

# Recognizing and Dismantling Systemic Racism at Northeast SARE

## Introduction

Systemic Racism (also called structural or institutional racism) is the complex interactions of practices, ideologies, and programs that produce and perpetuate inequities for racial minorities (Gee, 2011). These macro-level mechanisms are independent of intentions and actions of individuals, so that even if individual racism is not present, inequalities for racial minorities continue to exist.

Systemic racism has shaped the history of the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. Established by Congress in 1985 and first funded in 1988, SARE was designed by and for privileged entities in agricultural research and education, specifically 1862 land grant institutions and their key state and federal partners.

The SARE legislation addressed practices that improved the economic, environmental, and social well-being in agriculture, but there was no acknowledgment that a truly sustainable food system can only be achieved with full inclusion of people with different cultural and scientific experiences, needs, and perspectives.

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Agriculture cannot be sustainable without being equitable. SARE is one of many USDA grant programs now trying to redress systemic racism.

People of color's contributions to agriculture in the Northeast have been critical. Long before the colonization of the northeastern United States, Indigenous cultures maintained food sovereignty. The agricultural labor of enslaved Black people formed the foundation of U.S. wealth. Latino people and other foreign-born farm employees of color produce most of the food we eat.

After 30 years of grant making, the Northeast SARE Administrative Council launched a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice (DEIJ) Strategic Planning process to explore equity in our grant making. The strategic planning process brought to light the considerable impact of systemic racism in our grantmaking.

This report details the process, results and recommendations of the DEIJ Strategic Plan passed by the Administrative Council in February, 2022.

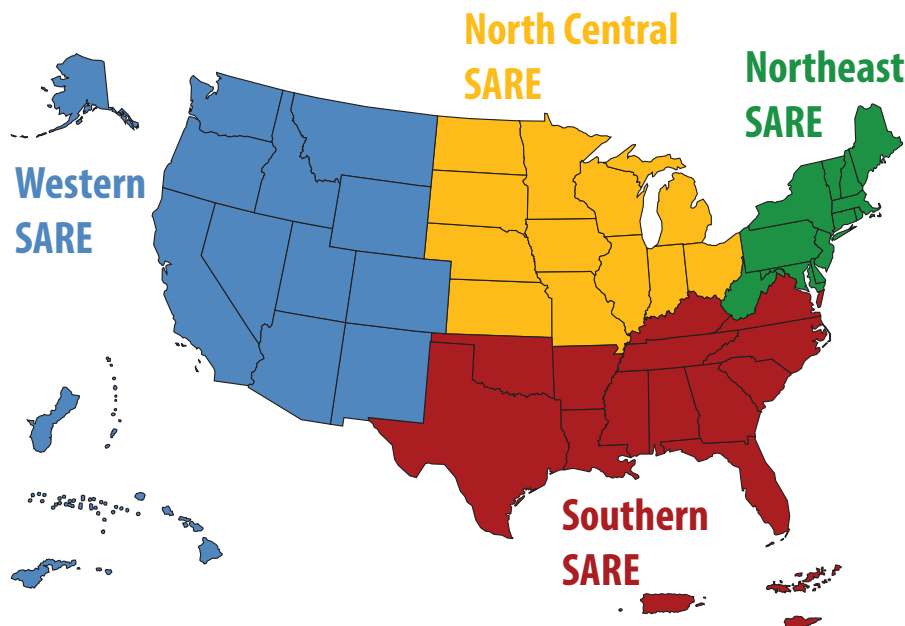
## Key findings:

- 1) The current grant application and funding reimbursement model privileges white communities with access to capital.
- 2) Northeast SARE has inequitably allocated resources to 1862 land grant institutions without providing equitable access to marginalized communities.
- 3) Northeast SARE leadership has never included Tribal representation in state programs despite being legislated to do so.

There is no way to accurately measure the continuing harm caused by disproportionality funding privileged communities; an honest reckoning of our failure to embrace a truly sustainable food system is an essential part of our journey to repair those harms.

In sharing our shortcomings and strategies for more equitable grant making, we are striving to stay true to the best part of our history – embracing knowledge that improves agriculture in the Northeast.

Northeast SARE offers grants and education to farmers, agricultural service providers, researchers and others to address key issues affecting the sustainability of agriculture throughout our 12-state region. The program is funded by USDA and administered by the University of Vermont. Funding allocations and many operating policies are determined by the 20 member regional Administrative Council (AC) representing different parts of the food system.



# Historical Context

## Structural Racism and the USDA



### Recognizing and Dismantling Systemic Racism at Northeast SARE

Structural racism impacts the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funding and grant programs to this day. The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is one such USDA grant program.

SARE began in 1988 with the Farm Bill and was legislated with two main purposes: to fund research and education in sustainable agriculture, and to support the training of professionals in sustainable agriculture.

Northeast SARE is one of four SARE regions and currently receives \$10M annually from the USDA.

Structural racism in the USDA, and the land grant system, has impacted the amount and type of grant funding available to people of color and other underserved communities.

Slavery, Tribal land theft, and farmworker exploitation are all aspects of agriculture deeply

rooted in racism and oppression.

Within the USDA, largely Black, Indigenous and Latino farmers have been systematically discriminated against. The Pigford I and II (1999-2010), Keepseagle (1999-2011) and Garcia (1997- ) cases are all lawsuits conducted in just the past few decades which concluded that these groups had been systematically discriminated against.

The history of structural racism in the USDA includes discrimination against people of color in predatory lending, lack of access to capital, and lack of access to other USDA programs and resources. This has contributed to the removal of

farmers of color from the land.

In 1920, Black farmers owned 14% of U.S. farms (Banks, 1986). Today, they own 1.4% (2017 US Agricultural Census). White people own 98% of all private agricultural lands in the United States today (Gilbert et al, 1999, Horst and Marion 2019).

In 2021, United States Secretary of Agriculture, Thomas Vilsack said; "racism and discrimination have no place at the Department of Agriculture... I am committed to rooting it out and establishing a relationship with producers that is built on a commitment to equity, trust and customer service." (USDA Press Statement Release No. 0058.21) Northeast SARE is committed to this same mission.



## Land Grant Institutions

1862 land grant institutions, and to some extent 1890 land grants and other historically Black colleges and universities, are founded on land stolen from Tribes (Lee, 2020). 1994 Tribal colleges and universities are also considered Land Grants, though they are funded by an endowment.

USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture  
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## Recognizing and Dismantling Systemic Racism at Northeast SARE

We recognize the ability to collect data is a privilege, and that we must do a better job acquiring and analyzing data to better understand challenges and opportunities and how well we address them going forward. SARE has only consistently collected applicant demographic data since 2020, and grantee demographic data since 2016 (when the national grant management system was implemented). We now face the challenge of identifying, collecting and analyzing new data that better reflects reality for all communities of farmers, educators and researchers in our region.

### Process of Discovery

Fall, 2020: The Northeast SARE Administrative Council conducted a search and hired ResourceFull Consulting for a 3-year contract (2020-2024) to prepare a DEIJ Strategic Plan and begin to implement it.	May – September, 2021: ResourceFull consultants conducted 19 interviews, 8 focus groups, received 390 survey responses (32% response rate), analyzed SARE grant management system data (2016-2022 ) of thousands of applicants and grants, and provided 6 presentations about results to Northeast SARE stakeholders.	February 24th, 2022: The Administrative Council adopted the DEIJ strategic plan, with 17 voting in favor and one abstaining.	July 2022: Northeast SARE Administrative Council voted to pause grant making in 4 of our 6 grant programs for 1 year in order to give staff capacity to support implementation of the strategic plan with working group members recruited from communities of color across the Northeast.
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April –May 2021: A 12 member, region-wide steering committee oversaw the strategic planning process. They were comprised of white staff members, Black, Latino, white and Indigenous professionals working in agriculture.

November 2021-February 2022: The DEIJ Steering Committee met to analyze results and prepare a Strategic Plan

March – July 2022, a committee of Administrative Council members and Northeast SARE stakeholders (some from the original steering committee) was formed to implement the strategic plan.

### Key Findings



*The current grant model privileges white communities with access to capital*



*Northeast SARE has inequitably allocated resources to 1862 institutions*



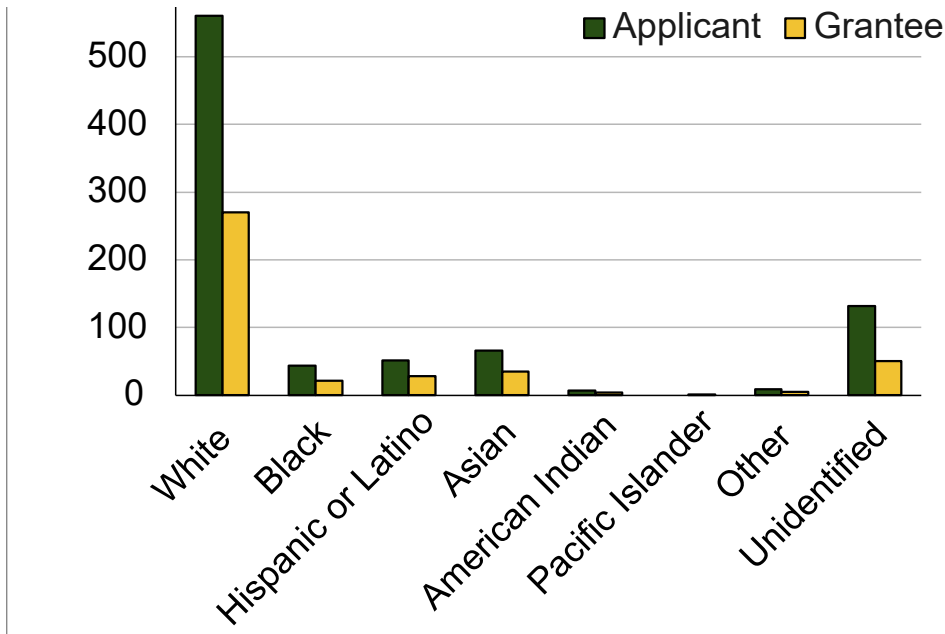
*Northeast SARE leadership has never included Tribal representation in our State Programs despite it being part of our legislated duty.*

In response to our key findings, Northeast SARE has paused five of our six competitive grant programs from 2023-2024 in order to implement the strategic plan with the support of working groups comprising members from diverse communities across the Northeast.

Strategic directions include: developing a large grant program serving communities of color, re-designing current grant programs to be more equitable and inclusive, establishing a Tribal advisory council and state program, recruiting more members from communities of color to serve in leadership positions, and providing training to Northeast SARE staff, Administrative Council, reviewers, and State Coordinators to develop an anti-racist culture.

## Key Finding #1 Northeast SARE is using a funding model that favors those with access to capital.

Applicant Success Rates by Race/Ethnicity 2020-2022



Our reimbursement funding model favors farmers and organizations who have access to capital and can afford to cover grant costs up front. Because of stark disparities in wealth by race (Aladangady and Forde, 2021), this requirement has the effect of privileging white applicants.

Northeast SARE sees this represented in our grantees, who are predominantly white (81%) and/or located at predominantly white organizations.

Responses from surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted in the strategic planning process highlighted barriers communities of color face in accessing Northeast SARE grants.

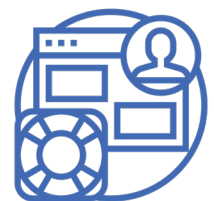
Northeast SARE’s grant process has advantaged predominantly white institutions that already have the financial, human, and infrastructure resources necessary to apply for and manage grants.

## Barriers Reported by Grant Applicants



*Northeast SARE grants take more than 20 hours to prepare*

*The grant submission process has limited accessibility: it is online only, English only, and has short application windows.*



*Those without grant writing experience or support are less likely to be awarded*

*The USDA definition of a farm used to determine eligibility has excluded food systems important to communities of color such as urban agriculture or tribal food sovereignty.*



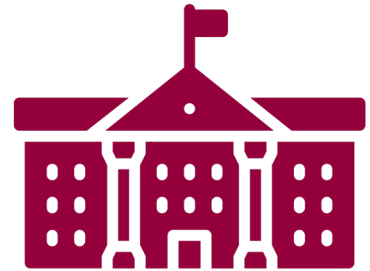
## Key Finding #2 Northeast SARE has inequitably allocated resources to 1862 institutions

Since data on organizational types have been collected starting in 2016, the majority of Northeast SARE funds (58%) have been granted to 1862 land grant universities.

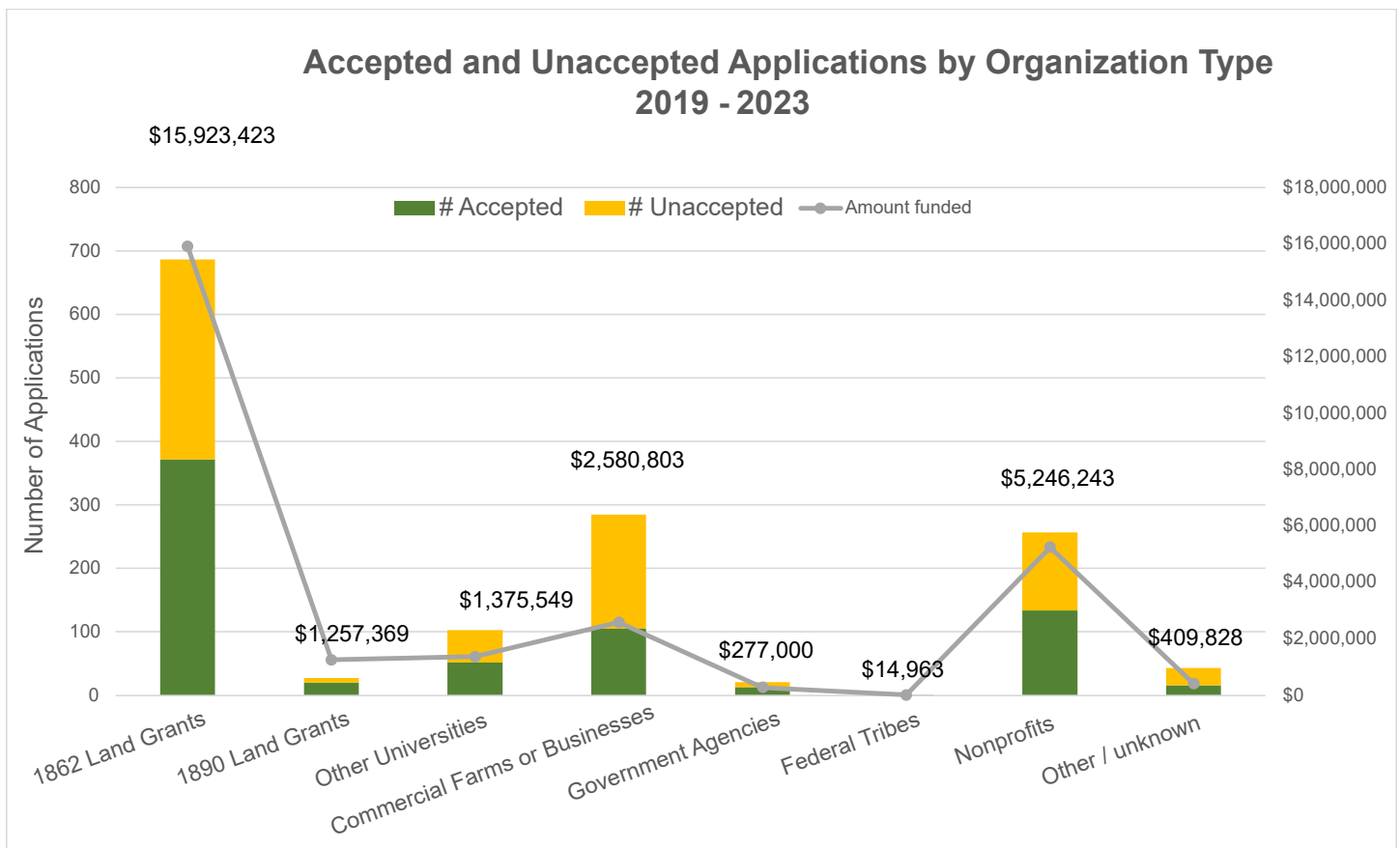
Historically Black colleges and universities (1890 land grant universities) which make up one quarter of the land grant institutions in our region, have received 5% of our total funding to conduct projects in sustainable agriculture. Tribes have received less than 1%, of funds.

Past applicants and grantees surveyed reported that 50% of them (n=363) first heard about Northeast SARE from someone who already received a SARE grant or from a person at a land grant institution.

These results indicate Northeast SARE’s grant process has advantaged predominantly white institutions and those with access to the power of these institutions have continued to benefit.



By inequitably funding land grant institutions, Northeast SARE has failed to provide equitable access to marginalized communities.



# Key Findings

## Key Finding #3: Northeast SARE has low diversity among our leadership and has no formal Tribal representation on the AC or among State Coordinators

Northeast SARE’s staff, Administrative Council, State Coordinators and Technical Committee have lacked cultural and racial diversity, reducing input from marginalized communities.



The authorizing legislation for SARE specifically defines a “state” to include the “50 states, the District of Columbia, various commonwealths and territories, and federally recognized Indian tribes.”

None of the federally recognized Northeast Tribes have been represented on Northeast SARE’s AC or in the state program in SARE’s 32-year history.

Northeast SARE’s staff, Administrative Council, State Coordinators and grant reviewers have lacked cultural and racial diversity. Diverse stakeholders represent only 21% of Northeast SARE’s gatekeeping authority.

In recent years, we have added more diversity to our organization, and in 2022, 23% of the AC, 27% of grant reviewers, 23% of State Coordinators and 10% of staff, were BIPOC. While this representation reflects the demographics of the Northeast population, which is predominantly white, it does not yet adequately represent the diversity needed to represent equity in sustainable agriculture.



Department of Interior Map of Federally Recognized Tribes

In all of these ways, Northeast SARE has failed to honor our legislated mission to “advance the whole of American Agriculture.” We recognize that our organization — through its structures, processes and procedures — has failed our responsibilities to historically Black colleges and universities, tribal nations, and farming communities of color.

Correcting inequity is not enough. We need to do more than just correct historic inequities in our procedures and programs – we must work to transform in order to undo the harmful impacts of these injustices, and that requires us to create a culture and structures that are actively anti-racist.

### Key Strategic Directions

These are the steps we are taking to repair the harms of our past and become a more anti-racist organization.

As we implement our strategic plan for DEIJ, we seek to repair and expand relationships with marginalized communities, operate with accountability and transparency, acknowledge our shortcomings and celebrate our progress, and continue to enhance the sustainability of agriculture in our region by actively including and engaging with new ideas and approaches that come from people with a wide diversity of experience, knowledge, and perspective.

#### Strategic Direction 1:

Do the Internal Work at Northeast SARE to become a more anti-racist agency

1. Create an anti-racist organizational culture.
2. Establish Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) leadership and increase BIPOC representation across the organization.



#### Strategic Direction 2:

Increase Resources to BIPOC communities that have been excluded

1. Provide greater direct financial assistance to BIPOC communities and BIPOC-led organizations with a focus on access to capital and land.
2. Leverage Northeast SARE's power and relationships to align partnerships behind its anti-racist goal.



From March 2023 – March 2024, Northeast SARE has paused five of our six grant programs to implement this strategic plan. The pause will give staff time to support a DEIJ Committee and working groups focusing on each strategic direction. These working groups will be empowered to make substantive changes to our grant programs and led by BIPOC community members. Proposals to implement changes will be reviewed and adopted by the Administrative Council to invest more in communities of color practicing sustainable agriculture. Northeast SARE is committed to a more equitable sustainable agriculture and anti-racist organization – we are taking steps to be accountable.

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