

Establishing a Commission on Farm Transitions

This document, focusing on the establishment of a Commission on Farm Transitions by USDA, is one in a five-part series of transition recommendations from [AFT](#) to the Biden Administration. The full set of recommendations can be [found here](#). Please note that these recommendations are not intended to represent the full breadth of policies supported by AFT. Rather, they were chosen because they could be swiftly implemented without congressional action. AFT recognizes that there are many other challenges facing agriculture and we look forward to working with the Biden Administration, Congress, and other stakeholders to achieve lasting solutions.

SUMMARY

The US is undergoing a seismic shift in farmland ownership that will impact American agriculture for generations to come. According to [AFT research](#), seniors aged 65 and older own more than 40% of the agricultural land in the United States. This suggests an impending transfer of more than 370 million acres of farmland in the next two decades.¹ Public policy will play a pivotal role in determining how and to whom this land will transfer, and whether this vital national resource is accessible to a new generation of producers, or simply paved over for development.

Recognizing this threat, Congress authorized a “Commission on Farm Transitions—Needs for 2050” in the 2018 Farm Bill. The 10-member Commission is tasked with studying issues impacting the transition of agricultural operations to the next generation of farmers and ranchers. Intended for completion within one year of enactment, the Commission has not yet been constituted. The Commission represents an excellent opportunity for the Biden Administration to identify and develop support for strategies that will help older farmers and landowners retire and help a new, diverse generation of producers build strong and successful farm enterprises.

BACKGROUND

More than four times as many farmers and ranchers are age 65 and older as are under age 35. In most states, seniors comprise at least a third of the farming population. Regionally, the trend is most pronounced across southern states: in Texas, more than 38% of the state’s producers are over age 65, versus fewer than 6% who are under 35.²

Despite the aging of American producers and the current substantial transition of land, finding and affording appropriate agricultural land is still a major barrier for young and beginning farmers and ranchers, according to an [AFT report](#).³ Most farmland is not sold on the open market. According to the most recent Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land (TOTAL) Survey, of all of the land expected to be transferred between 2015 and 2019, only one-

quarter was expected to be sold to non-relatives.⁴ In addition, the land that is sold is often only affordable to well-capitalized, well-established buyers.

Agricultural land loss contributes to this challenge. AFT's research in *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States* shows that between 2001 and 2016, 11 million acres of land were paved over or converted to uses that threaten the future of agriculture – a rate of 2,000 acres of productive agricultural land a day.⁵ Not only does this loss limit opportunities for the next generation of farmers and ranchers, it places at risk the stability of our food system, our ability to mitigate the impacts of climate change through natural climate solutions, and much more.

The 2018 Farm Bill authorized a “Commission on Farm Transitions—Needs for 2050” to elevate and address the challenges of this pending generational transfer of agricultural land, businesses, and infrastructure. Congress envisioned that appointments to the Commission would be made within 60 days of the bill’s passage. Fortunately, the Commission is authorized through September 30, 2023, meaning that there is still a window of opportunity.

The enabling language for the Commission provides an automatic appointment to the Commission of the USDA Chief Economist, and gives the Secretary of Agriculture, and the House and Senate Agriculture Committees, each three appointments. The Commission is tasked with a broad-ranging study of issues impacting the transition of farm operations to the next generation of farmers and ranchers, including:

- The availability of quality land and necessary infrastructure, affordable credit, adequate risk management tools, and apprenticeship and mentorship programs
- The state of current agricultural asset transfer strategies and potential improvements
- Incentives to facilitate agricultural asset transfers to the next generation of farmers and ranchers, including an assessment of how current federal tax policy impacts lifetime and estate asset transfers, and impacts individuals seeking to farm who do not have a farm family lineage, as well as recommendations for new or modified incentives
- The effectiveness, and potential improvements, of transition assistance programs and incentives

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Appoint and convene the Commission on Farm Transitions within the first 100 days in office.

To ensure that the findings of the Commission on Farm Transitions informs the development of the 2023 Farm Bill, it is important that its work commence as quickly as possible. For this reason, we recommend that the Commission be constituted within the Biden Administration’s first 100 days in office.

2. Encourage the Commission to place special emphasis on socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

In 1910, 15 million agricultural acres were Black-owned. Today, roughly 3 million acres are Black-owned.⁶ The pending transfer of millions of acres of farmland and ranchland offers an opportunity to re-diversify agriculture. While the Commission should focus on the challenges facing all next-generation farmers, the Commission should place special emphasis on identifying and addressing the unique challenges facing next-generation Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers and ranchers in their ability to inherit or purchase agricultural assets, including land. AFT strongly encourages USDA to ensure that BIPOC farmers and ranchers are well-represented on the Commission.

[American Farmland Trust](#) is the only national organization that takes a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on the land itself, the agricultural practices used on that land, and the farmers and ranchers who do the work. We look forward to serving as a resource to the Biden Administration. For more information about these and other recommendations, contact AFT Policy Director Tim Fink at tfink@farmland.org.

¹ J. Freedgood, M. Hunter, J. Dempsey, and A. Sorensen, “Farms Under Threat: The State of the States.” American Farmland Trust, 2020. <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/farms-under-threat-the-state-of-the-states>

² J. Freedgood et al, “Farms Under Threat: The State of the States.”

³ J. Freedgood and J. Dempsey, “Cultivating the Next Generation: Resources and Policies to Help Beginning Farmers Succeed in Agriculture.” American Farmland Trust, 2014. https://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/AFT_BF_08-27-2014lo_0.pdf

⁴ D. Bigelow, A. Borchers, and T. Hubbs, “U.S. Farmland Ownership, Tenure, and Transfer.” USDA ERS, August 2016. http://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/TOTAL_ERS_Aug2016.pdf

⁵ J. Freedgood et al, “Farms Under Threat: The State of the States.”

⁶ M. Chen, “Black Lands Matter: The Movement to Transform Heirs Property Laws.” The Nation, September 25, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/heirs-property-reform/>