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July 25, 2010

**Introduction to the Compendium of Statements of Support
for Shirley Sherrod, our Colleague and Friend**

What follows is a compendium of the many statements of support issued by our diverse communities in support of our friend and colleague, Shirley Sherrod. We are providing the full statements in the form in which they were issued last week, as a record of the depth and breath of support immediately generated for Ms. Sherrod, who has worked passionately without regard to race, ethnicity or gender on behalf of the producers and workers we all serve.

We recognize that since that time, apologies have been issued and Ms. Sherrod offered a new job within the Department of Agriculture. We stand beside her in full support of whatever she decides to do next and express our willingness to work with her in any way in the continuing struggle for justice.

We also recognize that irrespective of what Ms. Sherrod decides, it is the responsibility of all of us to continue the work we have long done together with renewed energy to transform the structural injustices at the Department of Agriculture and in our society in general. We will be issuing additional calls to action and recommendations for continuing action in coming days, and will be reaching out to all who are committed to achieving equity and opportunity for everyone in the food and agriculture system and in our society. Please contact lpicciano@ruralco.org to be added to our list.

Our diverse coalition further calls on President Obama, Secretary Vilsack, and Attorney General Holder to work with us to make this a “Teachable Moment” as our colleague Edward Pennick suggests in his contribution to this compendium. We call on the press to continue probing the complexity of this story and to assure this important conversation receive continued attention involving all voices but particularly those, like Ms. Sherrod and the Spooner family, who have walked the journey the most deeply and have the most insight to share.



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July 20, 2010

Statement on the Resignation of Shirley Sherrod

On behalf of the Rural Coalition and all the undersigned groups, we express our full support for our friend and colleague, Ms. Shirley Sherrod who was hastily forced from her position as the USDA Georgia State Rural Development Director yesterday.

We deeply admire Ms. Sherrod for the work she has done for a lifetime to help thousands of families stay on the land and develop their communities. Her integrity and vision have helped keep our diverse leaders from the many organizations, who have worked with her for many years, unified and focused on making life better for rural communities and people across this nation.

We call on President Obama and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to reinstate Ms. Sherrod and apologize for the pressure they applied to force her resignation before a full inquiry into the matter.

Ms. Sherrod in her speech to an NAACP group courageously and honestly used her own experience to make the very point that race is not the only problem, and that all in society deserve to be treated fairly. We call on the President and Attorney General Eric Holder, who say they want to have an honest discussion of race in America, to step in at this moment to assure fairness to her as well.

Outraged by the treatment a white farm family received so many years ago, Ms. Sherrod, an African American woman in the rural south, took action when she didn't have to do so. We have observed Ms. Sherrod acting from the same outrage on many occasions in the years since for farmers of all races.

As leader of the 5-year USDA Community Based Organization Partners process, Ms. Sherrod was the one a few years ago who passionately insisted that the injustices experienced by Hmong immigrant producers in Arkansas be addressed by USDA. Moreover,

Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural Members and Allies Statements and Perspectives on the Resignation of Shirley Sherrod, July 20, 2010



it was her leadership of shared efforts that set the stage for the Civil Rights Initiative of the current Secretary.

We are distressed and deeply disappointed that instead of seeking the facts and using a teachable moment to invoke a conversation our society desperately needs to have, the Obama administration allowed Glenn Beck and other commentators to dictate who works for them and for us, the American people. They have in the process denied the people of Georgia a state official who was accomplishing important investment in their rural communities.

We the undersigned also raise our deepest concern about the hasty actions of the USDA and the statements of the NAACP, made before a full inquiry into the matter. We compliment CNN and others in the press for digging deeper and correcting their errors and are glad to see that NAACP has retracted their earlier denouncements and apologized to Ms. Sherrod.

We find it deeply ironic that after 100 years of discrimination precipitating the loss of thousands of acres of land from family farmers and Indian tribes, that USDA, which has never dismissed anyone for discriminating, now forces the resignation of a talented African American woman on unfounded claims that she will be unable to do her job based on her practicing discrimination in which she helps a white family save their farm.

Most of all we thank Roger Spooner and his wife and family for coming forward to share the full story, and Ms. Sherrod herself, for her eloquence and courage in the face of these outrageous and undeserved attacks. If USDA has no toleration for discrimination, there is no choice but to reinstate Ms. Sherrod with apologies. We stand with her, and urge President Obama and Secretary Vilsack to set this matter right. Doing only that much is justice; using this experience to demonstrate, as Attorney General Holder has suggested, that we can learn together to become one society, would be leadership.

Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural (Washington, D.C)
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (East Point, Georgia)
Rural Advancement Fund (Orangeburg, SC)
Intertribal Agriculture Council (Billings, MT)
Farmworker Association of Florida (Apopka, FL)
National Hmong American Farmers (Fresno, CA)
National Immigrant Farmers Initiative (Washington D.C)
National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association (Washington, D.C)
North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project (Durham, NC)
Mississippi Association of Cooperatives (Jackson, MS)
National Family Farm Coalition (Washington, D.C)
Farm Aid, Inc. (Cambridge, MA)
North American Farm Alliance (Windsor, OH)



Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project (Baskerville, VA)
 Organización en California de Lideres Campesinas (Oxnard, CA)
 Twenty First Century Youth Leadership Movement (Eutaw, AL)
 Rural Development Leadership Network (New York, NY)
 Border Agricultural Workers Union (El Paso, TX)
 Agriculture Missions, Inc. (New York, NY)
 National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (Washington, D.C)
 Flats Mentor Farm (Lancaster, MA)
 League of Rural Voters (Minneapolis, MN)
 Concerned Citizens of Tillery (Tillery, NC)
 Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association (Tillery, NC)
 Rural School and Community Trust (Washington, D.C)
 American Federation of Government Employees Local 3354 (St. Louis, MO)
 CASA del Llano, INC. (Hereford, TX)
 New American Sustainable Agriculture Project (Portland, ME)
 Taos County Economic Development Corporation (Taos, NM)
 Operation Spring Plant (Oxford, NC)
 Hispanic Farmers & Ranchers of America Inc (Las Cruces, NM)
 CATA (The Farmworker Support Committee) (Glassboro, NJ)
 Land Stewardship Project (Minneapolis, MN)
 Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (East Troy, WI)
 Community Food Security Coalition (Portland, OR)
 American Agriculture Movement, Inc. (Springfield, CO)
 Missouri Rural Crisis Center (Columbia, MO)
 Rural Advancement Foundation International – USA (Pittsboro, NC)
 Western Organization of Resource Councils (Billings, MT)
 Family Farm Defenders (Madison, WI)
 Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (Madison, WI)
 Community to Community (Bellingham, WA)
 Domestic Fair Trade Association (Jamaica Plain, MA)
 The American Corn Growers Association, (Washington, DC)
 Center for New Community (Chicago, IL)
 Ashtabula County Farmers Union (OH)
 Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporation (Brinkley, AR)
 Religious Leaders for Coalfield Justice, Winchester, VA
 The Rural Chaplains Association
 Southeast Region Agribusiness and Economic Development Corporation
 Minnesota Food Association
 Organic Farming Research Foundation
 American Raw Milk Producers Pricing Association
 Rev. Joseph D. Keesecker, Retired Former Executive Director of Agricultural Missions,
 Inc.
 Sarah Bobrow-Williams, Augusta, GA





July 22, 2010

A Teachable Moment

*By Edward "Jerry" Pennick
Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund*

The firing of Shirley Sherrod as Georgia State Director of Rural Development and the subsequent backlash could lead to what the President calls a "teachable moment." The administration, however, is among those who need to learn that when one stands on principle they however never really loose. To paraphrase another President, the only thing the administration has to fear is fear itself. Shirley and I were on the phone when she was in the car after being asked to resign, I advised her not to but she said she had no choice, so she was pressured.

When we hung up my first thought was "they don't know who or what they are dealing with". I knew that she would not willingly lie down in front of the bus nor would she be thrown under the bus without a fight. I also knew that she was afraid of neither the tea party nor Fox news - a teachable moment. The swiftness of the community organizing that took place on the day the firing was announced was staggering.

Organizations and individuals from around the country mounted a campaign of support and pressure that surprised even me, this campaign was in high gear way before politicians, civil rights leaders or main stream media stepped up to the plate. The diversity of the campaign, which ranged from Willie Nelson and Farm Aid to farm workers in Florida, was a testament to the impact Shirley has had over the years as well as to the effectiveness of community organizers. Again when you stand on principle and do the right thing the support will be there - a teachable moment.

Some of the emerging leadership within the social justice movement did not perform well during this incident. Knowing and respecting history are keys to the success of any movement. As several people have said since, the name Sherrod should have caused pause and caution on the part of the NAACP before Shirley was condemned by them. Shirley's husband Charles was the leader of the Albany, Ga. civil rights movement and a founder of the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee. He is nationally known and respected. To the NAACP's credit they quickly gathered additional evidence and issued a public apology. Some other "leaders" have not had the decency to do so. Know your history and gather the facts before acting - a teachable moment.

Shirley has led the nation to a crossroad unlike any other in the recent past, but are we really ready to choose the correct but less traveled path? Compared to Shirley's ordeal the Henry Louis "Skip" Gates affair that led to the "beer summit" at the White House was recess rather than a learning opportunity. Soon Shirley will be off center stage, but that is when the real work should begin. Shirley's experience leaves no doubt that race and racism are acceptable weapons in the political war that is raging in America, these weapons of mass destruction no longer need to be camouflaged because too many people are either blind or are in a comfort zone of denial, Shirley has shown the nation that the first step toward neutralizing these weapons is admitting that they exist but not allowing them to be used to advance a political or social agenda - a teachable moment.



*Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural Members and Allies
Statements and Perspectives on the Resignation of Shirley
Sherrod, July 20, 2010*

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July 20, 2010

What Rural Coalition Members and Allies are saying about our friend and Colleague, Shirley Sherrod and her forced resignation from USDA.

John Zippert, Chairperson, Rural Coalition

We urge the President and the Secretary of Agriculture to reinstate Ms. Sherrod with apologies. If the Obama administration is going to let Glenn Beck tell them who they can appoint to positions, they might as well go home. This makes no sense. Ms Sherrod was doing exactly what President Obama and Attorney General Holder have urged us to do: have the courage to talk about race and in this case how she learned that it was not the only thing that excludes people from the benefits of our society.

Georgia Good, Executive Director, Rural Advancement Fund and Vice Chairperson, Rural Coalition

“All the years I have know her, Shirley Sherrod has always been a positive force in the rural communities for economic change, policy change and social change. We regret that President Obama, the USDA and the NAACP did not investigate the facts and allowed this tragedy to happen to such an important leader. We hope they will rectify this error and that Ms. Sherrod will not allow this injustice to stop her in any way from doing this important work.”

Ross Racine, Executive Director, Intertribal Agriculture Council, Billings, MT

“Shirley Sherrod helped out of the goodness of her heart and is being chastised for helping someone out side of her scope of work, helping someone of a different color. Sounds to me like someone in the local democratic party did not agree with her appointment thus had to go back 24 years in history to find some thing to discredit this loving, giving lady....The administration and career staff at USDA have allowed 70 years of preferential treatment of “traditional partners” which in turn gave rise to court cases founded on their exclusionary practices. The court cases are yet to be resolved nor has been lasting correction to “administration supported practices.” Yet someone who has made a career of truly helping others is being held up as the example. This just stinks of political manipulation!”

Rudy Arredondo, President, National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association, Washington, DC

“For years, numerous administrations could find no way to even reprimand the former director of loan servicing for USDA, who had a noose in his desk and by failing to take action on civil rights complaints, allowed thousands of families to loose their land. How could USDA finally allow him to quietly retire a few months back, while forcing Shirley out on the basis of a 'you tube' video without apparently giving her an opportunity to come to Washington, DC and state her case?”

Marge Townsend, Rural Coalition Board member and retired family farmer, Windsor, Ohio

“Shirley has been helping farmers for a very long time. There is no way she would do anything wrong. I am sorry what they are using against her is taken so badly out of context.”



Mily Trevino-Sauceda, Board member, Rural Coalition

"Shirley has had an exemplary life in helping and supporting many, including the farmworker women in Lideres Campesinas when we were just a group struggling to survive and sought her support in the late 90s. She was there to listen and mentor us to continue our struggle strong and we will never forget and we are here now to be with and support her as well."

Chukou Thao, Executive Director, National Hmong American Farmers, Inc.

"We, NHAFA and the Hmong community in Fresno and throughout this United States have a very deep and honest respect for Mrs. Shirley Sherrod. This respect has been earned because of her commitment and years of service for small minority farmers. This is a very sad day when a person who has earned her place in this move for equal justice is not judged by her life long achievement but rather by what other choose to present. Mrs. Shirley is a friend, family and a mentor for us all. If there is anything we can do, please let us know. The Hmong farming family is behind Mrs. Sherrod 100%."

Lorette Picciano, Executive Director, Rural Coalition

"Shirley Sherrod has been our close colleague, mentor and dear friend who has taken the tragedies and struggles of her own life and turned them into a indefatigable commitment to protect others from injustices. It has been a continuing honor to work with her in the shared efforts of our many diverse organizations to transform the unjust systems of the US Department of Agriculture. We cannot but stand with her at this time, as she has done for so many others on so many occasions, and call on USDA to do what is hard, and what is right. What Ms. Sherrod, together with the Spooner family, is courageously teaching us opens a new door to solving, resolving and healing what has long plagued USDA and our society. We will be a richer nation and better society if we continue this discussion together."

Maria Moreira, Flats Mentor Farm, Lancaster, MA

"The Flats Mentor Farm and the immigrant farming community here in MA are very appreciative of Shirley's lifelong social justice work. She can count with our support."

Savonala Horne, Executive Director, Land Loss Prevention Project

"Shirley Sherrod is a valiant fighter for civil rights in all aspects of US civil society. Her singular struggle to imbue justice and fair play at the USDA, is a case in point. She overcame instances of racial oppression to champion the rights of all people who have been denied opportunities due to the insidious nature of race and class. She is a transformative leader. The State of Georgia and the USDA would be greatly served by her reinstatement."

Pati Martinson and Terrie Bad Hand, Taos County (NM) Economic Development Corporation

"We have known Shirley for over 15 years. She has been a constant inspiration and force for good in both her personal and professional life. She has dedicated her life to social justice in the most loving and open manner possible. Those of us who have been touched by her work and impeccable values are deeply wounded by this outrageous attack. The credibility of USDA has been tarnished at a time when the expectation of rural communities was raised by the stated policies of the administration. Those of us who have encouraged socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers to utilize USDA programs despite a long history of discrimination, are horrified and dismayed by this situation. An immediate reinstating of Ms. Sherrod's



appointment and an apology from the highest level of the administration would be the very least remediation required.”

Mark Schultz, Associate Director/Policy and Organizing Director, Land Stewardship Project

‘Shirley Sherrod is an important and accomplished leader. The attack on her and the Administration’s response is wrong.’

Ferd Hoefner, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

“What a travesty.”

Dorothy Barker, Executive Director, Operation Spring Plant, Inc.

“Operation Spring Plant, Inc., and our staff lend our support to Mrs. Sherrod in her efforts for justice.”

Rev. Joseph D. Keesecker, Retired former Executive Director of Agricultural Missions, Inc.

“Thank you Shirley, for standing up to this racist attack and the timidity and flawed judgment of the USDA and the administration in cow-towing to the shrill voices from the right, and for seizing the opportunity to turn this into a national educational seminar on the history and current realities of racism in the United States. I have known and worked with Shirley Sherrod for over two decades. We have served together on the board of Agricultural Missions, Inc., an ecumenically-based organization that provides support for rural development and community organizing, both in the U.S. and in developing countries. I have always found Shirley to be highly professional, bringing profound and thoughtful experience to the table, and operating with an attitude of acceptance and fairness toward everyone. She is undoubtedly one of the best people the USDA could have chosen for the role for which she was hired in Georgia. As subsequent disclosures have shown, her opinions and actions concerning fairness for all have been honorable and consistent, and 180 degrees from the attempted smear which was initially accepted by Secretary Vilsack and the administration.”

Charnell T. Green, President, Southeast Region Agribusiness and Economic Development Corporation

“Shirley has been an inspiration to me because of the passion she has for helping farmers save their land. She is an asset to USDA and the rural communities in the US.”



The following comments represent my personal views on this case, and do not represent the views of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, where I work.

July 21, 2010

USDA Makes Wrong Move In Alleged Racism Dispute

By Ted Quaday

What is happening to Shirley Sherrod in the wake of misplaced allegations of racism is shameful. Until Monday, Shirley Sherrod was the USDA's Georgia State Director for Rural Development. But Monday, the USDA forced her out after a video tape surfaced on conservative media outlets that purportedly revealed some racist behavior on her part. The USDA should reverse this train wreck of hysterical overreaction immediately and place Sherrod back in the position she so richly deserves. Here is why.

According to CNN, Ms. Sherrod was speaking at a March 27, 2010 NAACP Freedom Fund dinner where she shared an anecdote about a white farmer she worked with 24 years ago in 1986. At that time, Ms. Sherrod was not working for the USDA, she was working with a non-profit organization in Georgia dedicated to helping small family farmers—black or white—retain their land.

The story she recounted was one of her personal struggle with racism when she tried to help a white farmer who expressed some racist behavior toward her. At that time, said Ms. Sherrod, she did only what was necessary to help the farmer and his family. In other words, she chose not to devote her usual measure of emotional commitment to the farmer's case. That she would bother to help the farmer at all under those circumstances speaks volumes about the nature of Ms. Sherrod's commitment to helping people regardless of race.

Ms. Sherrod shared this story with those at the NAACP meeting as a way to underscore her own transformation around her perception of race relations in America. In 1986, she explained, she believed the power structure in the country was skewed by "race and race only." Through her experiences with the farmer—whose farm was saved and who maintains a friendship with Ms. Sherrod to this day—she says she came to understand that economic survival in rural America is really about "those who have versus those who do not have."

This is a truly valuable story, one which reveals in a personal way that there remain reasons to hope real change on race is possible in this country. That Ms. Sherrod lost her job for sharing details from her personal journey as a Black woman and long-time civil rights activist is unconscionable. The hysterical response of the USDA and the Obama Administration sends our high hopes for real change into freefall.



For Immediate Release:
July 21, 2010

Contact:
Brandi Horton
202-248-5447

WILLIE NELSON AND FARM AID STAND WITH SHIRLEY SHERROD, CALL FOR HER REINSTATEMENT BY USDA

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Farm Aid President Willie Nelson today declared his support of Shirley Sherrod, former director of the Georgia Field Office for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, and called for her reinstatement as Georgia USDA State Director of Rural Development. Farm Aid has long-supported the Federation in its efforts to improve economic opportunities for family farmers in the South and has worked closely with Shirley Sherrod over twenty-five years.

“Since we started Farm Aid in 1985, the Federation has been a true friend and an ally in our work to keep family farmers on the land,” said Farm Aid president Nelson. “During Ms. Sherrod’s time at the Federation, she made sure that all of the family farmers she worked with got what they needed to stay on their land. Ms. Sherrod has been a national leader for family farmers and a strong, knowledgeable advocate for all struggling family farmers. Farm Aid is proud to support the exemplary work of Ms. Sherrod and the Federation.”

Farm Aid executive director Carolyn Mugar, echoing Mr. Nelson’s comments, stated “Shirley Sherrod has dedicated her life to work on behalf of family farmers--regardless of race. We call on Secretary Vilsack to right this wrong immediately and reinstate Ms. Sherrod. Farm Aid extends to Ms. Sherrod an offer of employment until Vilsack does so. This country desperately needs more farm advocates with the expertise of Shirley Sherrod. But this is not just about a job--it’s about ensuring that Shirley Sherrod has the opportunity to continue to help farmers and the rural poor, something Ms. Sherrod has spent her life doing. We would be honored to have her experience and commitment at Farm Aid.”

For 25 years, Farm Aid has worked to build a vibrant, family farm-centered system of agriculture in America. Farm Aid artists and board members Willie Nelson, Neil Young, John Mellencamp and Dave Matthews host an annual concert to raise funds to support Farm Aid’s work with family farmers and to inspire people to choose family farm food. Since 1985, Farm Aid has raised more than \$37 million to support programs that help farmers thrive, expand the reach of the Good Food Movement, take action to change the dominant system of industrial agriculture and promote food from family farms.

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From the Huffington Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/willie-nelson/shirley-sherrod-a-family_b_654824.html

Shirley Sherrod, A Family Farmer's Friend by Willie Nelson

Shirley Sherrod has been a great friend to me, Farm Aid and family farmers for 25 years. She has always worked to improve economic opportunities for family farmers in the South, going back to when I first met her as the director of the Georgia Field Office for the [Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund](#). Like Ms. Sherrod herself has said, she's always tried to help those who don't have so that they can have a little more.

The real story of Shirley Sherrod deserved to be told a long time ago. She has had an amazing impact on the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of families and communities throughout the South. Farmers of every race have struggled with the income inequities that have persisted for generations, and advocates like Ms. Sherrod have moved mountains to ensure that families can remain in their homes and on their farms.

While all family farmers in our country face an uphill battle to stay on their land, growing good food for rest of us, black farmers have lost their land at an alarming rate, faster than any other family farmers. Lending discrimination and inequities in agriculture programs are largely responsible for the shrinking number of black farmers. Farm Aid began supporting the Federation in 1985, where Shirley worked at the time, because of the group's unique ability to reach out and help struggling farm families in the South. Many had owned their land for generations and were, and continue to be, under constant threat. We continue to support the Federation's work to this day, and hundreds of farmers are still on their land because of Ms. Sherrod's efforts.

During her time at the Federation, she fought to make sure that family farmers got what they needed to stay on their land. She has been a national leader for family farmers and a compassionate, courageous advocate for all struggling family farmers. Shirley Sherrod has dedicated her life to working on behalf of family farmers, civil rights and the alleviation of poverty and it's up to Secretary Vilsack to right this wrong immediately.

This country desperately needs more farm advocates with Ms. Sherrod's expertise. But this is not just about a job -- it's about ensuring that Shirley Sherrod has the opportunity to continue to support family farmers and the rural poor, something she has spent her life doing.





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July 20, 2010

Support for Shirley Sherrod

Shirley Sherrod, who has devoted her life to racial justice, was forced to resign yesterday as Georgia State Director of Rural Development for the United States Department of Agriculture, caught in the crossfire of discrimination charges between the Tea Party and the National Association of Colored People (NAACP).

On July 13, the NAACP charged elements of the Tea Party with racism. On July 18, Fox News began playing a video clip circulated by a conservative activist that was framed to show Ms. Sherrod telling an NAACP audience last March that she was reluctant to help a white farmer, whereas the point of the story she was telling was that her experience with this farmer “opened her eyes” to the fact that poor white farmers could be ill treated also. It’s not just black and white, she said, even on the part of the speech that was shown, “It’s about the poor versus those who have.”

The story is presented on the internet with a text panel stating that “Ms. Sherrod admits that in her federally appointed position, overseeing over a billion dollars, she discriminates against people due to their race.” This statement is false, but apparently was accepted at face value by Fox News, MSNBC, the Department of Agriculture, the White House and the NAACP.

The events in the story she was told in her speech about how her eyes were opened, actually took place twenty-four years ago, when she worked for a nonprofit organization that grew out of the Civil Rights movement with a mission to save black-owned land. In that capacity, she did in fact help the white farmer in question. She worked hard, as she related in a phone conversation and as the full story would have shown, on an emergency basis over a Memorial Day weekend, finding a more responsive lawyer than the one initially contacted, and she actually was successful in saving this white farmer’s farm. She and the family became so close that the farmer and his wife drove four hours to a meeting in Atlanta several months later to attend a conference on saving black-owned land. Mrs. Eloise Spooner, the farmer’s wife, spoke by phone to CNN this morning and testified to the family’s friendship with Ms. Sherrod and their gratitude toward her.

Ms. Sherrod understands discrimination well. When she was sixteen, her father was murdered by a white man, who, although he was known in the community, was not brought to justice.



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As the first African-American Georgia State Director for Rural Development, USDA, Ms. Sherrod was in a position to help many people of all races, and she was reaching out to many under-served communities to do just that.

In the 1960's, Ms. Sherrod and her husband, Charles, the first field secretary for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) withdrew from SNCC and formed the Southwest Georgia Project in response to SNCC's new policy, under Stokely Carmichael's leadership, that white people could no longer be members of SNCC.

In 1985, Ms. Sherrod became a participant in the Rural Development Leadership Network, a national, multicultural social change organization. She earned her master's degree from Antioch University through RDLN and became Vice Chair of our Board of Directors, working closely with our white President, our diverse Board, which includes white members, and helping to orient each new group of participants who have been black, American Indian, Latina/o, Asian, and white. Ms. Sherrod has worked constructively with a number of other organizations with white staff and constituencies, including the Farmers Legal Action Group based in Minnesota.

In announcing Ms. Sherrod's resignation, Secretary Vilsack stated that the Department has "zero tolerance" for discrimination. We are disappointed that the Department of Agriculture, the Obama Administration, the NAACP, and several news outlets did not look into the facts and did not stand up for Ms. Sherrod.

We call upon Secretary Vilsack to reinstate Ms. Sherrod and investigate how this injustice was allowed to happen.

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Congratulations, Shirley Sherrod!!

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It was only a year ago that we were congratulating Shirley Sherrod on her appointment as Georgia State Director for Rural Development at the United States Department of Agriculture and the victory of New Communities in winning a substantial award in the Minority Farmers lawsuit (Pigford vs Vilsack).

Those achievements were the result of hard work, persistence, and dedication to rural people and the development of poor rural communities. Now Shirley, with her forced resignation from USDA and restoration of her reputation through the media, has a victory that is even more personal and visible. When she was thrown under a bus, she did not let the bus run over her. Although the initial attack came from just a fragment of video, the forces rolling over her and her reputation were large, weighty and full of momentum: major media outlets, the United States Department of Agriculture, the White House, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, public opinion. All had condemned her. Who would want to be associated with her after that? What kind of employment could she have found as a certified racist, the only person to be discharged from the Department of Agriculture for that offense even as the Department pays out billions of dollars for past discriminatory acts?

It was Shirley's personal character that saved her – her forthrightness, her truthfulness, her confidence, her absolutely clear conscience, her genuine voice, her passion and composure. The unfolding story was riveting as new characters were added and the plot took new turns. The ending so far is happy. Thank goodness that CNN took the trouble to call and talk with her. Thank goodness that the Spooners, the white farmers she was accused of mistreating, were alive and spoke up for her with such firm and easy conviction. Thank goodness for networks of supporters who made calls and wrote statements.

Yes, they have met before...



(l to r) Ralph Paige, Executive Director, Federation of Southern Cooperatives; USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack; Shirley Sherrod; Rep. Sanford Bishop (GA) at the Federation's Georgia farmers meeting Sec. Vilsack's first out-of-town visit to a farm group after his appointment

The message

that emerged



*Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural Members and Allies
Statements and Perspectives on the Resignation of Shirley
Sherrod, July 20, 2010*

from Shirley's story is about the power of forgiveness, about hurt and the grounds for hatred being converted into "a life of service and love." While she is a shining example of these values, others share them. We have found largeness of spirit, generosity and forgiveness among the grassroots leaders with whom we work. Many are uncommonly strong, speak well, and know how to create out of nothing new programs and institutions that they need and that others may take for granted. Many have experienced hardship, discrimination, poverty, and injustice. They are nevertheless working constructively to build their communities, thinking of others, of the big picture, following a vision of justice and shared humanity. Such people need a larger voice in our society. They and their plans and projects, coming from the bottom up, need financial support, whether or not they fit into an abstract philanthropic scheme.

We are proud of Shirley's association with the Rural Development Leadership Network. She has been an RDLN participant, launching her on-the-ground work with a resource center for small farmers in Georgia as her RDLN field project, linking with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives as her Sponsoring Organization, forming cooperatives, finding markets, earning her master's degree from Antioch as part of our program, going on to more regional economic development, remaining part of our family-style network over twenty-five years, helping to orient each new group of leaders at our Institute at the University of California at Davis, helping us to raise money. She was vice chair of our Board of Directors until she had to resign when she took the federal job. We were touched and grateful when New Communities made a financial contribution to RDLN in a generous act of giving back. We urge others to follow this lead.



RDLN Network members with Charles and Shirley Sherrod (4th & 5th to right of sien) during RDLN Assembly in Albany, GA

Shirley has expressed gratitude to RDLN for nurturing emerging leaders like herself, providing a supportive structure for study, and connecting people from diverse cultures, including Hispanic, American Indian, Asian and white, a connection she did not have in the black and white south where she grew up. Over the years, she has formed alliances and worked closely with people around the country from all different backgrounds, and she has traveled overseas, with RDLN and other groups, continuing to grow and to expand her understanding of the world. Shirley would have risen from the ashes of this disaster no matter how the media and political story worked out, but we are glad that it unfolded as it did and that the world got to know one of treasures of rural America.

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Statements and Perspectives on the Resignation of Shirley
Sherrod, July 20, 2010*

Letter of NOFA

July 20, 2010

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Like many of our colleagues in sustainable agriculture, we are outraged by your hasty decision to force the resignation of Shirley Sherrod as the Georgia State Director of USDA Rural Development. We call on you to reinstate Ms. Sherrod immediately, and with the Agency's apologies.

In the words of Susan E. Stokes, Executive Director of the Farmers Legal Action Group: "For the Secretary to call for Shirley Sherrod's resignation before he had all the facts was wrong. The point she was making in her speech was in fact the opposite of racist; she was saying that her life's lessons taught her that race does not matter – poor people are poor and without power, regardless of race."

We think you that your decision to force Ms. Sherrod to resign was taken in haste without a thorough and complete review of the facts, context and circumstances of her actions. In our view, you were unduly influenced by the distorted and edited videotape that completely misrepresented a speech Ms. Sherrod made to the NAACP in Georgia. We hope that you as Secretary of Agriculture will quickly correct this injustice committed against Ms. Shirley Sherrod and the people she has struggled for years to serve. If anything, she deserves to be honored for this work and not falsely condemned and forced to retire in disgrace.

There is much of the agency's legacy of discrimination that cannot be corrected. Farms cannot be returned to their rightful owners. Communities that were scattered by the loss of their land cannot be brought back. The many lives that were destroyed by abuse and losses cannot be made healthy and whole. But this firing is a mistake that can be corrected, and you should do so immediately. Ms. Sherrod should be reinstated immediately and publicly, and with the agency's apologies. Our country and a person of her character deserve nothing less.

Yours truly,

Bill Duesing
President, NOFA Interstate Council



Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund
Shirley Sherrod Saving A White Owned Farm in South Georgia
July 20, 2010

In March 2010, Shirley Sherrod spoke before the NAACP in Douglas, Georgia. As the first Black director of the USDA's Rural Development in Georgia, and a long history of advocating for justice and civil rights in the rural south, Shirley had much to share.

One of her experiences that she had recounted numerous times with audiences was how she helped save the farm of white farmer Roger Spooner in the 1980's. The experience was life changing for her.

In the 1980's Shirley worked as the Georgia field director for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (Federation) that worked primarily with Black farmers throughout the south. The organization grew out of the civil rights movement to assist farmers and rural communities across the region with, for example, land retention, access to credit and USDA programs, housing, farm management and importantly cooperative economic development. It continues with this important work today.

The 1980's were a time when black and white farmers were losing their farms in record numbers. In 1986, when Shirley Sherrod served as the Georgia Field director for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, for the first time she was approached by a white farmer for assistance. His name was Roger Spooner. There was a lot to consider in terms of what would be best for him and where she should seek assistance for him. But she ultimately recognized that he was a farmer who needed assistance and she thought it best that the white community also step up to the plate and help him. It was the beginning of a process that changed Shirley's life as well as the Spooner family.

Spooner's visit to Shirley came just after Congress had passed the Chapter 12 bankruptcy provision to assist family farmers. Under Chapter 12 farmers could hold on to their land while arranging whatever they could, financially, to retain ownership. Chapter 12 also required that farmers had been in operation the previous year, otherwise, they were not able to file.

In her speech before the NAACP Shirley noted that she wasn't sure why this farmer had come to her office. He needed help yes – but he spent much of the time at the beginning of the discussion trying to demonstrate that he was superior to her. For someone white to ask assistance from a black person for assistance was not the order of things in the South. Whites would generally try to maintain a superior status with blacks regardless of the assistance they needed.



Shirley knew that Spooner needed an attorney. She then contacted a white attorney in Albany who she knew had gone through the Chapter 12 training. Shirley also went with Spooner to the meeting with the attorney. She, Spooner and Spooner's wife Eloise, then kept in close contact in the subsequent months and years as Spooner tried to hold on to his farm. Shirley helped him every step of the way.

One of the challenges faced by Spooner, and what was an eye opener for Shirley, was that the USDA county supervisors had rented Spooner's farm without his approval. Because of this Spooner was not able to file Chapter 12, as he could not claim having farmed the year before. Shirley had never witnessed this kind of abusive behavior by the USDA against Black farmers.

As it turned out, the Albany attorney was abysmal and did little to help Spooner. Finally in May of 1987 Spooner received a foreclosure notice along with 13 others in Georgia and he came to Shirley. He visited her on Thursday before Memorial Day in 1987. The farm was about to be auctioned on the courthouse steps Tuesday week after Memorial Day.

They then visited his Albany attorney who said, "You're getting old, why don't you let the farm go?" Shirley was outraged by the comment. She then contacted another attorney for Spooner in Americus, Georgia who had helped with black farmer cases for the Federation. He immediately offered to help. By the next Tuesday after Memorial Day the attorney had the Spooner's papers. Because Chapter 12 was not useful to Spooner, the attorney instead filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

The Spooner farm was saved, although the Chapter 11 filing was just the beginning of a process. It took 2 years for a final resolution. In the meantime, Shirley and the Spooners kept in close contact and the friendship evolved. They would often have lunches together after discussing the case. In the late 1980's there was a conference in Atlanta on Black landloss issues. Shirley asked if the Spooner's would like to attend. Roger Spooner drove his truck all the way from Florida so that he and his wife could drive with Shirley to attend the conference in Atlanta.

The lessons learned for Shirley from this experience were profound. While she had always thought that the white community and white farmers could work the system for their benefit, she realized this was not always the case. The Spooner's were poor whites. They, as whites, had been treated by the USDA in a way she had never witnessed.

She became aware that the problems farmers experienced were not only racial, but that it was also a question of those who have and those who do not.

