



Vermont Farm to Plate Racial Equity Report: Findings and Next Steps to Improve Racial Equity in the Vermont Food System

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Introduction

This document summarizes conversations and next steps related to the Racial Equity Priority Strategy Team of the Farm to Plate Network, and is meant to support further development of the priority strategy team's work on Racial Equity in the Farm to Plate Network (F2P). Between summer 2022 and April 2023, 21 interviews occurred with interested parties and two meetings held, one in-person on January 24th, 2023 in Richmond VT and the other online on February 14th, 2023. The initial summary document from the interviews as well as notes from each meeting are annexed below.

Objectives and method

The consultant (Julian Portilla) was hired to explore and propose the work plan for a priority strategy team (PST) based on the issue brief [Racial Equity in the Vermont Food System](#). Meeting notes and the summary from interviews are available to group members on the Racial Equity PST page available [here](#).

Interview process: The consultant initially interviewed 21 stakeholders about their perspectives on the issues identified in the Racial Equity Brief, and what the composition, objectives, and scope of work should be for a Racial Equity PST within the F2P Network.

In person meeting: Following the interviews and summary document, a first meeting was held on January 24th in the Richmond Public Library. Ten people were present. Participants reviewed the results of the interview process.

Online meeting: On February 14th, a virtual meeting was held to discuss the conclusions of the document and the in-person group that met on January 24th.

Summary of Results

This summary reflects participants' suggestions for a work plan for a Racial Equity PST. It cannot capture the full breadth of what was said throughout the process. Please refer to the three documents mentioned above to explore the breadth. Immediately below are the five suggested areas of collective activity that emerged consistently during the interviews and meetings, followed by a more detailed discussion of each.

SUMMARY OF SUGGESTED AREAS OF ACTIVITY FOR THE RACIAL EQUITY PST

1. Define and collect relevant data about racial equity in order to set clear and measurable targets for the state and food system in Vermont.
2. Create an assets “map” of people and organizations working on racial equity issues in VT with a focus on ag-related work.
3. Set meaningful and measurable racial equity objectives for the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (F2P backbone organization), the F2P Network including the Racial Equity Priority Strategy Team, and willing partners.
4. Use the group to develop a community of practice for improving racial equity.
5. Identify targeted racial equity training needs and opportunities.

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES FOR THE RACIAL EQUITY PST

1. **Define and collect relevant data about racial equity in order to set clear and measurable targets for the state and the food system in Vermont.** Participants of the groups emphasized the importance of finding relevant food system data on racial equity. They pointed out that it would be difficult to set meaningful objectives and track their progress without the relevant data. While not everything that matters is measurable, many important things are measurable such as number of BIPOC who work on farms, who own farms, who wish to own farms, who are part of the supply chain, who lead organizations, what wage differences there may be among BIPOC relative to whites, etc. Other opportunities for data collection could include purchasing patterns and preferences of restaurants, supermarkets, and other food venues. Who do they purchase from? Do they have any policies about purchasing, hiring, or other priority commercial dealings with BIPOC sellers?

There may also be relevant data about the BIPOC perceptions of Vermont in general and the state’s food system more specifically. Many spoke of the need to create a more welcoming climate to BIPOC, both to keep BIPOC in the state but also to attract BIPOC to the state. Perception data could be an important indicator of the efficacy of such efforts.

Finally, several people noted that there are organizations that already have data relevant to this effort, or the ability to collect relevant data, but there hasn’t been a concerted effort to aggregate available data or amend the practices of existing data collection efforts. People and organizations could come together to understand and catalogue what data they have and actively collect, what data they would like but is not available, and then determine what data is possible to obtain given the resources available.

The following steps were discussed during the meetings:

- a. Call a meeting to define the data stakeholders would like to have.
- b. Determine what data is available and what data needs to be found.
- c. Determine where to get it. It’s possible that a great deal of data is already available from within the network or that network members will know where to get it.
- d. Set achievable racial equity goals and objectives given the available data. Many of these will be beyond the exclusive control of F2P and its membership, but the F2P Network could set goals and measurable objectives both for itself and the broader food system

based on this data. The latter is an express need identified in the Vermont Food System and Agriculture Strategic Plan 2021-2030, and goals and objectives developed from the data could be tracked and reported to the legislature as part of the Strategic Plan reporting requirements of the Farm to Plate Investment Program. Also, see section #3 for other comments on setting racial equity goals, targets, or objectives.

Two additional points were made about data. The first is that putting data to use is most effective when it's linked to stories. If the data provide the trends and big pictures, the stories connect people to the trends, opportunities and challenges the data suggest. The stories are where data come to life and inspire people to action.

The second point is that while data are critically important, they will not be of use without the careful and persistent work of building trust and relationships. F2P (including members of this priority strategy team) should invest the time and care to consult, check in with, and highlight the work of others (see next point below).

2. **Create a community services and asset map of those working on racial equity issues in VT.** In a context of limited resources, existing priorities, and evolving knowledge and practices to improve racial equity, it is critical to avoid duplications, to support existing efforts, and to illuminate and spread effective practices. In order to do this, it will be necessary first to understand who has, is already, and is planning on creating efforts to improve racial equity. New efforts that fail to understand or support existing efforts risk taking resources and attention from those efforts. Therefore, F2P should create a "map" or inventory of organizations and people engaging in racial equity work in the VT agricultural system. It would behoove members to know who works on land acquisition for BIPOC, who works on market access, who works on labor standards, who includes conversations on racial equity with farmers and supply chain actors including retailers and service or input providers (ag service stores and retailers, composters, etc.).

This effort should map:

- a. Activities related to racial equity of F2P members and relevant organizations outside the network.
 - b. Funding priorities of relevant ag funders including public, private investment, and philanthropic actors.
3. **Set meaningful and measurable racial equity objectives for the F2P backbone organization (VSJF), the F2P Network, and willing partners.** Participants suggested that the means of achieving this is a three-step process, begin with an internal audit to understand how current F2P practices impact racial equality, establish measurable goals that are supported by internal practices to achieve the goals, then later repeat the audit after a period of time by people or organizations in the network. The idea of a racial equity audit is relatively new. After the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis in May 2020, the practice became more common in

corporate settings. According to a paper posted in October 2021 on the [Harvard Law School on Corporate Governance](#) a racial equity audit is:

[A]n independent, objective and holistic analysis of a company’s policies, practices, products, services and efforts to combat systemic racism in order to end discrimination within or exhibited by the company with respect to its customers, suppliers or other stakeholders... intended to help companies craft their policies and practices to achieve their social justice goals.

[A] Racial Equity Audit is not necessarily to critique a company’s current platforms and efforts... instead, they can be a “stepping stone” to assist companies in developing and identifying a strategic plan to advance their goals.

This form of audit could help the Network understand where it is and is not contributing to racial equity and how to improve. As it identifies good practices both inside the organization (the backbone), among the Network’s groups, and finally, among its member organizations, F2P can improve its own practices or help to improve others’ practices.

Most importantly, the audit can help each group within the network understand what it can do to mainstream racial equity in its work. In total, there are 19 different groups within the F2P Network including priority strategy teams, communities of practices, and topic exchanges. This process should also include the newly formed Steering Committee, responsible for providing direction and focus for the Network as a whole. Over the course of this process, many people described the initial reactions of people in their organization to racial equity work as being “outside of scope,” only later coming to understand the importance of racial equity to the core functioning of the organization. It is possible that network groups will need to go through similar processes.

Participants suggested several possibilities for objectives such as:

1. Purchasing practices: Develop a goal of buying x% of things from BIPOC vendors.
2. Hiring and recruiting practices: Develop a goal of x% of BIPOC in leadership positions and staff.
3. Create a public statement of the diversity commitment and expectations of member organizations and people.
4. Ensure that anything that confers status or higher visibility is viewed through a BIPOC lens to ensure that BIPOC candidates are not overlooked (in the case of hiring processes), that labor practices are part of the considerations, especially where BIPOC labor is a factor. For example, a farm may have laudable achievements on environmental aspects side but may fall short on labor practices for a mostly migrant work force.
5. Ensure that each group within the F2P Network develops racial equity objectives relevant to their own subject matter.

Next steps include:

- a. Recruit leaders from the F2P Network that can provide leadership and guide the initial audit and subsequent work within the Racial Equity Plan Priority Strategy Team
- b. Conduct an internal audit of:
 - i. F2P backbone team
 - ii. F2P Network groups

- iii. Membership organizations (related to 2.a.)
- iv. Externally facing communication
- c. Share results of audit with Network membership and invite feedback
- d. Establish objectives and practices around racial equity
- e. Invite a periodic audit of progress

4. Use the group to develop a community of practice for improving racial equity. Many people and organizations who have been part of F2P have a wealth of experience in trying to bring more racial equity into the food system of Vermont. Some have great interest but little experience, and others have neither. Given these differences, the Racial Equity Priority Strategy Team could become something of a community of practice for people and organizations interested in improving on racial equity. The successes and failures of individuals and organizations could serve to inspire and inform the paths of others. Additionally, this shared learning could inform the training needs and opportunities discussed in (5).

Next steps include:

- a. Under the umbrella of the Racial Equity PST, bring F2P members together to discuss and share successes and failures with their efforts at improving racial equity.
 - b. The space could also be open for consultation for organizations and people trying to start up a particular effort.
 - c. The space could also be a place to document and share racial equity efforts with people and organizations inside and outside of the network.
- 5. Identify targeted racial equity training needs and opportunities.** Throughout the process, people have mentioned that training and learning about racial equity is necessary but mentioned two very important caveats on this point. First, trainings should not be an excuse for inaction i.e., holding a training is not the end goal nor itself an indicator of progress. Second, and relatedly, the trainings pursued should be specialized to address specific questions, problems, or practices that people and organizations in the network might be struggling with or believe would lead to better actions and outcomes in their organizational operations and policies, programming, or business practices.

These might be things related to topics such as:

- a. Fundraising for BIPOC specific initiatives
- b. Communication and awareness raising around racial equity efforts
- c. Accounting/purchasing/hiring/creating a more inclusive organizational culture
- d. On how to find, collect, and communicate relevant data on racial equity.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARTICIPATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE GROUP

Groups within the F2P Network tend to meet monthly or semi-monthly. This group would be similar. Usually there are co-leads for the groups who manage the agendas and facilitation with support of the backbone team (Jake Claro, F2P Director and Kelly Dolan, F2P Network Manager). Co-leads are paid for their time.

In the case of the Racial Equity PST, leads for some of the topics mentioned above could be a useful way to organize the effort. For example, there may be someone who wishes to take the lead on data and mapping, while someone else takes the lead on the audit, and another on training opportunities. The community of practice could be someone else, either of the leaders of the other subgroups, or a collaborative approach amongst leads.

Participation in the group should be open to whomever wishes to participate. Special efforts should be made to reach out to the people who were interviewed and who participated in one or both meetings.

NEXT STEPS FOR CONVENING THE RACIAL EQUITY PST

1. Backbone team members will reach out to people who have participated in the process to identify willing candidates for leadership roles in the group.
2. The group will meet, confirm leadership and begin work on one or several of the points mentioned in #s 1-5 above.