



Harvesting Justice

How Black Farmers Used Pigford Cash Compensation to Uplift Their Land and Legacy

By: Irma Zamarripa, Thomas Shapiro, Sylvia Stewart

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Seeding Justice

In the United States, cash transfers have played a significant role in addressing poverty, economic inequality and historical injustices by providing direct financial support to those who policies have systematically marginalized. These transfers aim to alleviate immediate burdens, foster economic stability, and offer a path toward justice. One of the most historic examples of this in agriculture is the Pigford Consent Decree of 1999, which awarded cash as compensation to Black farmers who suffered decades of discrimination by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). This ruling was not just a financial remedy—it symbolized an acknowledgment by US justice system of the systemic barriers and outright racial discrimination that limited Black farmers’ access to loans, land, and resources. For many, these funds represented an opportunity to reinvest in their farms, address generational debt, and honor the resilience of their families, underscoring the potential of cash transfers to provide restitution and renewal in the face of long-standing injustice. While the adjudication brought hope, it also underscored the immense challenges Black farmers faced in sustaining their livelihoods and legacies.

The Pigford Project is a research initiative by the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/LAF and the Institute for Economic and Racial Equity (IERE) at Brandeis University which seeks to the better understand the legacy and impact of *Pigford v. Glickman* and *In re Black Farmers Discrimination Litigation*, two of the largest civil rights class action lawsuits in the history of the nation, and apply those lessons to better support the lives and livelihoods of Black farmers today.

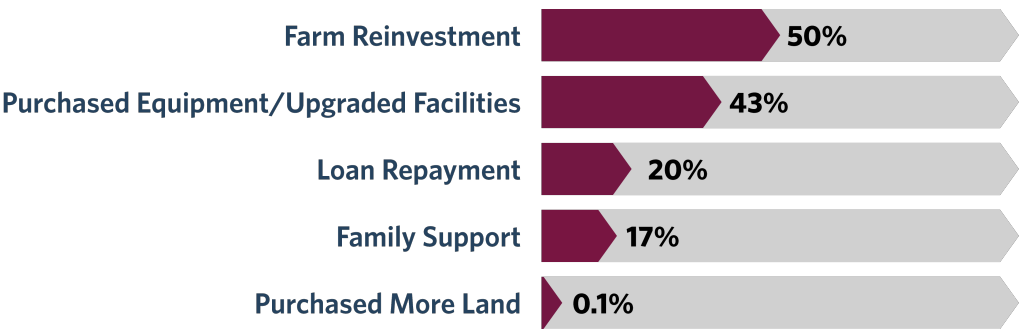
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Just as crops can fail due to poor conditions, reparative justice efforts can fall short because of corruption, lack of resources, or flawed execution. This leads to unmet expectations and societal disillusionment. Attempts to achieve justice may provoke backlash or resentment, particularly among those who perceive reforms as a threat to their privilege or status. Some harvested crops go to waste. Similarly, justice efforts may squander resources, time, or opportunities due to inefficiency, bureaucracy, or mismanagement. The Pigford case underscores the complexities and potential pitfalls in the pursuit of justice, illustrating that outcomes both can advance justice and diverge from intentions in significant and often detrimental ways.

Overview of Findings

The Pigford funds held significant potential for recipients to reinvest in their farming operations and address financial burdens. Among the questions we asked claimants was how they utilized money from the class action resolution. While not all respondents chose to speak in detail about using the compensation money, our conversations with Pigford Claimants and their descendants revealed three major findings regarding how they utilized these funds. First, many claimants who detailed what they used Pigford claims funds for (hereafter referred to as respondents) chose to spread the disposition funds around to meet the varied needs of their families and farming operations, with over 1/3 of respondents noting that they used funds to meet multiple needs. Second, most respondents we interviewed reinvested the funds back into their farming operations, whether to pay off existing loans they had at the time, purchase machinery and additional land, or offset costs like salaries for farm workers. Finally, some respondents noted using funds as an opportunity to help family members who established the farm or worked to sustain it across generations. Table 1 details the spending categories for which Pigford claimants utilized resolution funds.

Table 1: How Respondents Detailed Using Funds from the Pigford Cases



Settling with the Past

Black farmers in the United States have faced generations of systemic discrimination within the agriculture sector, from unequal access to loans and resources to outright denial of opportunities for land ownership and farm expansion. One participant struggled to access basic information about USDA loans, and after repeated unsuccessful applications and no response, he was forced to

leave the farming industry and pursue a different career. This was the case for many Black farmers, and the repercussions of discriminatory practices left many in debt and ill for decades to come. Moreover, many claimants fell short of the high bar that the ruling set for court-ordered debt relief (see our previous report [They have to do something about that debt...](#)).

Despite these barriers, many farmers worked tirelessly to sustain their farms, often relying on family and community efforts to maintain the land and livelihood. For some successful claimants of the Pigford receiving compensation was not only a step toward justice but also an opportunity to give back to family members who had supported the farm through years of adversity. Dana Eubanks used her funds to support her mother, who had passed the farm down to her and was relying on Social Security benefits to make ends meet. She described it as “a way of giving back,” viewing the financial help as both a gesture of gratitude to her mother and a means to provide much-needed support for her mother’s physical and emotional well-being after facing years of discrimination in the farming industry. These acts of gratitude honored the collective resilience and sacrifice that allowed the land to be preserved across generations.

The challenges faced by Black farmers, compounded by decades of systemic discrimination, left deep scars across generations, affecting not only their ability to succeed but also their ability to pass down their legacies. While the Pigford adjudication offered some compensation, it often fell short of healing the long-lasting damage (see our previous report [Tending Repair](#)). For many, the funds served as both a bittersweet acknowledgment of the hardship endured and an opportunity to support the family members who had long been the backbone of their farming operations. Because of the structure of the settlement, if an eligible farming operation was held between multiple family members, the \$50,000 was divided among multiple family members, regardless of who was actively tending the land. This left some feeling that justice was not fully served, as the amount was spread thin, highlighting the ongoing inequities faced by Black farmers and their families. Around 17% of respondents who detailed how they spent funds shared a portion of funds with family, either in recognition of their contribution or because of shared title.

Despite the challenges and limitations of the ruling successful claimants found ways to make the best use of the funds they received. Close to half of respondents reinvested to grow their farming operations, purchasing essential equipment like combine tractors and upgrading machinery to improve efficiency. Others focused on enhancing their land, installing irrigation systems, or acquiring new parcels of land to expand their operations. Some used the funds to purchase fertilizers, seeds, wheat, and livestock, ensuring they could continue farming and cultivating their land. Additionally, many claimants offset costs for farm workers, paid laborers, and established poultry houses to diversify and strengthen their agricultural businesses, providing much-needed support to sustain their livelihoods.

Compensation for farm operations owned in common by multiple family members was distributed evenly between them per the consent decree, regardless of who was farming the land.

Most notably, 20% of respondents used the funds to address long-standing debt, which had been a major barrier to their ability to sustain and grow their farms. Many applied the funds to settle existing loans, with some specifically using the money to pay off large debts, such as a \$40,000 loan that had been a significant financial burden. In addition to clearing these debts, the funds helped cover essential farming expenses, including purchasing equipment and covering operational loans. By reducing or eliminating their financial obligations, claimants were able to regain some financial stability, giving them a better chance to reinvest in their farms and secure their future in agriculture.

Tending to the Future

The Pigford case serves as a profound case study in the potential and limitations of cash transfers as a tool for redress and restitution. For Black farmers, these funds provided a critical opportunity to reinvest in their farms, address generational debts, and support the family members who sustained their agricultural legacies through decades of systemic discrimination. While the compensation fell short of fully remedying the deep injustices faced, it offered a tangible acknowledgment of the harms endured and a chance to reclaim a measure of economic stability and dignity.

More broadly, Pigford illustrates how cash transfers can serve as a bridge toward justice for historically marginalized communities. By providing immediate financial relief, cash transfers can empower individuals to overcome entrenched barriers and rebuild their livelihoods. Yet, this litigative justice approach also underscores the need for systemic change to accompany these measures—ensuring that restitution is not merely a one-time payment, but part of a broader commitment to equity, access, and the dismantling of discriminatory systems. True justice requires both material support and structural transformation to foster lasting opportunities for historically marginalized groups to thrive.

