

By John W. Boyd, Jr.

Black farmers in the United States are disappearing. Their numbers shrank from approximately 900,000 in the 1920s down to about 43,000 in the last U.S. Census -- down to less than 1 percent of America's farmers.

But the staggering 98 percent decline in Black farm ownership does not tell the whole story. With each farm closure, those farmers, their families and their employees all lost a way of life that had existed for generations. Despite the horror stories behind Black Americans' link to the land throughout our national history, these losses represent an erosion of cultural, geographic and heritage bonds far greater larger than the Black farmers' small presence in American agriculture.

When I started the National Black Farmers Association (NBFA) in 1995, I, like quite a few farmers in my community, was on the brink of losing my farm. As a fourth-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 Black farm ownership. More recently, however, anti-competitive conduct by monopolists and reduced competition for the biotechnology that we need has emerged as a major obstacle. Our strenuous efforts to sound the alarm on this very important issue continue to fall on deaf ears. I recently read an [article](#) on how Monsanto has used the image of Black farmers on billboards

to promote its products. Ironically the image was spotted in Iowa, a state where I know firsthand that Black farmers barely number above the single digits.

Seed production is one crucial area of biotechnology that we have identified as desperately needing more competition 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.

A seed is as old and ubiquitous as the Bible itself and absolutely essential to farming. How can one company control the world's seed supply? When one gigantic corporate entity is allowed to block farmers from planting a seed without compensating that monopoly, the farmers are held in bondage to uncontrolled price increases. A decade ago I could purchase a 50-pound bag of soybean seeds for \$11.00. That same fifty pounds of seed has risen to \$56.00 dollars because there is no choice or competition in the market. I see no end in sight for higher costs which in the long run will pass on to the consumer.

It would seem that somewhere in the Republican presidential contests this vital issue would gain some recognition, especially as the candidates trot out to farms and fields in heartland states to pursue support of agricultural and related industry interests. By my close observation of the campaigns, none has yet addressed the issue of Monsanto, its monopoly and the high costs of seed. I am calling on the Republican candidates to tell voters where they stand on this issue, either for healthy competition or for business as usual and an ever-expanding Monsanto monopoly.

As planting season nears for America's farmers Congress, too, must act to allow other companies such as Dupont which have the capacity to supply seeds to farmers at a competitive price to be a part of the process.

Monsanto is one of the few companies that will sue its customers for saving seeds from a harvest and replanting them for the next crop year. Although farmers are permitted to sell harvested seeds to a local grain elevator, restrictions on replanting them force farmers to have to purchase Monsanto seeds every year.

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

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.

It is my hope that U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder will take a closer look at the effect of one seed company's stranglehold on the survival of Black and other small farmers. Farmers should be able to purchase seed at a fair price.

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 and sustain a tradition older than the existence of our country itself.