

## **“Who Owns Arkansas?,” by Dr. Chris Jones**

Land is power, and in Arkansas, that power is shifting. For generations, farmland was the backbone of local communities, with family-owned farms providing both economic stability and a way of life. But over the past century, big business interests and super wealthy individuals have taken a growing share of that land, reshaping the agricultural economy and leaving many Arkansans behind.

The trend isn't new. In the early 20th century, African American farmers owned millions of acres of farmland across the South. But race based lending practices, legal loopholes, and economic pressures stripped most of that land away, contributing to today's vast racial wealth gap. Meanwhile, small white farmers also faced pressures from corporate agriculture, which prioritized industrial efficiency over local sustainability.

By the late 20th century, corporate ownership of farmland was accelerating. Companies like Delta & Pine Land, a major cotton producer, acquired vast tracts of land, squeezing out independent farmers who couldn't compete with industrialized operations. Today, corporate agriculture dominates in everything from poultry processing to rice production.

At the same time, the ultra-wealthy have turned farmland into an investment opportunity. Bill Gates, for example, has quietly become one of the largest private owners of farmland in the country, with holdings across the South, including in Arkansas. Hedge funds and foreign investors have also quietly bought up large amounts of land, driving up prices and making it harder for everyday Arkansans to own and farm their own land. They treat Arkansas land as a stable financial asset rather than a resource for food production and local livelihoods.

### **New Policies Squeezing Small Farmers**

Recent federal decisions have stripped away key supports for local farmers. The USDA recently canceled a \$2 billion program that helped schools and food banks purchase from small farmers, cutting off a vital revenue stream. At the same time, Elon Musk's gutting of the United States Agency for International Development has left over 30,000 tons of American-grown food rotting in ports, leaving farmers on the hook who relied on the Food for Peace program to sell surplus crops.

Trade policies are also putting more pressure on small-scale agriculture. The re-escalation of tariffs with Europe, China, Canada, and Mexico is driving down commodity prices for crops like corn, wheat, and soybeans, making it harder for farmers to turn a profit. Meanwhile, input costs—such as fertilizer and equipment—continue to rise, further squeezing farm incomes.

### **The Consequences for Arkansas**

As land ownership consolidates, local farmers struggle to stay afloat. The decline of family farms means fewer small businesses, less investment in rural communities, and dwindling school enrollments. Meanwhile, big landowners—many of whom don't even live in Arkansas—hold immense political influence, shaping agricultural policies to favor large-scale agribusiness over small and mid-sized farms.

**This shift isn't inevitable, but reversing it requires action.** Policies that limit corporate land acquisitions and support independent farmers are critical. Arkansans must also demand that state leaders focus on protecting local communities, not just serving the interests of out-of-state investors.

The future of Arkansas shouldn't be dictated by billionaires and big business. It should be in the hands of the people who work the land, raise their families here, and want to build a sustainable future.

Support local farmers by buying from them, push for policies that keep land in the hands of working Arkansans, and demand that lawmakers stop catering to big business interests. The more we organize and act, the harder it will be for billionaires and corporations to dictate our future.

Who Owns Arkansas is good question. **But the better question is: Who Should Own Arkansas? I believe it should be US!**

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