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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, 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.

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Agriculture Missions, Inc.
American Agriculture Movement, Inc.
American Federation of Government Employees
Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association
Border Agricultural Workers Union
CASA del Llano, INC.
CATA (The Farmworker Support Committee)
Community Food Security Coalition
Concerned Citizens of Tillery
Farmworker Association of Florida
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund
Flats Mentor Farm
Hispanic Farmers & Ranchers of America Inc.
Intertribal Agriculture Council

Land Stewardship Project
League of Rural Voters
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
Mississippi Association of Cooperatives
Missouri Rural Crisis Center
National Family Farm Coalition
National Hmong American Farmers
National Immigrant Farmers Initiative
National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
New American Sustainable Agriculture Project
North American Farm Alliance
North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project
Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project
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