

# **FARM COMMITTEE**

## **FOOD & AGRICULTURE REGIONAL POLICY FORUM**

### **SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES**

#### ***Ona Balkus***

Ona Balkus serves as the Committee Director for the DC Council Committee on Health, chaired by Councilmember Christina Henderson. In this role, Ona oversees legislation and budgeting related to public health and health care access. Previously, she served as the DC Food Policy Director, and as Legislative Counsel on the DC Council Committee on Transportation and the Environment. She has crafted major food and nutrition policies, including laws enhancing nutrition benefits and healthy school meals. Ona holds a J.D./MPH from Harvard University, and lives with her family in Ward 5.

#### ***Sara Beckwith***

Sara Beckwith is the Interim Senior Deputy Director for the Community Health Administration at the DC Department of Health. With over a decade of public health leadership experience, she focuses on building healthier communities through disease prevention, early detection, and strategic collaboration. Sara is known for her commitment to improving health equity, navigating federal benefit systems, and strengthening public health infrastructure in the District.

#### ***Salaam Bhatti***

Salaam Bhatti is the SNAP Director at the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), where he leads national efforts to protect and strengthen access to food assistance. Previously with the Virginia Poverty Law Center, Salaam successfully advocated for major legislative reforms expanding SNAP, increasing TANF cash benefits, and expanding free school meals for children. He developed a digital tool to simplify benefits access, which has been used by over 1 million people and unlocked over \$50 million in benefits. Salaam has received multiple awards for his work on hunger and interfaith community-building. Salaam holds a JD from Touro Law School and a BA from Albright College.

#### ***Ashley Drakeford***

Ashley Drakeford is the Director of Small Business Development for the Capital Market of 20743. Ashley is a sixth-generation Prince George's County resident and a dedicated food justice advocate. Since 2019, Ashley has served as one of the leaders for The Capital Market of 20743, a community led initiative and farmers market dedicated to ensuring that

neighbors have access to healthy affordable food options, supporting the growth of local farms and agribusinesses owned by people of color, and advocating for equitable and culturally aware food systems. As Director of Small Business Development and Chief Officer of Vibes, Ashley oversees vendor relationships, agricultural education, and market operations. Under her leadership, The Capital Market has supported over 80 urban farms and donated thousands of pounds of produce annually.

### ***Kate Fitzgerald***

Kate Fitzgerald is an experienced food policy consultant and Principal at Fitzgerald Canepa, LLC, where she advises on sustainable food systems at federal, state, and local levels. With a strong background in governance and economics from the University of Texas at Austin, she has led successful Farm Bill campaigns and built bridges between regional agriculture and federal nutrition programs. Kate provides expertise in government, advocacy, and nonprofit communications to support healthy communities and resilient regional food economies.

### ***Charles Green***

Charles Green is the Deputy Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). He has worked with VDACS since 2005 and served as Deputy Commissioner since 2014. With a background in both international and domestic agricultural marketing, Charles previously held leadership roles at the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Coastal Lumber Company. He holds degrees from Virginia Tech and Campbell University and lives with his family on a small farm in King William County, Virginia.

### ***Emma Jagoz***

Emma Jagoz is a first-generation farmer and the founder of Moon Valley Farm, where she is dedicated to building a healthier and more just food system. Committed to regenerative agriculture and community empowerment, Emma grows certified organic produce and is the organic seat on the Maryland Agriculture Commission, advocating to restore the Chesapeake Bay region's ecosystem through agriculture. She sees localized food as a solution to climate change, poor health outcomes, and environmental degradation.

### ***Gale Livingstone***

Gale Livingstone is the founder of Deep Roots Farm, a regenerative, women-owned, Black-owned farm in Maryland focused on growing culturally relevant and seasonal produce. Originally from Guyana, Gale cultivates crops like okra and long beans, alongside local favorites such as tomatoes and squash. Her mission is rooted in food justice and community empowerment, and she envisions her farm becoming a full-service "life cycle farm" providing everything a family might need.

***James MacDonald***

Dr. James MacDonald is Research Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Maryland, where he teaches courses on commodity markets and on food and agricultural policy. His research focuses primarily on competition, technology adoption, and productivity growth in food and agriculture industries. Prior to joining the University, Professor MacDonald was for two decades chief of the Structure, Technology, and Productivity Branch at USDA's Economic Research Service.