SAFSF Film Discussion Guide



Digging In documents the story of American agriculture in its totality, unearthing complexities in the food system in **land access, consolidation,** and **climate change.** The narrative follows **Masika Henson**, an environmental advocate turned guide, from the plains of North Dakota to a celebration in Nicodemus, Kansas, to central Missouri and the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, to the West Coast, as she unpacks the food system.. Follow Masika as she digs in to answer the question: **is there hope for our food system?**

What makes *Digging In* a truly unique film is the way it takes on complex but powerful forces in our food system in an easy to digest format. The film explores themes of land ownership and corporate control, the hollowing out of rural America and the devastating impacts of a changing climate on farming communities. The film also highlights the struggles many marginalized farmers face, such as legacy Black farmers in Nicodemus, Kansas who struggle to maintain land due to financial difficulties and lack of support. Viewers also learn about the impact of market concentration and land consolidation, where large farms and processors dominate, leading to economic pressure on small farmers and local communities. Additionally, the conversation touches on the role of policy, particularly the Farm Bill, in shaping the agricultural landscape and the need for reform to support sustainable and equitable farming practices.

Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders, in partnership with Nathan.Works, produced Digging In in 2022, with underwriting provided by Vatheuer Family Foundation.

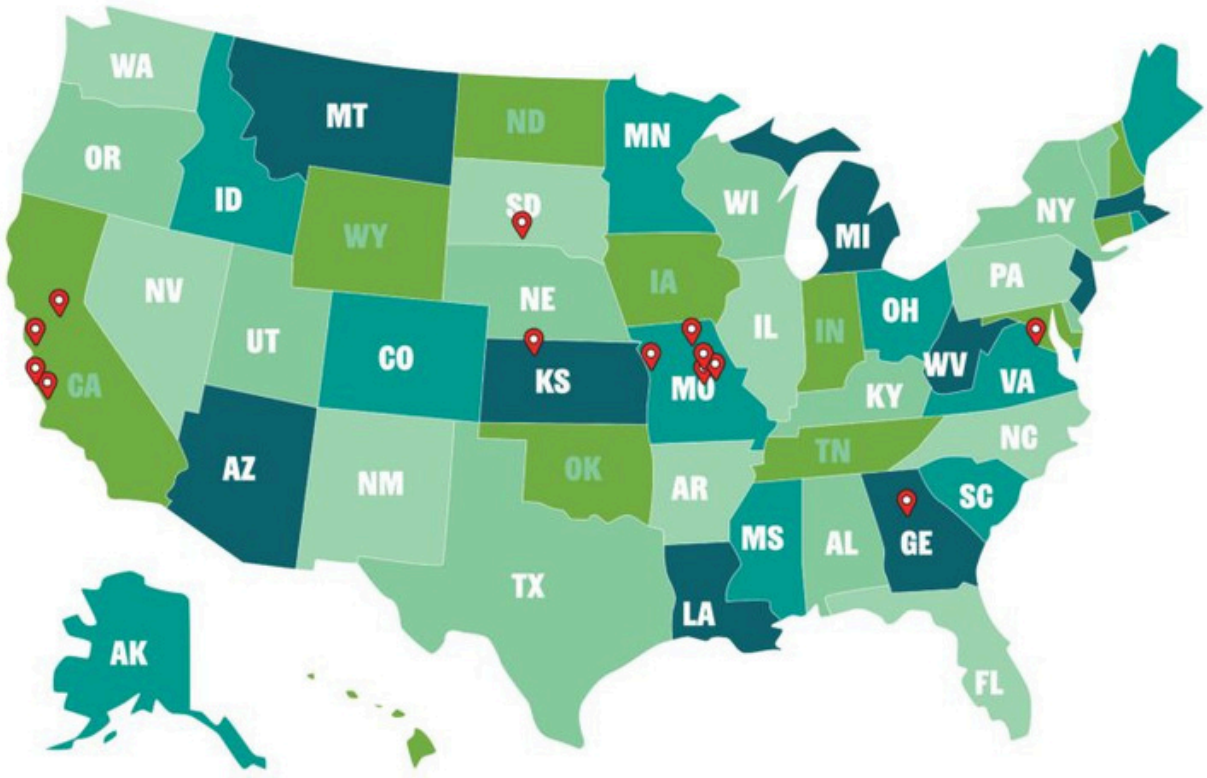
Digging In is available to you – now with a robust resource and discussion guide – to elevate the stories and situations featured in the documentary as sparks for systemic change that funders, nonprofit organizations, farmers and ranchers, and policymakers can work toward together. Land, corporate power, and climate change – these are three complex topics now made accessible. **Let's dig in.**

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Digging In stands out among other food documentaries because it tackles complex topics by introducing the viewer to memorable people and places, bringing to life the issues they face within the broader food and agriculture system in a way that is accessible and thought provoking. This discussion guide is designed to support groups who are learning about food and agriculture by unpacking the themes of the film and promoting further discussion. We created this film to shed light on under-discussed topics and under-resourced communities who face challenges but also offer solutions at the margins of our current food system. Additionally, SAFSF produced a series of virtual "lunch and learn" events that feature leaders in the field who weigh in on themes and scenes of the film. These 45 minute recordings are also linked in the discussion guide below.

While we hope this film will influence philanthropy to better understand the needs of marginalized producers and communities, we believe that *Digging In* is a useful tool for diverse audiences and ages. The documentary and accompanying discussion guide are in no way exhaustive, and we encourage you to continue learning by clicking the links for the dozens of organizations and people featured in this production. We hope this discussion guide will deepen your understanding of people and places, the policies and market forces that bring food to our plates - and inspire you to take action in your community for a more sustainable and just future of food.

The map below shows all the locations we traveled to create this film.



CONSOLIDATION & CONCENTRATION



"We can have whatever kind of agriculture we want. All we have to do is develop policy that promotes it."

—Wes Shoemyer, *Missouri Farmer and Former State Senator*

Let's dig into concentration and consolidation: farmland consolidation and industry concentration of livestock and agribusiness.



FAST FACTS (*at time of filming):

- The top four beef processors control 85% of the market.
- The top four pork processors control 2/3rds (67%) of the market.

Concentration plays out when a sector becomes so consolidated that there are only a few suppliers or buyers of a product. The food and agriculture system is concentrated – blatantly apparent in the meat processing sector and throughout the supply chain, made visible during the COVID-19 pandemic where packers saw historic profit margins. Workers in highly concentrated sectors have little to no power to demand equitable treatment, proper working conditions, and fair wages. The power has been taken from the people and transferred to corporations – who in turn, profit.

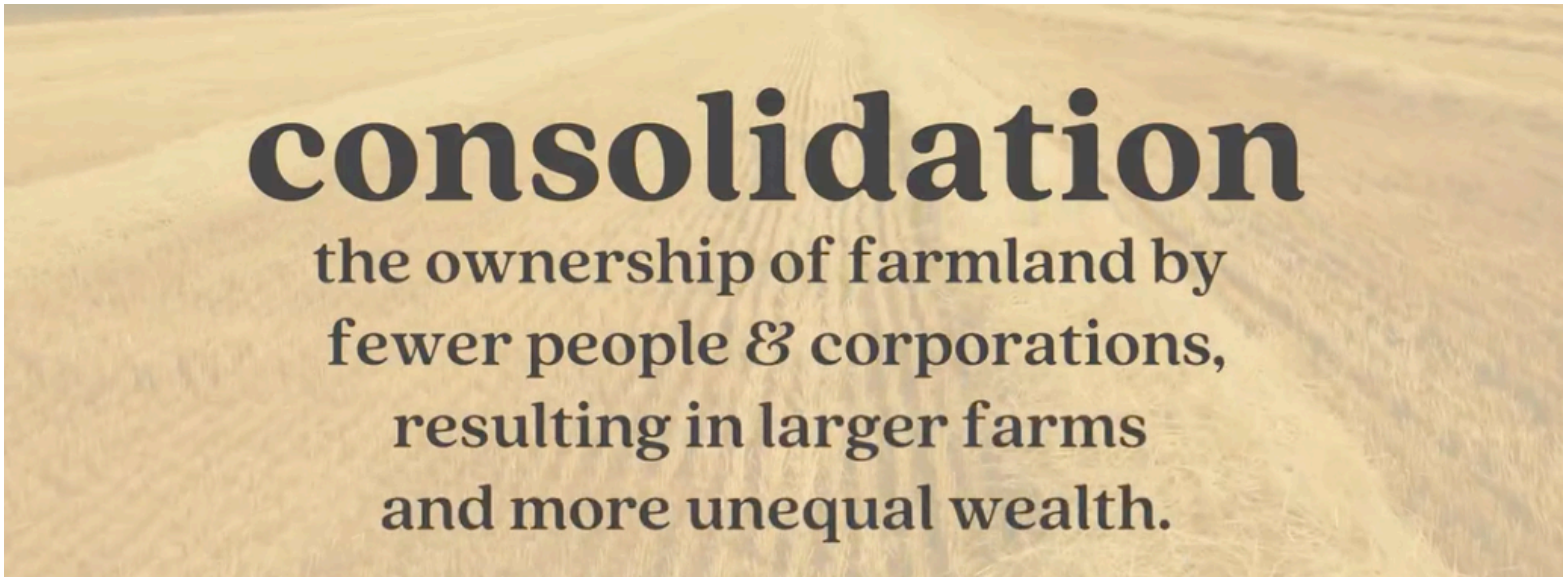


"Wealth could be shared by many people, or have it shared by just a very wealthy few."

—**Claire Kelloway**, *Open Markets Institute*

Felt in communities across America, agricultural concentration and consolidation has a notable impact in rural America. The hollowing out of rural America by these corporations is ***extraction of wealth.***

"They extract our natural resources, they extract our labor, they extract the wealth from the farm, from the labor, and put that money somewhere else, and it's not reinvested back in the rural areas," noted **Wes Shoemyer**, Owner of Shoemyer Family Farms.



State and federal agriculture policies have historically favored large farms and continue to do so. Large crop farms are getting larger, small crop farms are getting smaller, and many mid-size farms are disappearing. As Dr. TJ Cooper, a farmer in Fulton, Missouri candidly shared in the film: "One statistic is going to be out: Me."

"The industry has a strong narrative that the system that we have now is kind of the natural outcome of these kind of mythic market forces. Things just tend towards larger economies of scale, and this is the most efficient way to produce and distribute things. But that's not the case. **Governments set rules for markets. Right now, the rules of the market are skewed towards concentrated capital and large consolidated businesses**," - **Claire Kelloway**, Open Markets Institute

Economic pressure, extreme weather events, and systemic discrimination are forcing out farmers like Dr. **TJ Cooper** and **Webster Davis**, commodity growers in rural central Missouri. The unique pressures rural communities face – further exacerbated by loss of industries in healthcare, retail, education, and other sectors – make small and mid-size farms easy targets, more vulnerable to acquisition and closure.

Enter the current landscape: fewer farmers, fewer beginning or next generation farms, and fewer opportunities for farmers of color.

According to **Ferd Hoefner**, a food policy expert, roughly half of America's food production is done by about 4 percent of farm businesses. Corporations artificially drive up the price of land and dictate who does and does not have timely access to the marketplace, effectively shutting out family farmers in communities nationwide. Read more from Claire Kelloway, featured expert, here.

Discussion Questions:

- Whether you live in an urban or rural place, what do you know about who owns the land in your community?
- Who controls how and where you access food?
- How does the use of land in your community affect your daily life, your health, and what you eat?
- What does it mean for our food system—and our communities—when just a few big companies control most of what we eat, and who benefits or loses because of it?

LAND ACCESS

Today, 98 percent of farmland is owned by white people, and 95 percent of farmers are white. It wasn't always that way. Over decades, Black farmers have lost farmland due to discriminatory policies, lack of financing opportunities, and unscrupulous land development. The wealthiest farmers in the United States are white, and nearly all of the largest operations are owned by white farmers.

Land is a **visible** example of the racial wealth gap, highlighting disinvestment outside of the white middle class. The industry is trending toward consolidation, and that manifests in concentration of land ownership, economic access, and affordability for food.

FAST FACTS (*at time of filming):

- 41% of farmland is operated by just over 7% of the country's farms.
- 30% of farmland is owned by non-farmers
- 40% of farmland is leased
- 45% of landlords of agricultural lands have never farmed—and do not intend to.

Since the mid-20th century, agriculture policy has explicitly favored the largest of landowners and farming enterprises, leading to the disappearance of small and mid-sized farms owned by farmers of all cultural backgrounds. Unequal land access is a historical inequity entrenched in the culture of private land ownership and various forms of enforced labor and enslavement practiced by European settlers in America. Centuries of policies, laws, and violence have dispossessed Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) of land and labor, while discounting or erasing their contributions to building the country's agricultural knowledge wealth. There is a clear connection between land access and **food sovereignty**–having full control of the foods that are culturally significant and relevant to you.

Land ownership is a gateway to equitable food access for one's family, and most often, a community, and is a mechanism for the accumulation of generational wealth, which is why some families are financially stuck while others grow wealthy with each generation.

The number one barrier to entry? Securing access to land. To continue the conversations from the film, learn from **Martha McFarland** at Practical Farmers of Iowa about land access, transitional farming, and land ownership via SAFSF's YouTube channel.

Access to land must expand beyond the current landholders–it is critical to building a food system we all want. To elevate food sovereignty and food justice in communities that have been shut out, including Tribal nations, Indigenous communities, low-income neighborhoods, and predominantly people of color communities, equal opportunities for land is critical.

By putting the land back in the hands of diverse communities, sustainable and regenerative farming methods have an opportunity to flourish, building soil health and environmental stewardship of the land.

Food sovereignty for Tribal nations and Indigenous communities, food justice for communities of color and low-income Americans, the ability of the next generation of farmers and farmers of color to make a living on the land and keep agricultural lands in production using sustainable and regenerative farming methods, all are contingent on the expansion of land access beyond the current landholding class of Americans.

Discussion Questions:

- What emotions did the film bring up when discussing land loss and dispossession?
- What barriers to entry exist for new and beginning farmers, particularly farmers of color?
- How might unequal land access shape what food is grown and who benefits from it?
- What would a more equitable land ownership landscape look like in 20 years?

CLIMATE CHANGE

“Agriculture has a profound impact on the environment. It’s one of the most direct ways that humanity transforms the landscape” - Claire Kelloway, Open Markets Institute

Behind and beyond industry concentration, land consolidation and barriers to land looms an even larger threat: a rapidly changing climate. Climate change manifests in rising temperatures, extreme heat, adverse weather conditions, drought, severe wildfires, and heavy downpours and flooding.

The United States agriculture system takes quite a toll on the environment, accounting for 10 – 25 percent of total US greenhouse gas emissions, when estimates include fertilizer production, land use, and food waste, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Feeding a growing population against an increasingly unstable backdrop, climate change is a significant accelerator of the environmental impacts that agriculture already makes on our planet.

This is not news to the industry — farmers and ranchers are at the frontlines of climate change every day. Rural communities and Indigenous and Tribal communities face unique and heightened risks from the effects of climate change, elevated in the Digging In film. Farming and producing isn’t only affected by a changing climate–they are also drivers of environmental change that either positively or negatively contributes to a changing climate.

Key Terms





Amidst growing challenges and trying environments, there is a narrative that young people and others are not interested in farming. For **Kellee Matsushita-Tseng**, Land Stewardship Manager at **FoodWhat?!** and former Young Farmer Board member at **National Young Farmers Coalition**, this is a myth. They have trained thousands of young farmers who are passionate about ecologically regenerative, community-serving agriculture.

***Young people are ready**, but there are access and capital barriers, many of which are illuminating throughout Digging In. Learn from **Kellee** at **FoodWhat?!** about land and seed sovereignty, and community sovereignty as a tool for climate resilience on SAFSF's YouTube Channel.*

To shift to more sustainable and climate resilient practices:

- Federal agriculture policy needs to **shift from subsidizing** very particular crops to supporting farming systems that are scientifically-proven to address or mitigate climate change.
- Elevate regenerative agriculture practices that originated in traditional and Indigenous communities. Agroecological and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) practices prioritize diversified crop rotation, building soil health, livestock grazing at non–industrial scales, and supporting biodiversity.
- Check out SAFSF's Policy Principles for more on the role of policy.

The bottomline: change is going to have to happen. Our climate is going to demand it. **The future demands it.** And change can result in more climate resilient communities and ecosystems.

Discussion Questions:

- Who pays the price for a changing climate?
- If the way we grow food is part of the climate crisis, how can farming become part of the solution—and who should lead that change?
- How do we rebuild the community knowledge and community fabric that will support building community sovereignty as a tool for climate resilience?
- What is possible when BIPOC farmers have land access and can produce food sovereignty for their communities?

DIG INTO THE FILM

Is there hope for our food system?

When we set out to create Digging In, we hope to make a film about food – and we finished with more questions than answers. The answers we did encounter changed our minds, lifestyles, and approach to food in the United States. The film shows where our food system is abundantly failing, but also shows that change is possible. The good news is that the farmers and experts, communities and advocates featured in the film are leading on solutions. A more resilient local regional food system is being created as we speak, and with increase resources and support, change is possible in our lifetimes.

Narrative Film Production

Led by Nathan.Works, film production responded to and was accountable to the communities visited. Imperfectly, we practiced the following throughout the production:

- Chose locations closer to our crew's homes in the Midwest, High Plains, and the Bay Area
- Opted for road trips over flying when possible
- Planned efficient productions with limited movements between set-to-set
- Materially limited our plastic and paper usage
- Avoided chain restaurants and sought out local eateries that sourced food as responsibly as possible
- At the end of our production, we calculated our CO_2 emissions and paid for carbon offsets that went to soil health initiatives. We know that legitimate carbon offset programs aren't easy to find, and we also acknowledge how purchasing offsets can easily lead to more behavior that produces emissions. This is why we focused on rethinking and reducing throughout the project more than offsetting.

We are advocates for a future where making a film about Mother Earth is regenerative, sustainable, non-extractive, and kind, and we understand our role in bringing about that future.



NATHAN LEE

Film Director + Producer



JAY AUSTIN

Film Producer + Project Manger



MASIKA HENSON

Film Narrator + Host

FULL LIST OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consolidation + Concentration

- Whether you live in an urban or rural place, what do you know about who owns the land in your community?
- Who controls how and where you access food?
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Climate Change

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Additional Discussion Questions

- One of the co-producers of Digging In, Jay Austin, noted that filming gave him more empathy and understanding toward food producers in rural America. Reflect on your perspective on rural America, including Tribal and Indigenous communities and rural producers before and after the film. Did you learn anything that surprised you?
- During the buffalo hunting process at Wolakota Buffalo Range, TJ Heinert describes the relationship between the hunter and the animal, naming buffalos as relatives and the harvest as a sacred rite. In what ways do you feel connected to (or not connected to) the animals you consume?
- Review the definition of “food sovereignty.” What is a food that is culturally significant and relevant to you? To your family? To your community? Do you feel that you have control over the foods that mean the most to you? Why or why not?