowledge that our recommendations about working toward racial equity in UA may not be in line with the priorities of the presidential administration that will take office in January 2025. Nonetheless, these recommendations may provide useful insight for any ongoing and future actions to address racial equity in USDA urban agriculture programs—at federal, but also state and local levels—in addition to the broader application of our recommendations in state and city policies and government UA programs.

Our recommendations were as follows:

1. Implement OUAIP-wide education and action on USDA legacies of discrimination to confront gaps observed in our study. We recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture mandate that all OUAIP, NRCS urban agriculture staff, FSA urban agriculture staff, USC staff, UCOC members, and UAIPAC members be required to undergo education about USDA's histories of discrimination as a part of their onboarding into any OUAIP position. We also recommended that the OUAIP director convene a working group to examine the 2024 USDA Equity Commission report and develop a strategy and timeline to implement the commission's goal to "institutionalize equity" within OUAIP.
2. Cultivate systematic understanding of urban agriculture and innovative production within and across the OUAIP. We recommended that the OUAIP director work with the USCs and community-based organizations to refine the working definition of UA in USDA programs and policies to ensure systematic and inclusive understandings of the practices and innovations in urban farming and gardening. We also recommended that Congress reconsider the use of "innovative" production in federal UA policy, insofar it is currently used as a catch-all for controlled environment agriculture or high-tech, for-profit production, in order to contribute to an equity-centered approach supporting SDFRs.⁶
3. Reduce administrative hurdles in the UAIP grant program and increase technical assistance with grant writing for Urban SDFRs/Minorities. We recommended that the UAIP grant program be improved in terms of outreach, assistance with grant writing, allowable regranting and subgranting, and accessible application processes for urban SDFRs. To do so, we recommended that the UAIP grant application and reporting processes be simplified, shortened, and redesigned to allow grantees and potential grantees to describe their work in every day, nontechnical language; the OUAIP provide more assistance with grant writing; and UAIP grants continue (as is currently the practice) to not require preliminary fund matching for small producers and nonprofit farms, and allow regranting.
4. Reconsider the institutional location of USCs and UCOCs. Given the historical discrimination in which FSA has engaged (see above in this brief), and the questioning on the part of USC Leadership interviewed for this study about the applicability to UA of the programs that FSA offers, we recommended that the siting of UCOCs within FSA should be reconsidered. Specifically, we recommended that OUAIP examine whether locating the UCOCs in another USDA agency may be more effective and accessible to a broader diversity of UA practitioners.
5. Ensure that USC leadership, staff, and the UCOCs represent the demographics of the urban farming and gardening communities that they serve. We recommended that USDA provide systematic guidance on county election processes and provide and make publicly available UCOC election reports, with detailed demographic statistics on eligible ballots, as is does for non-urban county committees.⁷

⁶ See Guthman and Fairbairn (2024) for an analysis of the potential limitations of controlled environment agriculture and what they discuss as 'agri-food tech.'


⁷ County committees election reports are available from 2002 through 2021 on the FSA website. No reports are therefore available to account for election results after the establishment of the Urban County Committees. See <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/about-fsa/county-committee-elections>

6. Improve and modernize communication and outreach to reach urban SDFRs. We recommended that USDA revise its communications policies to allow local agencies and offices to hold social media accounts to reach broader and more diverse communities of urban farmers; OUAIP provide guidance on outreach to UCOCs to better and more consistently reach SDFRs in their areas and make resources available to follow through on such guidance; and Congress authorize funding for USCs continue to work with FSA community-based organizations for outreach and to better target the communication of information in local areas.

Conclusion

This study was designed in March 2023, and data collection concluded in May 2024. During and immediately following this time period, several changes took place. As noted in this brief, 10 additional urban areas were added to the list of FSA Urban County Committees in mid-2023, (although no Urban Services Centers have been announced for these areas as of this writing). Additionally, in October 2024, FSA announced changes allowing producers to report acreage-based crops at a minimum size of .000001 acre or 0.0000004 hectare (about a 2.5-inch by 2.5-inch or 40 square cm area), a move that expands flexibility in eligibility requirements for FSA services (USDA, 2024). We also observed UAIPAC meetings throughout the period and observed deliberations leading the committee to change recommendations supporting earmarked funding for 1890s (Historically Black) land-grant universities (LGUs) to instead recommend funding for all LGUs; and recommend additional funds for 1890s LGUs.

As of this writing, in early November 2024, the next farm bill has not been finalized. (The 2018 bill ran through 2023, and was extended in November 2023 through September 30, 2024, but is expired as of this writing [USDA, n.d.-c].) Several marker bills addressing UA have been introduced in Congress, and both Senate and House agriculture committees have put forth language and versions of a next farm bill that include urban agriculture (U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry, 2024; House Committee on Agriculture, 2024). We continue to observe this policy landscape, and our analyses will be the subject of future publications.

Finally, the outcome of the 2024 general election suggests that there may be less political will in the near term to prioritize racial equity in UA through federal policy or programs. However, as a research team, we will continue to engage with such efforts through the action-oriented approach to racial equity in urban agriculture that grounded this study. There is much work to do. 

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