



**Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice Alongside Continuing Inequalities in
our Food Systems Hearing Testimony**

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Richard A. Ball, Commissioner

New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Department of Agriculture and Markets on New York State's efforts to diversify agriculture, address inequalities in our food system, and combat food insecurity in our communities.

There is no question that we need to do more to increase diversity and equity in the agricultural industry and food system. The 2017 Census of Agriculture provided sobering statistics on this issue: in New York State, only 0.5% of farms are operated or owned by Black or African American producers, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) producers in total can be found on only 1.94% of farms in New York. There are also great disparities in the distribution of, or access to, healthy, local food in some communities. COVID-19 has exacerbated these long-standing inequalities, particularly as they relate to the food supply chain and those who have experienced greater food insecurity during the pandemic.

It is time that we take decisive steps forward toward a sustainable and equitable agricultural industry. New York State has already begun laying the groundwork toward a solution. First, Governor Cuomo immediately recognized the challenges our families were facing because of the COVID-19 pandemic and announced the creation of the Nourish New York program in May 2020. The program provided funding for food banks and providers in every corner of the State, helping them to purchase surplus agricultural products our farmers and producers were struggling to sell and deliver it to families in need. The program has been extended twice, with an investment of \$60 million to date, and thanks to the New York State Budget and our partnership with all of you, Nourish New York has now been extended a third time, through 2021, with an additional commitment of \$25 million.

So far, Nourish New York has helped New York's emergency food providers purchase more than 26 million pounds of agricultural products, such as New York State milk, yogurt, cheese, vegetables, fruit, meat, eggs, and more and deliver what equates to nearly 21.7 million meals to New York households. Our food banks have worked hard to connect those in need with New York producers, and reach our hardest hit communities, holding thousands of food distribution events in our urban centers as well as rural areas.

Recently, the Department joined state, federal, and local partners to help announce the start of construction for the New York State Regional Food Hub (The Hub). This critical project is the result of the NYS-NYC Regional Food Hubs Task Force, which, as Commissioner, I co-chaired in 2015. When complete, the new facility will strengthen the local food economy and improve access to healthy and affordable foods for low-income communities. In fact, The Hub will allow GrowNYC to increase the amount of food they distribute to a total of 20 million pounds, benefitting local farmers and underserved New York communities, and ensuring the capability to respond to potential future emergency food needs for New Yorkers.

In addition, through several other State initiatives, such as Vital Brooklyn, we are collaborating with BIPOC community leaders to inform food programs and advocate for equitable local food system investment, which includes new mobile markets, food insecurity screening for seniors, youth run farmers markets, and community gardens.

The Department is also working closely with organizations and leaders that advocate for racial equity to advance their work and address decades of disparity and inequality in agriculture. Building on the ongoing conversations the Department has had with the BIPOC community, in early 2020, Governor Cuomo announced a proposal to increase diversity in the New York agricultural industry as part of his 2020 State of the State agenda. This proposal built on discussions and listening sessions with BIPOC farmers and community advocates that began in 2019. Since then, the Department has convened the Diversity and Racial Equity Working Group, which is comprised of vital New York State agricultural leaders, farmers, growers, food system thinkers, educators, trainers, institutions, and advocates. The group has held half a dozen meetings, and explored many areas, including existing economic development programs, finding that much more work is needed to provide a more equitable playing field.

The meetings have been difficult at times, as effecting change is never easy or comfortable. However, the personal experiences and insights shared by the workgroup members have provided many of us with new perspective and understanding, and a critical opportunity to advocate for the BIPOC community. The Work Group ultimately focused its recommendations for improvement and investment on four key areas: access to infrastructure and resources; access to education and training; access to capital; and access to land. The Working Group's report is currently being finalized, and the Department is committed to not only helping implement the recommendations but also to build a stronger agricultural community from these newly formed relationships.

Moving forward, the Department is wholly committed to ensuring that all New Yorkers have access to the food they deserve and to uplifting and advancing the BIPOC community in our shared industry.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets.

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