

Now disappearing: Black farmers must be protected

Written by John W. Boyd, Jr., NNPA Guest Columnist
Friday, 31 July 2009 15:20

Black farmers in the United States are disappearing. In the 1920s, there were approximately 900,000; today there are only 18,000, accounting for less than 1 percent of America's farmers.

But the staggering 98 percent decline in Black farm ownership does not tell the whole story: when each farm closed, those farmers, their families and their employees all lost a way of life that had existed for generations.

When I started the National Black Farmers Association in 1995, I, like quite a few farmers in my community, was on the brink of losing my farm. As a third-generation Black farmer, I wanted to save my own farm and preserve my heritage, but I also wanted to protect the first and oldest occupation for Black Americans.

Today's Black farms primarily are small enterprises with particular needs for the crops we grow. Our productivity comes from our enterprise and hard work, aided by biotechnology innovations that help our crops tolerate certain herbicides and protect them against insects.

Biotechnology helps reduce labor costs by eliminating the need to use more labor-intensive farming methods, reducing pesticide use and insect problems; and increasing crop yields. Because no two crops are alike, having access to the best choice of biotechnology innovations is critical to meeting the challenge of feeding an ever-increasing world population.

For most of the NBFA's history, racial discrimination was the biggest threat to the livelihood of Black farmers. More recently, however, anti-competitive conduct by monopolists and reduced competition for the biotechnology that we need has emerged as a major obstacle. Lack of choice in agricultural markets was a topic of discussion at the NBFA's recent Legislative Conference.

One area we identified in which we desperately need more competition is for biotechnology used in seeds, because it currently is controlled by one company: Monsanto. Monsanto is the Microsoft of agriculture: the dominant company that controls the key biotechnology that all farmers need. The St. Louis-based company's recent lawsuit to block DuPont and Pioneer from introducing their new biotechnology with Monsanto's biotechnology in soybeans is only one of the practices it has used to preserve its monopoly and attempt to intimidate customers and competitors.

A few years ago, following the NBFA's public opposition to Monsanto's acquisition of Delta and Pine Land, then the largest cotton seed company in the United States, Monsanto used those practices against us. Several of my colleagues and I were unable to purchase seed — the lifeblood of any farm — from our local retailer because of threats to penalize the retailer financially.

We were forced to drive to a different state to do so. But the NBFA members and I will not be intimidated or silenced. We fought the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure and obtain civil rights for Black farmers, and we will fight for our rights to be free from monopoly tyranny.

Monsanto's monopoly limits farmers' choices and threatens our livelihoods. But America's

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antitrust laws were enacted to protect us — including farmers — from this very situation. These laws are premised on the belief that competitive markets produce the best products, and they need to be enforced.

I welcome the Oklahoma Attorney General's recent comments expressing concern about the impact of Monsanto's lawsuit, and I ask him and other state attorneys general to take action to protect farmers and consumers. Farmers ought to be able to obtain the technology that we need for our crops regardless of the source of that technology.

Restoring competition to agriculture will allow Black farmers to choose products that best suit our needs, making it a little easier for us to stay on our land.

John W. Boyd, Jr. is president and founder of the National Black Farmers Association. He grows corn, soybeans and wheat in southern Virginia.