



**Adoption of Sustainable Farming and Ranching
Practices among African-American Farmers:
*Helping and Hindering Factors***



PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of Sustainable Agriculture Practices (SAPs) among African-American farmers in four states (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina). Specific objectives were to identify the demographic characteristics of small scale African-American farmers, identify factors that encourage or impede the adoption of SAPs, determine the extent to which these farmers engage in certain SAPs, and determine the extent to which small scale African-American farmers have access to USDA programs that encourage SAPs. Data were collected by Morehouse University using a convenience sampling method that was employed by the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (Federation) outreach personnel in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina in 2012. The research sample was 128 farmers affiliated with the Federation. The data were analyzed by Tuskegee University and the Federation using descriptive statistics.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE?

The Sustainable Research and Agriculture Education (SARE) website states the following:

Every day, farmers and ranchers around the world develop new, innovative strategies to produce and distribute food, fuel and fiber sustainably. While these strategies vary greatly, they all embrace three broad goals, or what SARE calls the 3 Pillars of Sustainability:

- *Profit over the long term*
- *Stewardship of our nation's land, air and water*
- *Quality of life for farmers, ranchers and their communities*

Examples of sustainable agriculture practices include Crop Rotation, Cover Crops, Soil Enrichment, and Integrated Pest Management.

“Adoption of Sustainable Farming and Ranching Practices among African-American Farmers: *Helping and Hindering Factors*” is based on research funded by a grant to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund in 2011 from SARE at the University of Georgia. Both Morehouse and Tuskegee Universities played significant roles in the research thanks to Dr. Hasan Crockett at Morehouse and Dr. Robert Zabawa at Tuskegee. Much of the material in this report came from a Masters Thesis by Tuskegee student Folashade Adalumo. The Federation personnel on the grant were consultants Heather Gray and Jerry Pennick who for decades have worked with the Federation and played a key role in coordinating the project and developing recommendations. Ralph Paige, Executive Director of the Federation, was project manager. The project was conducted between 2011 and 2014.

Profile of African-American Farmers

(2012 Census of Agriculture)

- The majority of African-American farmers are small scale and have limited resources.
 - 45% of African-American farmers earn less than \$2,500
 - 62% earn less than \$5,000 and 77% earn less than \$10,000 from farm sales annually
- 49% of farms operate on less than 50 acres.
- There is a growing presence of African-American female farmers in U.S. agriculture
 - a 153 % increase from 1997 (1,830) to 2012 (4,630).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Based on the 2012 Census of Agriculture, the United States has 2,109,303 farms, of which 33,371 are owned by African-American. Forty-five percent of African-American farmers earn less than \$2,500; 62% earn less than \$5,000; and 77% earn less than \$10,000 from farm sales annually. Also, 49% of African-American farms operate on less than 50 acres. These farmers participate to a lesser degree in USDA programs – production, financial, and environmental. Auburn (1994) noted that the environmental and social goals of sustainable agricultural practices (SAPs) are beyond just the small scale farmers control alone. “Often environmental and social goals are

well beyond the farmer’s sphere of control. Land use decisions, air and water quality, and labor conditions are effected by everyone....” (Auburn, p.9, 1994). Given this background, serious questions arise concerning the viability of African-American farmers as economic and sustainable producers in the future. Therefore, this research focused on the participation, or lack of participation, in USDA programs that promote production and environmental sustainability. Minimal progress has been observed on the adoption of SAPs by small scale farmers. The uniqueness of the reasons for adoption or non-adoption of SAPs warrants further investigation.

FARMER RESPONSES TO BARRIERS

USDA Discrimination & Heir Property

..... a lot of black farmers just won't go in the FSA (Farm Service Agency) or NRCS (National Resources Conservation Services) because of past discrimination.... And even today, they choose not to participate with the United States government, 'cause when you say United States government they say they're gonna lose their land, they're gonna take their land or something. So, I don't personally agree with that but if he wants to operate without the United States government, that's his choice. And I guess the other big problem is because a lot of our farmland is heir property.... you have to have control of the land ... (before you can participate in USDA programs). So, if you can't show that, you can't (for example) participate in the (hoop house) program. And we have a number of farmers in the Indian Springs Co-op (who are heir property owners) and that's the reason why they can't benefit from a lot of the programs.

BEN BURKETT - Petal, Mississippi

Age Disparity with Internet & Computers

I am probably the youngest of some of the younger generation of farmers. We are computer-oriented. A lot of the older farmers are not computer oriented so at one point they were having the (paper) newsletter that came out once a month (from USDA) but now everything is on-line and a lot of the older farmers have no access to a computer or don't know how to use a computer.

DEMARCUS WILLIAMS - Jackson County, Florida

Not Having Enough Information

... it's basically because when the information is put on the table - say if NRCS decides to do a workshop - we want to know, but we will not attend the workshop.

CONSTANCE SCOTT - Noxubee County, Mississippi

OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Why adopt SAPs?

Reasons given:

- to reduce ground water pollution
- to be good stewards of the land
- to produce quality produce with reduced amounts of chemicals, and
- to reduce health risks to farm families and livestock (Roberts & Lighthall, 1992).

A major determinant of adoption of SAPs is the social aspect (Baide et al., 2005).

Perceptions

- Respondents had positive perceptions about adopting SAPs and are open to new ideas (Alonge and Martin, 1995).
- Agricultural education plays an important role in deciding to adopt SAPs (Alonge and Martin, 1995).
- Farmers used pesticides and other practices to control pests, yet majority of these farmers are not familiar with integrated pest management (Tackie et al., 2009).

Limitations

Adoption of SAPs are often limited by:

- individual farm production practices
- perception problems
- environmental constraints (Roling, 1988).

Lack of concern, economic constraints to the transition and their traditional farming practices were major barriers (Drost et al., 1996).

Current Observation

- Younger farmers utilize SAPs, whereas the older farmers are more conservative (Comer et al., 1999).
- Participating with a variety of organizations does affect the farmer's use of a sustainable agricultural system (Comer et al., 1999).
- There was a high awareness of African-American farmers of USDA/NRCS, such as Farm Ownership and Operating Loans and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), but participation was low in the environmental program and the Value-Added Producer Project. This is due to the requirements being complicated (Asare-Baah, 2013).

Sustainability

Well, to me, sustainability means being able to stay on the farm with the necessary benefits that you can acquire from USDA, even though sometimes they are very difficult to acquire. But that's what sustainability means to me.

African-American Farmer - Baker County, Georgia



METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample Selection

The target population was small scale farmers in four southern states. The sample was drawn from Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Georgia. A total sample of 128 farmers was drawn from full-time and part-time small scale farmers affiliated with the Federation, based on a convenience sampling technique.

Data Collection

A survey instrument was developed to collect the data. The survey contained: (1) socio-economic questions (age, gender, marital status, numbers of children); (2) farming status (full-time farmers, part-time farmers); (3) land ownership (acres owned, or rented); (4) product sales (market alternatives or opportunities); (e) farm practices; and (5) awareness of USDA programs. Data from a total of 128 African-American farmers were collected in 2012 through telephone interviews by the Morehouse

University. The 128 respondents included 26 farmers from Alabama, 31 from Georgia, 33 from Mississippi, and 38 from South Carolina.

The findings were shared with 10 farmers and 10 service providers from throughout the South who were then interviewed regarding their perspective on the issues and the survey findings. The in-depth interviews were conducted and videoed with the 10 farmers at the Federation's Farmers Conference in Albany, Georgia in 2013 and the 10 service providers were interviewed in 2012 at Tuskegee University's Professional Agricultural Workers Conference. The findings were also shared at a full day gathering of farmers and agriculture specialists at the Federation's Training Center in Epes, Alabama in 2014 for discussion and assessment. The findings were also presented to 220 farmers, ranchers and landowners at the Federation's 2014 Annual Meeting at the Federation's Training Center.

Sustainable Practices

....we use (the) EQIP program, we use rotation grazing.... We move our cows from one pasture to another and we do the same thing with our goats. And to fertilize the soil we rotate the crops. We don't plant the same thing. If we plant watermelons this year in this crop we move it to another crop the next year; those are the things that we do.

EMMA HALL - Sumter County, Alabama



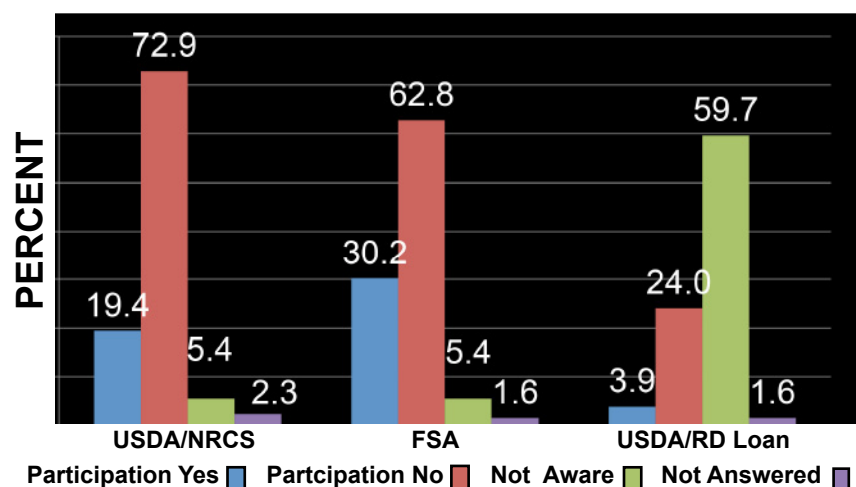
FINDINGS

The findings and recommendations are based on both the survey of 128 farmers, as well as the in-depth interviews with farmers and agriculture specialists.

Demographics

The findings show that a majority (77%) of the respondents were males, almost half were 64 years or older, 84% had at least 10 years of farming experience, and 66% had part-time jobs.

Participation in and Awareness of USDA Programs

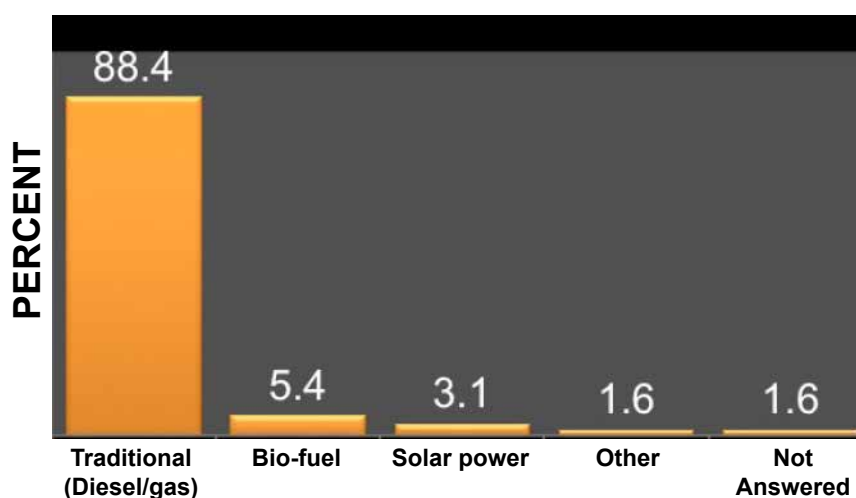


A little more than 70% did not participate in USDA/NRCS programs, while most were aware (92%) of such programs. Thus, awareness of the USDA/NRCS by African-American farmers was high, as supported by previous research. Further, the participation in specific programs that support sustainable agriculture was low which was also supported by the research.

Characteristics of Farmers using Sustainable Agriculture Practices

The farmers who used SAPs were members of a cooperative or other organizations, were younger in age, and had a higher level of education. This is supported by the previous research of Comer et al. (1999) who reported that participating with a variety of organizations influences the farmer's use of a sustainable agricultural system. The authors also observed that younger farmers are more receptive to adoption of SAPs compared to the older farmers who were more conservative regarding implementing changes.

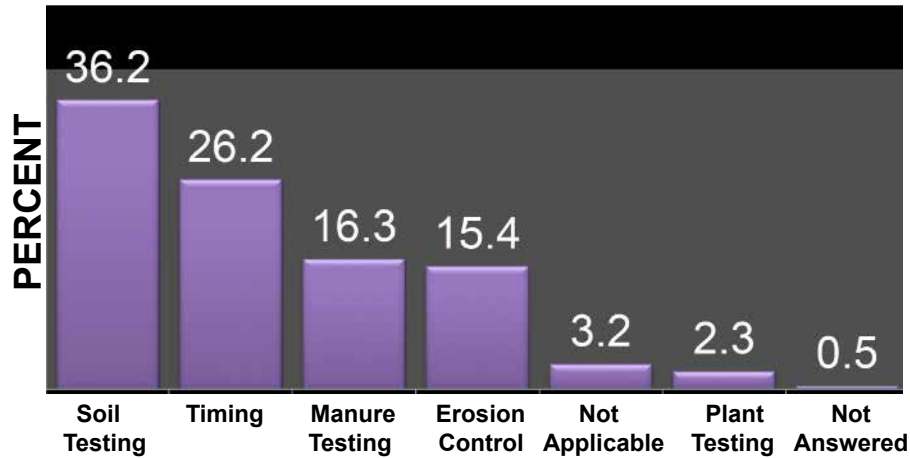
Farming Practices (fuel, chemicals)



A majority (88%) of the respondents used traditional petroleum fuel as the source of energy. Additionally, almost 80% applied chemicals on their crops. Approximately 40% of the respondents reported that they practiced row cropping; about 36% produced vegetables-truck crops; and 23% are involved in livestock and poultry.

FINDINGS - cont'd

Nutrient Management

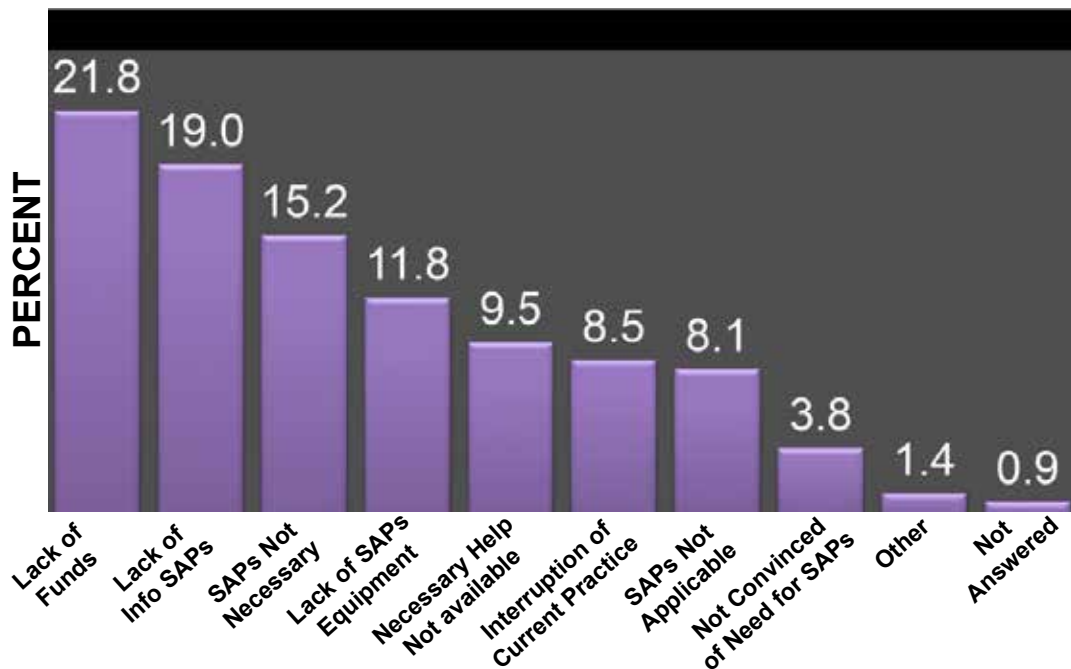


The adoption rates for the various nutrient management methods were as follows: soil testing (36.2%); application of manure/fertilizer (26.2%); manure testing (16.3%); erosion control practices (15.4%); and plant tissue testing (2.3%). Well over half of the respondents considered their production methods to be between organic and traditional practices.

Adoption of Sustainable Agriculture Practices

The results also revealed that adoption of SAPs was low. In the case of cover crops, 48% of the farmers planted cover crops after harvesting cash crops; 39.5% did not plant cover crops; while 18% felt that cover crops were not applicable to their farm operations.

Reasons for Non-Adoption of Sustainable Agriculture Practices



Survey results revealed a number of reasons for non-adoption of sustainable agricultural practices, including lack of funding and lack of adequate information about SAPs. Some respondents also stated that they were simply not convinced that there were sufficient reasons to change their current practices and switch to SAPs.

FINDINGS - cont'd



Cooperative Membership and Marketing Products

About 59% of the respondents were found to have membership in a cooperative in which the sole objective was to aid in buying farm inputs and marketing their products. The majority of the respondents, either cooperatively or individually, sold their products directly at farmers markets (83%), while 17% sold directly to grocery stores, schools and other institutions.

Distrust of USDA

In the in-depth interviews with farmers and service providers, a distrust of the USDA because of past experiences was consistently expressed as a major barrier to participation in USDA programs which would, of course, be inclusive of the Farm Bill programs.

Sample Corroborates Previous Research

The findings corroborate the impediments reported in previous studies. These include the social aspects and economic constraints to the transition to SAPs, and the fact that it is difficult for farmers to switch from the traditional farming practices to which they have become accustomed (Baide 2005; Drost et al. 1996).

FARMER RESPONSES ON COST

Cost of Some Programs not a Barrier for Some Farmers

Actually, it hasn't been a barrier for me because, of course, I am African-American and female so I got the 90% cost share. So, I am only responsible for 10%. And they (USDA) made (sure I had) that information. They gave me that information as I walked through the door; although it had been shared through the Federation, but they quickly put it out there that as an African-American female farmer ... I was entitled to it.

PRISCILLA KITT - Louisville, Georgia

Cost of Programs and Credit Issues a Barrier for Many Farmers

I definitely agree with that. 'Cause it's hard to get a loan from FSA now, or from a local bank or Farm Credit Administration. (With) those loans since the crisis, you know, your credit score gotta be 630 or 680 or better. And that knocks a lot of us out. It's hard to get financing.

BEN BURKETT - Petal, Mississippi

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON RESEARCH FINDINGS

In addition to the surveys, in-depth interviews were conducted with farmers and service providers. The findings revealed four major themes (discussed below) that were common among most respondents in each category. All of these findings and recommendations are relevant to the current and future Farm Bills and should be addressed in terms of policy and outreach programs.

The last section under recommendations will include some specifics and concerns about the 2014 Farm Bill. In fact, from the research it is evident that more resources should be made available for USDA and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to educate farmers about the Farm Bill programs. Also, given

much of the information about programs is now on the internet many farmers do not have the information they need. Resources should be available for the USDA and CBOs to distribute paper newsletters, as many communities do not have adequate broadband capabilities and many farmers do not have computer skills.

The respondents viewed the following as major barriers to African-American producers adopting more sustainable agriculture practices. These barriers included: (1) Distrust of USDA; (2) Lack of Funding; (3) Lack of Education and Information; and (4) Heir Property as a Barrier. The following recommendations should help address these concerns.

Distrust of USDA

There is a documented history of discrimination by the USDA against African-American farmers. That discrimination led to Pigford Lawsuit against the USDA on behalf of African-American farmers. The settlement, however, did not end the distrust.

Recommendations

- 1. All mission areas within the USDA should integrate Community Based Organizations into their outreach plans and provide the necessary resources for the CBOs to be a bridge between the USDA and the producer until trust between the two is well established.*
- 2. There should be more diversity of personnel within USDA so that all offices are more reflective of the clientele.*
- 3. The complaint process should be more streamlined in order to reduce the time it takes to resolve complaints.*
- 4. Make the USDA's "receipt for services" mandatory. This would create a permanent record of services, or lack thereof, that USDA offices provide to every applicant. It would also bring more accountability to USDA personnel.*

Lack of Funding

Respondents (both farmers and service providers) in each category cited the lack of funding as a major barrier to transitioning to SAPs. Many producers do not bother to apply to USDA or other sources because they often feel they cannot qualify or past experiences led them to believe that they will automatically be turned down. Others are not aware of the various funding opportunities available through the public and private sectors.

Recommendations

- 1. USDA should adopt a department-wide strategy modeled after NRCS' eligibility workshop initiative. These workshops bring together producers, CBOs and USDA agencies to meet with producers, explain USDA programs and their criteria and walk the producer through the application process. This process helps increase trust and helps the producer understand what is required to access these resources.*
- 2. Cost share for EQIP and matching funds for other requirements should be eliminated for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFRs) or sweat equity should be allowed as a substitute for cash contributions.*
- 3. The NRCS drip irrigation program is limited to farmers with at least 10 acres. There is a need to review this requirement so it can accommodate more small growers.*

RECOMMENDATIONS - cont'd

Lack of Education and Information

Several producers were unaware of the term Sustainable Agricultural Practices; others did not know the difference between sustainable and organic. Ironically, many were using comparatively fewer chemical inputs, however the reason, more often, had nothing to do with sustainability. Instead, it was generally a lack of resources to purchase chemicals.

For the most part, farmers did not believe they could have a profitable operation through the implementation of sustainable agricultural practices, even though their current operations might not be profitable. Overall, there was a general reluctance to try anything unfamiliar.

Recommendations

1. *USDA's Outreach and Technical Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers should focus more on the benefits of sustainable agriculture instead of traditional agriculture practices that might not be suitable for this sector. Section 2501 of the Farm Bill (outreach and technical assistance) should be fully and permanently funded and education on sustainable agricultural practices should be a major funding criterion.*

2. *SARE and USDA should direct more resources to peer-to-peer learning. Many respondents indicated they prefer to learn from each other. USDA and SARE should support more on-farm demonstration sites as learning tools for SDFRs. This would encourage the sharing of information and strategies among SDFRs, as well as acceptance of new ideas. Setting up meetings in different places closer to farmers, especially older farmers, and follow-up is important.*

USDA and SARE should support a series of workshops as requirements for producers to attend the demonstration projects. The demonstrations would, as much as possible, be

on-site - on the farms - and cooperatives should be included in training and demonstration initiatives. Consideration should also be given to offering information and workshops in churches where farmers and youth are in attendance.

The purpose of the workshops would be to educate the producer on sustainable agriculture including its benefits and weaknesses. The goal is to ensure that the producer has a working knowledge of SAPs prior to participating in the demonstration sites. This will help farmers understand sustainable agriculture. Coupled with the demonstration site, the producer should be armed with the information necessary for her/him to make an objective decision as to whether SAPs are right for him/her. Again, perhaps USDA should also reconsider its decision not to have paper newsletters mailed since many farmers do not have or use computers.

What works wonders is partnering with local farmers who are already using SAPs for peer group testimony - as when a farmer or neighbor shares their expertise or success.

Heir Property as a Barrier

USDA service provider interviewees were especially concerned about heir property owners who wish to access USDA, as well as private resources. Heir property occurs when an owner dies without a will or other form of estate plan. The heirs then own an interest in the land rather than any portion of the land itself. This means that there is no clear title to the land, which is a requirement to secure a loan from most lending and resource institutions, especially the USDA.

Recommendations

Uniform Heir Property Statute

Heir property laws vary from state to state, however, none adequately addresses the problems associated with heir property, especially partition sales.

There needs to be a uniform heir property statute, especially in the Black Belt region where most black-owned land is located. The statute should make it easier for heirs to maintain ownership of family land and more difficult for outsiders to purchase interests in heir property. Any or all heirs who want to keep the land should have the first right of refusal when heirs want to sell.

The statute should also address legal fees and expenses charged by attorneys. For the most part, current laws provide a financial incentive for attorneys to encourage partition sales over the objection of heirs. In some cases attorneys receive 10% of the gross sale amount.

Mandatory Mediation

Heir property problems are often caused by family disputes fueled by a lack of understanding of heir property laws. Often an heir will sell his/her interest in family land to an outsider without knowing that the outsider can force a partition sale of all the land.

RECOMMENDATIONS - cont'd

Mandatory mediation gives the heirs some control over the process. They would at least have to talk with each other and try to compromise before the court becomes involved when they could lose all control of the process and a judge orders a partition sale. Once an interest has been sold to an outsider, mediation might not be effective, so that issue will have to be addressed in the uniform heir property statute.

Modify Legal Services Regulations

Most African-American landowners are land rich but cash poor. Unfortunately, landownership might disqualify them for Legal Services assistance. Regulations should be modified to make landownership less of a factor when calculating eligibility and more emphasis should then be placed on actual income.

Student Loan Forgiveness

There is dearth of attorneys dedicated to African-American land retention in the rural south. This has contributed to African-American land loss because competent legal assistance is often the first as well as the last option. In order to help fill the void, young attorneys, especially those who have had externships or summer employment in the rural south, should be eligible for student loan forgiveness or reduction based on the number of years they spend in the region.

Title Issues

USDA programs that do not require a mortgage on the land should allow an heir or group of heirs to qualify for such programs if they are actively engaged in farming the land.

FARM BILL CONCERNS & RECOMMENDATIONS

While the 2008 Farm Bill had several programs that were relatively beneficial to African-American farmers, the 2014 Farm bill showed mixed results. The following three Farm Bill programs are essential to moving more African-American farmers toward the adoption of SAPs and how they fared in the 2014 Farm Bill.

2501 Outreach & Technical Assistance

Ten million dollars per year over a 5-year period represents a 50% decrease in funding and leaves many African-American farmers without critical technical and educational assistance.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

This program provides funds and technical assistance for farmers to adopt SAPs. There was a slight decrease in

funding in the 2014 Farm Bill. But payment limitations were increased by 50% from \$3,000,000 to \$450,000, however the increase was aimed primarily at livestock producers. Advanced cost share payments were increased from 30% in 2008 to 50% in 2014. The Bill also retains but does not increase set asides for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers.

Beginning Farmers & Ranchers Program

This program provides incentives for young farmers to enter production agriculture and offers a great opportunity to introduce SAPs to these farmers at the entry level. Funding for this program was increased by 25% to 100 million dollars over a 5-year period, however, set asides for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers were significantly reduced.

REFERENCES

- Alonge, A. J. & Martin, R. A. (1995). Assessment of the adoption of sustainable agriculture practices: Implications for agricultural education. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 36(3), 34-42.
- Asare-Baah, L. (2013). Participation in selected USDA programs by socially disadvantaged farmers in selected Black Counties of Georgia. MS Thesis, Department of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL.
- Auburn, J.S. (1994). Farming in Transition Overview: Society Pressures Farmers to Adopt more Sustainable Systems. *California Agriculture*, 48(5), 7-10.
- Baide, J.M.R. (2005). Barriers to the Adoption of Sustainable Agricultural Practices in the South: Change Agents Perspective. MS Thesis, Department of Rural Sociology, Auburn University, Auburn, AL.
- Comer, S., Ekanem, E., Muhammad, S., Singh, S., & Tegegne, F. (1999). Sustainable and Conventional Farmers: A Comparison of Socio-Economic Characteristics, Attitude, and Belief. *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture*, 15(1), 29-45.
- Drost, D., Long, G., Wilson, D., Miller, B., & Campbell, W. (1996). Barriers to Adopting Sustainable Agricultural Practices. *Journal of Extension*, 34(6). <http://www.joe.org/joe/1996december/al.php>.
- Roling, N. (1988). *Extension Science: Information Systems in Agricultural Development*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Tackie, N., Jackai L. E., Ankumah R., Dingha B. N., Salifu, A., & Ojumu O. (2009). Integrated Pest Management and Protection Practices by Limited Resource Farmers. *Journal of Extension*, [On-line] 47(1). [http://www.joe.org/joe/\(none\)/rb6.shtml/](http://www.joe.org/joe/(none)/rb6.shtml/).

For over a hundred and fifty years African-American farmers have been an integral part of production agriculture in the United States; even though, for the most part, since 1910 their numbers have been on a constant decline. Much data exist on the reasons for that decline, some of which are referenced in this study, however the common thread that links all of the available data is the lack of equitable access to resources and education on the ever evolving production systems that could meet the unique needs of this sector of agriculture.

This study attempted to provide a framework for farmers and service providers to begin developing diverse and replicable outreach programs that could help arm African-American farmers with the tools necessary for them to develop sustainable farming enterprises that, in turn, could help build sustainable rural communities.



**Federation of Southern Cooperatives/
Land Assistance Fund
2769 Church Street
East Point, GA 39344**