



Commitment to Equity

Historical Overview

As an agricultural organization, it is important to recognize that systems of oppression¹ have deep roots in American agriculture—from mass theft of indigenous people’s land, to the enslavement of black and brown people for field labor, to the Homestead Acts that prioritized white land ownership. The effects of these injustices manifest in our current agricultural system, and these same forms of oppression continue today. Among other contemporary injustices, we face: heirs property disputes, credit discrimination, unsafe working conditions and exploited labor in fields and factories, food insecurity and health issues in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, corporate control of markets, and pollution of land. All of these issues will continue unless we explicitly address them. Kentuckians, more specifically, are also struggling from the effects of persistent poverty and rising inequality on a daily basis. The problems of limited economic opportunities, poor health, and political marginalization are among the most severe in the nation. High unemployment, low levels of per capita income, low educational attainment, outmigration, and poor health characterize both rural and urban Kentucky.

Our Roots

Since 1985, Community Farm Alliance (CFA) has built a movement in support of community-based agriculture. CFA’s work has resulted in important gains across the Commonwealth, including amplifying the voices of family farmers and food insecure people. Together, we have influenced statewide policy and worked towards an agricultural system that is sustainable, equitable, viable, and healthy. As an organization that is committed to building grassroots power to achieve this vision, it is critical that we remain self-reflective and continuously re-examine the ways that we are meeting our mission and the ways that we might be falling short. Evaluation is important for us, and over this journey we will be looking closely at what we are doing, who is included in the work, and whose voices are left out of the conversation.

The mission of Community Farm Alliance reads:

We work to organize and encourage cooperation among rural and urban citizens through leadership development and grassroots democratic processes to ensure an essential, prosperous place for family-scale agriculture in our economies and communities. We envision a food and fiber system that provides nutritious food for Kentuckians in a manner that is socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable. We envision a system vital to the state’s economy.

To accompany our mission CFA members adopted the following set of beliefs:

We believe in agriculture founded on sustainable farming methods and traditional practices, in farms that produce products for people rather than commodities for markets.

We believe in the independent family farmer. They are the most reliable, efficient, careful producers of food and fiber. Healthy farms provide a foundation for a strong community.

We believe that all workers and farmers must be allowed a fair return for their labor.

¹ oppression: systems-level discrimination that privileges mainstream identity groups over marginalized identity groups based on access to power

We believe that communities must be economically stable in order to be healthy. That economic stability must be controlled locally.

We believe that all people have the right to organize in order to identify their own long-term needs and to secure those needs. Democracy must be inclusive. All people – regardless of race, income, gender, sexual orientation, age, citizenship status, nationality, or religion – must join together to create responsive policies and prosperous communities.

During the 2016 Annual Meeting, CFA leadership recognized the need to reorient our work around an equity lens, thinking more critically about how CFA unintentionally reproduces inequalities through its practices, culture, and structures. CFA recognized that it no longer resonated strongly with people of color and that the urban-rural divide seemed stronger than ever. Thus, we pledged to not only work on diversity, not only be inclusive, but to intentionally and proactively (re)create an organization of equity for all.

As a first step, CFA members, Board, and staff adopted the following resolution at the 2016 Annual Meeting: *We recognize that CFA has become unintentionally very white; therefore we resolve to build equity with people of color and other disadvantaged populations through direct engagement and grassroots allies.* In March 2018, CFA created the Leadership Development committee with staff, Board, and leader members that is actively working on our equity initiative. As a result, CFA hosted our first all-day equity training for CFA staff, Board, and leaders in January of 2019. We believe this work starts at the internal level and that to do it well we need to all be on the same page and have a basic understanding of the history and the roles we play. The 2018 Annual Meeting continued this work with a strong focus on equity and justice in all of the sessions.

The journey is moving CFA forward on the Pathway to Change and towards our long-term priority of ensuring that *Kentucky has an organized and diverse family farm, food, and fiber coalition that effectively influences and creates political, social, and economic change.* This Statement of Commitment is a critical part of the process.

Statement of Commitment

As we draw from our own organizational history for inspiration, we also look to national leaders who have come before us to envision a way forward towards a more equitable food and farm system. Fannie Lou Hamer, a prominent civil rights leader and community organizer in the South, argued that “nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” Hamer founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative in 1969 which aimed to empower poor black farmers and sharecroppers, and to unite them with poor whites in the struggle towards political and economic independence and food sovereignty for all.

Hamer’s work is a reminder that many injustices that defined her time still characterize our current food and farming system. These injustices—including land theft, worker exploitation, food apartheid², and more—are rooted in class, gender, and race disparities. We believe that to address these deeply rooted injustices, we must take direction from affected communities and work to dismantle the systems of oppression that allow these injustices to continue. We also know that we cannot solve or attempt to solve every problem as a single organization, and so we must work together with other organizations to build broad-based capacity and seek solutions.

If we are serious about practicing deep democracy³, building power through inclusive grassroots organizing, and ensuring a socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable agricultural system in Kentucky—then we

² food apartheid: alternative terminology to food deserts. “Food desert” is static and suggests that those designated communities are devoid of resources, skills, ideas, etc. and that poor food access is a natural phenomenon. Alternatively, “food apartheid” is deliberate and recognizes that there are active systems at play that cause certain communities to face these issues.

³ deep democracy puts more political power in the hands of the people; it leverages citizen power and promotes cooperation and compromise

must commit to bringing equity and anti-oppressive practices to the forefront of our organizing work in a way that permeates everything we do.

This statement is a pledge to move beyond words and commit to an intentional, proactive strategy that addresses issues of equity and diversity within our organizational culture and the systems and institutions we seek to influence.

With this understanding, CFA commits to take steps that:

- a) allow us to regularly evaluate and address equity concerns within our organizational culture and structures
- b) will help educate us as individuals to better recognize the systems of power and oppression that are at play in our work, both historically and in the present
- c) ensure that the voices of historically marginalized and socially disadvantaged populations⁴ and affected communities are always elicited, heard, and brought to the forefront of our conversations
- d) embrace equity and justice on a broader level by acknowledging the specific barriers that accompany classism, racism, sexism, geography, xenophobia, ableism, etc. in Kentucky
- e) prioritize strategic collaborative partnerships with organizations that are addressing issues of equity both within and outside of our sector
- f) will help us to determine measures of success for this work, including setting up a system of accountability and periodic re-evaluation of our progress and goals

Closing

We are committed to building a more equitable agricultural system in Kentucky. This commitment itself is not the work; this document will not challenge oppression nor move us towards equity and inclusion. We can only do that through our actions. This *Commitment to Equity* is a starting point for this journey. We recognize that this document will continue to evolve as more people participate in shaping this growth process and as our organization moves to intentionally weave equity into all that we do.

We understand that this work, as with any organizing that we do, requires significant buy-in from our members and community. We know that while this work may be difficult for some, we are committed to supporting everyone on this journey. Embracing equity and inclusion as a lens for what we do will improve the overall effectiveness of our organization.

Let us follow the lead of the great farmworker organizer, Dolores Huerta, who said, "Walk the street with us into history. Get off the sidewalk." Systems change does not happen in a day, a month, a year. Rather, it requires the steady march of many feet. We are here for the long haul, and now is the time to begin moving forward—together.

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⁴ socially disadvantaged populations: the USDA definition includes people whose group identities subject them to racial, ethnic, and gender prejudice