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The Decline (and Revival?) of Black Farmers and Rural Landowners: A Review of the Research Literature

Jess Gilbert, Gwen Sharp, M. Sindy Felin



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THE DECLINE (AND REVIVAL?) OF BLACK FARMERS AND RURAL LANDOWNERS: A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

The African-American farmer is a rare breed in the United States. The loss of landownership and farming operations has contributed to the poverty of many rural communities in the South, where almost all remaining black farmers live. Since about 1970 the research literature on this issue has blossomed. One of the commonalities found in the literature is the sense of hopelessness in stemming the tide of black land loss. Indeed, an oft-cited prediction in earlier works was that there would be no black farmers in the United States by the year 2000. On the other hand, another commonality in the literature is the view that the black farmer and rural landowner must be sustained, even brought back.

Among the several reasons for the decline in the number of African-American farmers is that young people are not entering the field to replace the increasingly elderly population of existing black farmers. Farming is not exactly glamorous work. It is likely that younger generations are put off by the communal memory of slavery and sharecropping. In addition, Civil Rights and Affirmative Action policies have allowed young black men and women to aspire to professional careers once closed off to them. Why then do some argue for young people to enter farming and for older people to remain or return to farming? They could instead, for example, encourage the improvement of poor rural communities through education, training, and economic development.

The first answer is that both of these remedies are recommended; they are not mutually exclusive. The second answer is that farming is no longer a toiling-behind-a-mule-and-a-plow venture but rather a technical and managerial occupation—one which, despite many odds, some African-Americans choose. Finally, agriculture and landownership offer more than just economic benefits to rural black communities.

Among the studies to be reviewed here are those claiming that landowners make up the backbone of civic and political life in rural black communities. In fact, black landowners can take credit for being among the first to join and support the Civil Rights Movement in the rural South. Because they owned land and thus were their “own bosses,” they were harder to intimidate with the threat of job loss for registering to vote or participating in a protest rally. In

some cases they also were able to provide meeting places, shelter and financial support (e.g., bail) to Civil Rights workers. Such community leadership by black landowners is not a thing of the past. Furthermore, studies have shown that other advantages of landownership include increased personal pride, higher educational achievement of children, and an overall better sense of wellbeing. Property ownership, in other words, goes hand in hand with active citizenship.

These are among the reasons that there is a call for a return of the black farmer. The causes of the drastic decline in their number are straightforward and the proposed solutions reasonable. What may be lacking, however, is the political will to enact and sustain the needed remedies.

This paper consists of a review of 74 journal articles, reports, chapters, and books on African-Americans and farming, offering explanations and possible solutions for the land loss problem. The 74 works comprise most of the scholarly literature on the issue published since 1971, most from the mid-1980s or later. Omitted from this review are primarily historical studies that deal with blacks in agriculture before about 1945.

The subject of African-Americans and landownership is by no means a new one. The phrase “40 acres and a mule” referred to the promise and expectation of newly freed slaves that they would start their lives over as landholders. For the most part this promise was not kept. Most ex-slaves became sharecroppers or tenant farmers. In some cases, however, blacks were able to purchase or otherwise acquire land.

These new landowners faced hardships common to all farmers such as droughts, crop infestations, and poor markets. But black farmers also faced their own set of difficulties. Much of the land they obtained was of poor quality and small acreage. Land sellers often overcharged black buyers. Storekeepers would often cheat or overcharge black farmers for equipment and seed. Those who purchased crops would pay less to black farmers than they would to white farmers. And there were physical acts of intimidation, from attacks by the Ku Klux Klan to the hostility of white neighbors. Nevertheless, African-Americans as a group went from owning almost no land in the United States after the Civil War to peaking at 15 million acres by 1920. In that year, 14% of all US farmers were black. Of these 926,000 black farmers, all but 10,000 were in the South. By 1997, fewer than 20,000, or 1% of all farmers, were black, and they owned only about two million acres. The great majority of those left are still in the South.

While black farmers may comprise only 1% of farmers nationally, within the South they account for much larger percentages of farmers. In the counties studied by Hoppe et al. (1986), 9.7% of farmers were black. Within certain sub-regions, then, black farmers are still a vital part of the rural economy and society. Black farmers generally operate small farms specializing in livestock, although some produce cash grains or field crops such as tobacco (Banks 1986; Wood and Gilbert 2000). Compared to white farmers, black farmers are older, have less formal education, lower literacy rates, lower farm incomes, and lower total incomes (Schulman 1989). According to Banks (1986), about half of black-operated farms were under 50 acres and produced less than \$2,500 in sales per year; Demissie (1990) found that in 1987, 89% of black-operated farms had annual sales of less than \$20,000. Schulman discovered that both the average gross income and average total acres operated for non-white farmers was less than half that of

white farmers, and non-white farmers left farming at a much higher rate. However, black farmers have experienced the same pressures to increase farm scale as white farmers; Demissie found that while the number of black-operated farms has decreased, the average size of farms increased between 1959 and 1987. Wood and Gilbert found that most black farmers depend principally on off-farm income, with farming as a secondary source. Yet Hoppe et al. claim that black farmers still have less off-farm income than farmers in general. Munoz and Crecink (1986) found that black farmers in parts of Mississippi and Tennessee made up a disproportionate number of poor farmers, had lower net worth than white farmers, and depended almost entirely on farm income, making them very sensitive to market changes.

Most of the works presented below offer similar perspectives of the decline of blacks in farming: from the plight of the sharecropper in the 1930s to the Great Migration of the 1940s to mechanization in the 1950s and then continued racism and general economic hardship in later decades. Federal agricultural policies have played an important role since the New Deal. Some suggested solutions also are often repeated in these works; they include better assistance programs from the government and legal advice in retaining land. Furthermore, most rely on the Census of Agriculture for at least some of their data. But there are differences in the works. Together they cover a wide range of issues that differentiate black farmers by sub-region, state, farm size, tenure, crops raised, and social and economic situation.

We begin this literature review by clarifying the use of some key terms and briefly discuss the limitations and advantages of relying on the Census of Agriculture as a data source. Next we discuss the importance of landownership for black communities. We then review the general history of the decline of black farmers as presented by the research. Finally, we look at some of the research in detail for specific causes and possible solutions to the problem of black land loss.

DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Most of the works rely on the US Census of Agriculture for data. However, not all of the studies make the important distinction between the key terms “farmer” and “landowner.” The Census of Agriculture tries to count all farmers but not all farm landowners. The distinction is as follows: A “farmer” operates a farm but may or may not own the land. A farm landowner is of course the owner of farmland; this person may or may not farm. The Census of Agriculture studies only farmers. Landowners are included in the Census only if they also farm. For all Americans and for African-Americans, there are many more farm landowners than farmers. It is important to note that in much of the literature, the terms “landowner” and “farmer” are used interchangeably. Whether or not researchers use the Census of Agriculture for their data should indicate whether landowner or farmer is the true unit of analysis.

The importance of the distinction between these terms is at the heart of studying black land loss. Because the Census of Agriculture is the only comprehensive source on farmers, it is the one most cited. However, the amount of rural land owned by blacks (or any other group, for that matter) in the United States is not known. Non-farmland (e.g., forested, unused land) and non-

farmers (even if they own farmland) are not included in the Census. Also, the Census definition of “farm” has changed over time and does not include land, regardless of use or owner, unless it meets certain criteria. One recent change is that a “farm” must make at least \$1,000 in annual sales. Because farms owned or operated by African-Americans are usually much smaller than other farms, such changes in the definition of a farm affect their reported numbers disproportionately.

Another change came in 1997, when the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducted the Census for the first time (instead of the Department of Commerce’s Bureau of the Census). The 1997 Census of Agriculture is the most accurate in a long time, including its count of black farmers. For this reason, the trend line is misleading; in all likelihood, the number of black farmers continued to decline sharply, as it has in recent decades. However, the total decline between 1992 and 1997 is reported to be only a few hundred, and the number of African-American farmers seemingly increased slightly in some states. It is unfortunate that one of the results of better data-gathering is this false “trend.” Yet this most recent, more accurate Census shows that previous ones underestimated the number of black farmers.

Fisher (1973, 1978) demonstrates the problem in relying only on the Census of Agriculture to provide a comprehensive picture of African-American farm landownership. By examining another data source, he gives a better portrait. Using county tax digests in the state of Georgia, Fisher (1978) found a 21% decrease in black farm landownership between 1920 and 1960. However, the Census of Agriculture for the same time period shows a 51% decrease in the acres of farmland owned by black farmers. Unfortunately, only Georgia has such tax digests, so comparable numbers for other states are unavailable.

Despite the drawbacks of the US Census of Agriculture, it is the best source of data on farmers. It is the most comprehensive—compiling national data down to the county level. It is longitudinal—conducted every 5 years. It also is accessible and easy to use. Nevertheless, some of the researchers treated below mention the need for a land registry specifically to account for land and landowners not (or only partially) covered by the Census of Agriculture.

LANDOWNERS AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING

Landownership is important because it is a form of wealth, not just income. As such, it can provide a spur to economic development and broader investment, including the education of children. In the rural Black Belt of the South, where most African-American farms are located, land is still key to cultural and political power as well. From the visions of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, to Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, through populists and progressives of yesterday and today, widespread property ownership has promised more democracy, fuller citizenship, and a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and power.

Landownership, then, is important to individuals for more than economic reasons. This was the conclusion of a convincing study by Salamon (1979a; 1979b); subsequently, other researchers have made similar claims. Salamon used survey interviews and government statistics

to compare the socioeconomic wellbeing and civic/political participation of black tenant farmers who became landowners under the New Deal Resettlement Program against those who remained landless farmers. One hundred tenants and 178 Resettlement participants from eight all-black communities were interviewed. Salamon found that the Resettlement participants fared better than tenant farmers in every respect. While the total number of African-American landowners decreased in the South overall, the number of blacks owning project lands in these communities actually increased. The number of acres per family decreased on these Resettlement lands, but the decrease was only half as much as for other blacks. Forty-two percent of the landowners' children became white-collar workers, compared to 25% of the tenant farmers' children. The percentage of landowners involved in the Civil Rights Movement surpassed tenant participation by very large margins. Finally, open-ended questions revealed that landowners felt more of a sense of optimism and independence than did tenants.

A central conclusion of Salamon's study was that the full benefits of many social experiments such as the Resettlement Program may not be apparent after the few years usually given before a policy is evaluated for effectiveness. By comparing the differences in the lives of participants and their children more than 30 years after the program began, Salamon concluded that the project was extremely cost-effective and successful. He recommended that a similar program be implemented with government-owned land in southern areas with large black populations. However, Trend and Lett (1986) present an opposing view of the effectiveness of this program.

Other studies confirm Salamon's findings. Darling (1982) found that African-American landowners in North Carolina helped stabilize black communities. Local residents felt that landownership provided economic autonomy and social independence both for individuals and for the community as a whole. Field (2000) also looked at black farm landowners in North Carolina, and found that they contribute to rural economies through property taxes and by patronizing local businesses. Families that own land create stable communities and are able to support community organizations and sustain kinship networks. Couto (1991) interviewed residents of four communities in the rural South, and found that black landowners were able to provide housing for Civil Rights workers and displaced tenants. Black farmers who owned land often became community leaders. Brown, Christy, and Gebremedhin (1994) found that landownership is related to individual feelings of value and self-worth among black farmers, and that they help support rural economies. Gaventa (1998) describes the importance of landownership for local economies, as well as the sense of empowerment it provides rural residents. Beauford, Miller, and Walker (1984) and Pennick (1990) argued that landownership is essential to developing a political power base and improving the quality of life for African-Americans. Groger (1987) believed that landownership—especially owning their own home—is a key determinant of the wellbeing of elderly black residents in North Carolina. Staten (1999) had similar findings. Grim and Effland (1997) documented the importance of landownership in Brooks Farm, Mississippi. Because local black residents owned land, they developed a sense of community and shared values that was absent in black communities where landownership was less common. Finally, Pogue (1979) suggested that landownership and the stability it brings will

continue to be important, as many blacks who migrated to Northern cities are returning to the rural South.

HISTORICAL STUDIES

Although the literature reviewed here is not primarily historical, three such case studies are included since they come up into recent times. All three trace the history of specific African-American communities where the legacy of landownership, beginning after the Civil War, continued to be important into the 1970s. These studies also present more detailed information on the gradual decline of landownership between 1920 and 1960, which much of the remaining literature simply summarizes. For additional historical studies, see Day (1981), Nathans (1982), McDougall (1984), Petrow (1982), and Gilbert and Eli (2000).

Darling (1982) interviewed residents in Warren County, North Carolina, and created an oral history of black landownership between 1910 and 1960. She verified information from the oral history using tax, estate, and court records. Her account documents the struggles black farmers faced, including exploitative sharecropping arrangements, white landowners' unwillingness to sell land to black farmers, and discrimination on the part of local USDA administrators. Most black farmers in the area were sharecroppers or small subsistence farmers, who produced cash crops for sale.

Residents of Warren County were explicit about the role of landownership in their community. Owning land gave black farmers more control over the management of their farming operations; they took great pride in making their own decisions rather than answering to a white landlord. For the black community, ownership of land provided a sense of economic autonomy and social independence. Families that owned land helped stabilize the community and built local institutions such as schools and churches. Many local residents felt that owning land was the key to economic security and real citizenship. This was true not only for African-American farmers but also for those who owned their own house in town. Over the years, forced partition sales, the unprofitability of small farms, and out-migration of young people undermined black landownership in Warren County. Residents also reported that they were denied food stamps and other government benefits because they owned land, and administrators of these programs pressured blacks to sell their land in order to qualify for government programs. The result is that black landownership fell from 47,000 acres owned by 555 individuals in 1949 to 19,000 acres owned by 379 individuals by 1969. However, many remaining residents were insistent on keeping their land, both because they were proud of owning their own home and because they felt it provided them with economic and social security.

Bethel's work (1981) on Promised Land, South Carolina, describes the social and economic life of the community between 1870 and 1970. Much of it is grounded in detailed case studies of individuals and families. Central to their stories is their relation to the land—how they got it and their struggle to keep and subsist on it. The few thousand acres that was to become Promised Land was distributed to former slaves beginning in 1868. Despite the hardship of Ku Klux Klan

attacks, droughts, and crop failures, Promised Land attracted freedmen who could find no other land to purchase. There was also the prestige and autonomy that came with landownership and, as the community grew, a sense of safety in numbers. Not all of the residents in the community were landowners, and Bethel notes the differences between those who owned land and those who were tenants.

As the population grew, land was divided by inheritance, and plots became too small to farm. The actual acreage of Promised Land did not grow as there was little additional land available to African-Americans in the area. Between 1880 and 1942, the average acres owned fell from 48 to 22 while the percentage of adults owning land grew from 41 to 73. During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, because of multiple division of land through the generations, the unprofitability of farming small acreages, the need for workers in nearby areas, and increased industrial opportunities brought on largely by the Civil Rights Movement, Promised Land became less and less of a farming community and more of a residential suburb. But because of the historical significance tied to owning land—including a sense of freedom, autonomy, and pride in passing along property to children—two-thirds of Promised Land residents in 1970 owned the land on which they lived, and 90% of the residents were direct descendants of the freedmen who settled there in 1870.

Nesbitt (1979) used oral interviews and historical documents such as deed books, newspapers, and court records to study land acquisition and land loss by African-Americans in the community of Promise Land, Tennessee, between 1870 and 1978. He argues that soon after the Civil War, blacks saw the connection between owning land and civic and political participation. However, the few blacks who could buy land faced discriminatory practices from white land sellers and businessmen. Even more common, the land that blacks purchased was of the poorest quality. Nevertheless, a group of freedmen made a concerted effort to purchase land in what would become Promise Land. At its peak during the 1920s, the residents numbered 500 and owned over 1,000 acres of land. By 1978, following decades of land loss similar to that experienced by many others, there were a dozen residents owning a total of 50 acres in Promise Land, Tennessee.

LAND LOSS AND FARMER DECLINE

The history of the communities that Darling, Bethel, and Nesbitt studied parallels in many ways the history of black landownership in general. In most cases much of the land was lost or no longer serves as a source of income. The modern study of these issues dates to 1971, when Clark College in Atlanta sponsored a two-day conference on black land loss under the auspices of the Black Economic Research Center. This organization was formed by Robert S. Browne to raise funds to address the problem through the creation of a land bank. A major result of this conference was the report by Browne (1973) describing the outcome of approximately a dozen small projects that were proposed during the conference and subsequently implemented throughout the South. Some of these projects were efforts to tackle the problem of land loss in a town or county while others were historical documentation of land loss in black communities.

Browne's report was the most comprehensive look at the then-current situation of black land loss. He found that between 1950 and 1969, the number of acres of land fully or partly owned by blacks dropped from 12 million to 5.5 million. Few of the research pieces appearing in the ensuing two decades covered topics not already broached in Browne's report. Instead many of the later works focused on one cause or potential solution to black land loss, or on a particular geographic area. Indeed, aside from these differences, the causes and suggested solutions found in Browne's 1973 report continue to be found in the latest literature on black land loss.

The general decline of farm landownership is not a problem exclusive to the black community. In the 1980s, stories of the passing of the "family farm" were common in the media. However, Christy (1991) argues that the disappearance of black farmers cannot be explained by general economic factors alone. Similarly, Hickey and Hickey (1987) argue that African-American participation in and success at farming is primarily determined by the social and economic power structures operating in agriculture. While the trend toward larger and fewer farms affects rural Americans regardless of race (Marshall and Thompson 1976), blacks have been hit harder than other groups. This is partially because minority farmers make up a disproportionate number of all small farmers (Lewis 1976, 1979b; Beale 1991). While many of the ways that a farm can "go under" are similar across racial lines, there are some more specific and interrelated reasons for land loss among African-American farmers. They include failure to write a will, failure to pay property taxes, non-participation in government programs, and racism.

Tax Sales and Heir or Partition Sales

Heir or partition sales are forced sales of land owned in common by a number of individuals. When landowners fail to leave wills, land is transferred to all eligible heirs as an undivided unit. Mitchell (2001) describes the ways in which joint inheritance of this sort leads to land sales. Land held under a "tenancy in common" is not divided and distributed to individual heirs; rather, all heirs have an equal, undivided interest in the entire property. Any individual heir can legally force a sale of the landholding, regardless of the wishes of other heirs. Any heir may also sell a share to non-family members without consulting other heirs. Non-family members (usually white landowners) have used these laws to their advantage, buying a small share in a parcel of land in order to force a partition sale. They are then able to purchase the entire parcel, usually at a very low price. For instance, Smith (1991) found that real estate developers used this tactic to acquire land from black landowners in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Unfortunately, heirs often do not realize that selling their individual share may lead to forced sale of all the land.

Many researchers note that one common way blacks lose land is through heir property sales. Zabawa and Baharanyi (1992), Schulman et al. (1985b), and Ball (1980) present research specifically on this problem. Zabawa and Baharanyi present a survey of 120 black landowners from five Alabama counties in the Black Belt. Of these respondents, 56% had not written wills. Of those without wills, 58% expressed that they simply had not gotten around to making a will, 28% made a conscious choice not to have a will or were in the process of making one, and 13% gave reasons why they thought they should not or could not write a will. Schulman et al. interviewed 60 small-scale operators in three North Carolina counties and found that 53 did not

have wills. Only nine of those without wills had received legal assistance in putting together a will within the past year. Ball also found that black landowners failed to leave wills, and in 1974, one-third of black-owned land in the Southeast was “heir property.” Given that older owners control most of the farmland operated by black farmers (Crecink 1984), failure to leave wills can have a very large impact on black landownership.

Failure to pay property taxes also leads to forced sale of land. In these cases, the land is sold for the whole or a portion of the amount of taxes owed. Several researchers note that this is another common way blacks lose ownership of their land. Lewis (1979a) reviews government records and previous empirical studies and suggests that poor quality farmland, inefficient use of land, input cost increases, and interregional competition all contribute to the inability to pay property taxes. Lewis recommends that farmers be educated on tax laws specific to their locale. He illustrates the importance of this by reviewing the differing laws that govern the process of tax sales for 11 southern states, including grace period given, interest charged on delinquent taxes, and amount of money needed to acquire a lien. Ball (1980) found that owners of heir property have particular difficulties avoiding forced tax sales. Because heirs often are dispersed and disorganized, they frequently are unable to act together to save the property before a forced sale occurs.

As Mitchell (2001) shows, legal assistance is desperately needed by many black landowners. McGee and Boone (1979) similarly call for efforts to educate black farmers about legal aspects of landownership and assistance keeping updated records.

Non-Participation in Government Programs

The federal government provides a wide variety of programs through which farmers can borrow money, obtain better commodity prices, improve land, and otherwise increase their income. The forerunners of today’s programs were instituted in order to alleviate the financial stresses of farms during the Great Depression. Black farmers, however, have never participated in these programs in proportion to their numbers. In fact, thousands of black farmers were harmed by the main New Deal agricultural policy of acreage reductions; their landlords cut back production by displacing sharecroppers and tenant farmers. According to a Tuskegee Institute report cited by Grim (1996), African-American farmers were basically uninvolved in or unaware of many government programs prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Racism contributed greatly to such low participation rates because most of the programs were implemented by local committees on which blacks were not represented, even in majority-black counties. Complaints of racism in the USDA’s Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) and Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) were levied loudly during the Civil Rights Era. Grim contends that the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 resulted in more farm program participation by minorities and increased the number of minority employees in local offices that administered the programs. Voting for, if not participation on, elected farmer committees also gradually improved. The resurgence of conservatism during the 1980s, however, was accompanied by a decline in the participation rate of black farmers in certain public agricultural programs.

Grim (1995, 1996) and Jones (1994) summarize the benefits and drawbacks of a number of programs and trace the participation rates of blacks through several decades. Grim reviews research regarding African-American farmers' participation in and knowledge of FmHA and ASCS programs between 1964 and 1990, including loans for farm operation, farm ownership, emergency disaster, economic emergency, and soil and water conservation. Jones uses the US Census of Agriculture data of 1969 and 1987 to compare whites and blacks in their rate of participation and level of program benefits. Among the forms of assistance he summarizes are price supports, income support, supply control, disaster assistance, conservation, farm credit, forestry incentive, and emergency feed assistance. Munoz (1985) also argues for increased federal programs for black farmers, particularly management counseling services and low-interest loans. Grim, Jones, and Munoz all found that blacks participate at rates below their proportion in the farming population and that those blacks who do participate often receive far fewer benefits than whites.

Grim (1995, 1996) and Jones (1994) attribute their findings to racism, but only in part. The low rate at which black farmers participate in government agricultural programs is also the result of poor education and lack of information. For example, McLean-Meyinsse and Brown (1994) interviewed 15 farmers who were among those chosen as outstanding black conservation farmers in Louisiana. They found that a major factor in these farmers' ability to minimize losses and stabilize farm incomes was their participation in government commodity programs. But they also differed from the average black Louisiana farmer in that they were younger and better educated. Dishongh and Worthen (1991) describe efforts by the Florida Soil Conservation Service in using non-traditional channels to reach black farmers and involve them in USDA programs. They found that personal visits by local agents were particularly effective at increasing adoption of conservation technologies because they increased black farmers' trust. While adoption rates were still low, those black farmers who knew about and understood available programs generally took advantage of them. The authors cite this as evidence of the potential to increase black farmers' participation in public agricultural programs. In sum, black farmers and landowners need more effective government programs in all areas, especially credit and technical assistance.

Racism

Despite the fact that land loss by and decline of black farmers has many specific causes, racism stands out both by itself and as a contributing factor to many of the other causes. Racism in its harshest form—slavery—was the root cause of the lack of landownership by African-Americans to begin with. Emancipation in the 1860s did not eliminate racism, of course, and newly freed slaves could purchase land only with great difficulty, if at all. From this disadvantaged starting point, African-American farmers had to contend not only with uncontrollable acts of nature and economic fluctuations, as did other farmers, but also with racial harassment by neighbors and unequal treatment by storekeepers and lending agencies. Almost all the literature reviewed here cites continued racism as among the major causes of land loss by African-Americans.

Minority farmers today experience racism in the form of discriminatory implementation of federal government programs. Ponder (1971) and Payne (1991) note that black farmers were not

represented on local USDA committees and that both federal and private lending agencies were unresponsive to the needs of black farmers. The most thoroughly documented accounts of such discrimination come from a number of government reports on the issue of black land loss. The US House of Representatives Committee on Government Operations (1990) held a hearing to document reports of discrimination against black farmers. Black farmers were misinformed about government programs, received less money than they requested, and did not receive loans in a timely manner. The hearing also described the difficulty of tracking discrimination complaints within USDA.

A recent report by the Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) of the US Department of Agriculture (1997) found that such discrimination still occurs. Members of CRAT conducted “listening forums” for minority farmers to share their experiences of unfair treatment by the USDA. Minority farmers described a pattern of discriminatory behavior, including approved loans arriving long after planting season, arbitrary reductions in loan amounts, and a much higher rejection rate for minority loan applicants than white applicants. They also accused the USDA of ignoring research that would help small-scale and limited-resource farmers and of failing to include minority populations in outreach efforts to raise awareness of federal programs. Finally, minority farmers said that complaints of discrimination were processed slowly, if at all, and that the USDA often continued with foreclosure proceedings even when a relevant discrimination complaint had been filed. Overall, the CRAT Report found that there is little accountability within the USDA; employees and county committees who discriminate against minority farmers are not held accountable for their behavior.

Several African-American farmers filed a class-action lawsuit against the USDA in 1997 (Wood and Gilbert 2000). The lawsuit accused the county offices of USDA agencies of systematic discrimination against black farmers, including many of the same behaviors described in the CRAT Report. It also accused the USDA of ignoring complaints filed by black farmers. Nearly 15,000 African-Americans who had farmed between 1981 and 1996 joined the class action lawsuit. The USDA offered each certified claimant an individual settlement of \$50,000 tax-free plus forgiveness of all debt owed to it (but not to private lenders). Claimants may also choose arbitration, in which the settlement is equal to actual cash damages, but because this option requires more proof of damages, the majority of claimants have chosen the first settlement option. Even so, this is by far the largest civil rights settlement in US history.

The United States House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture (1999) recently held hearings to follow up on the class action lawsuit and the implementation of the USDA/CRAT Report (1997) suggestions. The Director of the Office of Civil Rights for the USDA testified that the department has implemented most of the recommendations of the CRAT Report, has taken disciplinary actions against some employees, and plans to increase the diversity among its staff. However, many participants in the hearing were concerned that employees are not held accountable for acts of discrimination against black farmers. Because many USDA programs are implemented by locally elected farmers who are not accountable to the Secretary of Agriculture, it is difficult to take disciplinary action against them at the federal level. Several US Representatives expressed concern that without disciplinary action, discrimination will continue,

regardless of the class action lawsuit. Furthermore, black farm activists testified that settlement payments from the lawsuit were delayed, and some black farmers are being denied operating loans that would allow them to continue farming while they wait for their settlement payment. These activists argued that there has been little improvement within the USDA, and that many black farmers will not benefit from the class action suit.

REVERSING THE TREND?

The possibility that African-American farmers can sustain and eventually improve on their current level of landownership seems bleak according to many researchers. Several suggest that taking steps to attract industries is more likely to help alleviate poverty in rural southern communities that have lost a significant number of black farmers (e.g., Zabawa 1999; Christy 1991; Beale 1991). Fisher (1973) suggests that land loss among blacks has become a circular problem where young people are not interested in farming as they know it, and older farmers are unwilling to modernize their operations since their descendants are not interested in agriculture. Schweningen (1989) even suggests that the opportunities that education, urbanization, and the Civil Rights Movement have opened up to young African-Americans are more responsible for the decline of farming than is racial discrimination. Schweningen implies that these are positive changes since the romanticized notion of the “yeoman farmer” is a thing of the past.

In the literature on black land loss, however, Schweningen’s is a singular viewpoint. Not only do many of the researchers call for steps to restore African-Americans to the land, but these farmers themselves, as seen in the CRAT Report (1997) and the US House hearing (1999), want a fair chance to continue or return to farming. Wood and Gilbert (2000) found that black landowners were very committed to farming, and even those who had quit usually hoped to begin farming again as soon as possible. Among the most cited remedies are an infusion of younger, more educated blacks into farming to replace the elderly population, agricultural programs that are specifically tailored to the needs of small farmers, and compliance by local USDA offices with civil rights mandates. Other specific factors suggested in the literature that can contribute to the success of black farmers include particular survival strategies that increase the viability of individual farms as well as efforts by Black Land Grant Universities and non-governmental organizations.

Survival Strategies

Yeboah and Wright (1985) say that effective land-loss prevention measures may have to occur on the individual farm level. After conducting 217 interviews in five areas of North Carolina to gather statistics on land, labor, capital, crop type, and income, they chose three representative farmers for detailed study. The authors used linear programming to examine “allocative efficiency”—that is, “what enterprise combination can provide a farmer with the highest income given his resource constraints.” They found that the farmers could dramatically increase their income by changing the mix of crops they raise, using less hired labor, and farming more of their own land. They concluded by recommending the use of Extension personnel to disseminate

research information and to train farmers in better allocation of their resources. One useful research project would be to replicate Yeboah and Wright's study using more farmers from other states and following up with the Extension agents available to black farmers.

Other studies indicate a number of possibilities for increasing the incomes of black farmers. Webber (1987) and Staten (1999) found that many older black farmers engaged in subsistence gardening and also sold a variety of crops through roadside stands. Other uses for farmland included hunting, leasing to farmers, and contracting with paper companies to grow trees. Tackie, Findlay, and Baharanyi (1998) interviewed limited-resource farmers in Alabama and concluded that black farmers need help marketing their products, especially gaining access to high-value markets. Schulman, Garrett, and Luginbuhl (1985a) and Schulman and Newman (1991) found that access to tobacco allotments and household labor were key determinants of economic wellbeing. Field (2000) and Zabawa, Siaway, and Baharanyi (1990) urge assistance in production of alternative crops and direct or cooperative marketing for black farmers. They also suggest that youth outreach programs and legal services aimed at encouraging black farmers to write wills would decrease losses of black-owned land. McDougall (1984) describes a number of projects by black organizations, including the Nation of Islam, that attempted to link black farmers to mainstream supermarkets and urban consumers. Finally, the USDA National Commission on Small Farms (1998) urges targeting credit to minority farmers, developing direct marketing and value-added activities, increasing funding to programs that work with limited resource farmers, and implementing the recommendations of the USDA/CRAT Report (1997).

Increasing the efficiency of land through better farming techniques or resources may not be the only way for black landowners to hold on to their land. Non-crop use of land may also be an option. Jones' study of the participation of blacks in federal agricultural programs (1994) summarizes, among other forms of assistance, the forestry and conservation incentive programs. In all federal programs he reviewed, blacks lagged far behind their white counterparts in participation rates. Jones attributes the low participation rate to lack of information and racial discrimination in program implementation. McLean-Meyinsse and Brown (1994) take a different strategy, interviewing 15 black landowners who successfully participated in programs that enabled them to profit from their land through non-crop alternatives. These 15 were among 46 chosen as outstanding black conservation farmers by the US Soil Conservation Service in Louisiana in 1988. Like Jones, McLean-Meyinsse and Brown recommend employing methods specifically to spread information about various government programs and alternative agricultural enterprises to black farmers. According to Zabawa, Siaway, and Baharanyi (1990), division of land among several children results in many plots that are not economically viable as farmland; owners of such plots may find information on alternative uses for their land to be especially useful.

Several studies suggest that personal characteristics of farmers make a difference in success or failure at farming. Several articles—Brown and Larson (1979), Gladwin and Zabawa (1985), McLean-Meyinsse and Brown (1994), and Beauford and Nelson (1988)—study success and survival strategies specifically. All four found that when compared to black farmers who left farming, the successful black farmers were younger, better educated, and had stronger family

support. Brown and Larson and McLean-Meynsse and Brown also found that successful black farmers were more likely to be early adopters of new technologies and managerial techniques, prefer farming as an occupation, participate in government programs, have high educational aspirations for their children, and have a strong work ethic. However, Beauford and Nelson suggest that increasing the income of black farmers will be difficult because black farmers are unwilling to take risks, lack access to capital, and do not have information about new management practices.

Gladwin and Zabawa (1985) found that the main survival strategy used by black farmers was holding a full- or part-time off-farm job. However, both Banks (1986) and Munoz (1984, 1985) believe that black farmers' age, low education levels, and lack of job skills limit their ability to find off-farm work in many areas. Hoppe, Bluestone, and Getz (1986) found that black farmers are concentrated in counties with few non-farm employment opportunities. Given this situation, Munoz (1984, 1985) and Crecink (1984) suggest that utilizing social service programs such as income supplementation may be the best way to increase black farm families' incomes.

The Role of Black Land Grant Colleges and Non-Governmental Organizations

In 1890 Congress established land grant colleges for African-Americans, parallel to the system of land grants created in 1862. Eventually the Black Land Grant Universities (or "the 1890s," as they are called) would include 17 schools throughout the South. The main mission of land grant institutions is to assist farmers and rural populations. However, the entire system has come under criticism. For example, Marbury (1979) contends that the land grants have geared their efforts toward assisting industry and big business and in so doing have directly caused the loss of farms by small and black operators as well as a paucity of jobs for farm workers. Marbury recommends that the 1890s especially reorient their focus toward the needs of farmers and rural inhabitants. Marshall and Thomson (1976) similarly argue that the land grant institutions have ignored the needs of small farmers, and call for a redirection of public policy to support small farms through research and access to credit.

Lyson (1980) presents a more optimistic view of the Black Land Grant Universities. He surveyed 600 male students at 16 of the 1890s and found that 12% had farming aspirations. These students were more likely to come from farming families and have expectations of inheriting a farm. Lyson suggests that these black students can remain part of American agriculture with proper assistance and motivation and that other young blacks would opt for agricultural careers if the 1890s specifically aimed to recruit and train potential black farmers.

Tackie, Findlay, and Baharanyi (1998) and Zabawa (1999) both cite the USDA's Small Farmer Outreach Training and Technical Assistance Program, which allows Black Land Grant Universities to target limited resource farmers. Zabawa believes that increases in black farms in some counties may be attributed to the Small Farmer Outreach Program. Though it has never been adequately funded, the program has been successful at helping black farmers increase their farm incomes. Tackie, Findlay, and Baharanyi interviewed black farmers who participated in the program and identified further areas for research, such as marketing and access to credit. These

two studies indicate that Black Land Grant Universities can be an important resource for black farmers trying to increase the profitability of their farms.

Marshall and Godwin (1971) stress the importance of cooperatives as representatives of the rural poor in the South. They focus especially on the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), which acts as an umbrella group to support local cooperatives. The FSC provides assistance to cooperatives involved in marketing, agricultural supply purchasing, and credit assistance. Marshall and Godwin believe that cooperatives are beneficial because they build local political leadership, provide economic independence for members, and allow poor people to plan their own solutions. Cooperatives also engage in education and technical assistance activities. However, both Marshall and Godwin and Grim (1995) acknowledge that cooperatives face a number of challenges, including inefficient management, lack of resources, lack of marketing expertise, and insufficient political commitment to poverty relief.

When cooperatives overcome some of these problems, they provide valuable services that help black farmers increase the profitability of their farms. For instance, Brooks (1979) describes the services provided by the Emergency Land Fund (ELF). The ELF purchased black-owned land at forced partition sales, created a notification system to ensure black farmers were alerted if they owed property taxes, provided loans to black farmers, and provided technical assistance. In 1984, the ELF and FSC merged, forming the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF). The FSC/LAF has introduced legislation, such as the Minority Farmers Rights Act, which would provide additional resources to black farmers as well as provide minority farmers with greater protection against discrimination from governmental agencies (Pennick 1990). Zabawa (1991) argues that both land-grant universities and non-governmental cooperatives such as the FSC/LAF can play a vital role in educating their clientele about the importance of writing wills and the implications of heir property and partition sales. Both types of institutions provide very important legal, educational, and financial assistance to black farmers and landowners.

AREAS FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

More research is needed on viable survival strategies for black farmers. The literature reviewed here suggests a number of possibilities for further study. Research on the viability of alternative marketing strategies, non-traditional use of farmland, farmer outreach, and technical assistance programs could guide land-loss prevention efforts. Further research is necessary to determine the extent to which black farmers can benefit from conservation and non-crop uses of their farms, given the size and condition of their land and the resources available to them. Lewis (1979b) emphasizes that agricultural research should be redirected toward the needs of small farmers since such research would benefit a larger portion of the rural population. Research on off-farm employment opportunities and possibilities for rural development would help black landowners who are unable to increase their farm income.

Additional research is needed on the community-wide effects of landownership and its decline. Following Salamon's study of New Deal Resettlement projects (1979a, 1979b) as well as numerous other works (e.g., Brown, Christy, and Gebremedhin 1994; Nelson, 1979), we may posit that small-scale landownership has positive impacts on rural communities. These consequences go well beyond the economic. Salamon and others maintain that landowners usually constitute the backbone of rural black communities, socially as well as politically. This claim needs to be updated and documented more fully. If it holds, then a major rationale for promoting black landownership will be sustained. It would also be useful to study how the trend of return migration of black professionals from Northern urban areas impacts landownership and community wellbeing in the rural South.

Another fundamental research need is the ability to track changes in black landownership. At present, there is no easy way to monitor gains or losses of land owned by any group in the US, including African-Americans. While property transactions are recorded in more than 3,000 county courthouses across the country, there is neither a racial/ethnic identifier on, nor any aggregation of, these transactions at the state or national level. To deal with this serious gap in our knowledge, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and other advocates have proposed the creation of a registry of black farmers and landowners (USDA CRAT Report, 1997). This record-keeping device could monitor changes in black farming and landownership at the local, state, or national levels. Without such a mechanism, it is difficult to know precisely the scope of the problem. Activists and researchers need some such means of determining how widespread land loss is and how fast it is occurring in different areas of the rural South. Schulman, Garrett, and Luginbuhl (1985a) also call for more research on land tenure and believe that the concept of tenure should be expanded to include access to productive resources such as labor and government programs.

In conclusion, we emphasize that for black farmers, agriculture must be a viable business, but it is also a way of life. Tied as it is to landownership, farming has political and cultural, as well as economic, dimensions. Black land loss is a loss not only of potential income, but even more a loss of wealth, with deep consequences for social inequality and political power, especially in the rural South. Encouraging land retention and recovery efforts is thus a contribution to American democracy. There are many ways, as suggested above, to slow if not reverse the decline of African-American farmers and landowners.

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