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July 14, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Docket USDA-2021-0006

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

On behalf of Deere & Company ("Deere"), I am pleased to submit the following comments in response to your request for public input on how the U.S. Department of Agriculture ("USDA") can advance racial justice and equity for underserved communities.

Deere has a proud history of supporting racial equality as reflected by our longstanding support for Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS), the National Black Growers Council, 1890s land grant institutions, and other organizations supporting Black entrepreneurs and social justice.

Deere has also engaged in the work of a Business Roundtable special committee on racial equity and social justice. The group's finance subcommittee, of which Deere's Chairman and Chief Executive Officer John C. May is a member, focuses on providing access to capital in minority communities and on other factors contributing to persistent income disparity.

In our view, Deere is uniquely positioned to help promote public policy solutions and corporate initiatives that help underserved farmers gain access to capital and enjoy the advantages that come with proven land ownership. We believe, moreover, the impact of Deere's leadership on this issue can be further leveraged through our participation in organizations such as The LEAP Coalition ("LEAP").

In 2020, Deere joined with other partners in forming an organization dedicated to improving the livelihoods of Black farmers. The LEAP Coalition (Legislation, Education, Advocacy, and Production Systems) focuses on addressing the decades-long issue of heirs' property rights, in which no clear title to farmland is recorded.

In the announcement issued by Deere launching the coalition on September 15, 2020, the following statement was made by Marc A. Howze, Group President, Lifecycle Solutions and Chief Administrative Officer: "Property ownership is a driver of economic growth for individuals and families. However, too often the benefits of ownership for those who lack clear title cannot be truly realized."

Joining Deere as members of the LEAP coalition are the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and the National Black Growers Council. In addition, the coalition is further partnering with The Federation of Southern Cooperatives and other organizations to carry out LEAP's mission. These partners provide expertise that complements our company's legacy of serving farmers for nearly 200 years. Further, the coalition builds on Deere's longstanding relationships with Black farmers and organizations that have traditionally supported them and served as forceful advocates for social and economic justice.

The basic principles defining LEAP and describing its mission are outlined as follow:

Legislation

- Support legislation on Heirs' Property reform
- Serve as a conduit or partner in efforts to clearing title for Black farmers

Education

- Invest in Fellowships/Internships/Agri-business paths
- Engage in estate planning to prevent the further proliferation of Heir's Property

Advocacy

- Amplify the work of The Federation of Southern Cooperatives
- Raise awareness regarding the issues and challenges experienced by Black farmers

Production Systems

- Education and training to support Long-term Sustainability and Economic viability
- Access to tools, technology and innovation

Land is a farmer's most valuable and productive asset. Yet a majority of Black farmers – who make up about two percent of the U.S. farm population – are believed to operate on property lacking a documented title. At the same time, the amount of land owned by black farmers has fallen sharply, to less than 5 million acres compared to over 16 million acres a century ago. The decline occurred in large part due to discriminatory practices affecting how Black farmers acquired and transferred their land — a form of ownership commonly called "Heirs' Property." Many landowners also lacked the resources for formal estate planning and passed property to their heirs without a will. Over generations, this practice led to increasingly fractional ownership and unclear titles.

Without such title, farmers cannot use their property as collateral for loans and often cannot participate in USDA programs or receive emergency or disaster-relief aid. To this end, securing clear title helps eliminate systemic barriers to land improvement and wealth building that have constrained many farmers, particularly those in minority or underserved groups, across the United States.

Black communities in southern states have been disproportionately affected by these issues. However, similar situations exist in other populations and geographies. These include White communities in Appalachia, Native Americans on tribal lands, and Hispanic communities in the Southwestern United States. Each of these constituencies stand to benefit from LEAP's work.

Deere's partners in the coalition are providing the educational, legal, and technical resources to help disadvantaged farmers secure clear title to their land and acquire the technology and tools necessary to make their operations more profitable, productive, and sustainable.

Deere has made a number of investments to help ensure LEAP's success and remove the systemic barriers undermining the success of Black farmers. Among these is a collaboration with our dealer Tellus Equipment to fund and support two lawyers working on land retention efforts, making a five-year commitment to serve as title sponsor of the Federation of Southern Cooperative's Heirs' Property Conference and expand its investment in the cooperative's programming.

Further, Deere is providing funding for legal interns recruited through the Thurgood Marshall College Fund to work at the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. Deere has also created a full-time position within the company to oversee the LEAP Coalition work and ensure its success.

In alignment with these efforts, Deere highlights the following opportunities for USDA that would help advance the goals of addressing Heirs' Property rights issues:

- USDA should proactively engage with those states and territories that have enacted the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act (UPHPA) in order to raise awareness of and fully implement Sec. 12615 of the 2018 Farm Bill, which authorizes USDA to provide Heirs' Property operators with a farm number to allow for eligibility of various USDA programs.
- USDA should work with existing organizations, including the LEAP Coalition and its partners, to develop and carry out an outreach strategy to ensure Heirs' Property landowners are aware of their rights, including their right to obtain a farm number.
- USDA should work expeditiously to issue implementing regulations for the Heirs' Property Relending Program authorized under Sec. 5104 of the 2018 Farm Bill, which would provide relending loans for projects that assist Heirs' Property ownership issues.

Deere is committed to helping farmers, regardless of size or background, have access to the vital resources needed to achieve success and sustain their operations for generations to come. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on these important issues.

Sincerely,



Collis Jones

Vice President, U.S. Policy & Strategy