

BizFed Bounce Back



BizFed members share stories of resilience.

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In the face of COVID19, BizFed members bounce back with perseverance, creativity and resourcefulness.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN FARMERS FIND OPPORTUNITY IN COVID DISRUPTION

For farmers, the COVID-19 crisis might have come with a blessing in disguise.

As with just about every industry, farming suffered massive disruption as a result of the shutdowns and related mitigation measures. But according to Will Scott, president of the African-American Farmers of California, the COVID-19 aftermath has forced everyone to reexamine how they do things.

"Maybe one good thing is that this has forced us to reflect on what we have to do," Scott said. "This is not going to be the normal we know--we have to make it work for us."

Some positive changes Scott pointed to are restaurants and farmers delivering food, consumers being more interested in supporting local produce and new technologies easing these transitions.

Scott is a longtime farmer of various crops: black eyed peas, tomatoes, watermelons, cantaloupes, cucumbers, peppers, greens and cabbages. He spent considerable time selling his produce at farmers markets.

"I can probably make more money by using new technology as opposed to farmers markets," Scott said, speaking of handy phone apps.



Will Scott - President, African-American Farmers of California. Photo courtesy of African American Farmers Facebook page

Capital still a concern

Prior to COVID-19, Scott said African-American farmers suffered from the same issue as other minority-owned businesses: a lack of access to capital. In fact, the landmark class action suit, *Pigford v. Glickman*, which settled in 1999, paid out around \$1 billion to date to thousands of African-American farmers who sued on the grounds that the allocation of USDA's and assistance was racially discriminatory.

But according to Scott, the problem extends beyond the government into commercial institutions as well.

"The loans come either too late or they are too small," Scott said. "It's difficult getting the capital you need to get in this industry and survive."

Rationing essentials

As Californians were frustrated in the early weeks of quarantine over the run on household essentials like toilet paper and paper towels that created massive shortages of the products, farmers faced seed shortages that caused rationing.

Scott said his usual supply of 200 to 300 pounds of seed was reduced to 10 to 20 pounds, which, when added to other problems like access to capital and shelter-in-place, made it difficult to hold on.

"This is the kind of minor setback for small farmers that can put people out of business," Scott said.



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