

## **The Loss and Persistence of Black-Owned Farms and Farmland: A Review of the Research Literature and Its Implications \***

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**ABSTRACT** This paper reviews 115 articles and books published since 1971 that comprise almost all of the scholarly research on black farmers and land loss. It provides a general overview as well as discussion of the benefits of landownership for the black community. Several causes of black land and farm loss are reviewed: forced sales due to "heir property," lack of access to government programs, and continuing racial discrimination by lenders and government agencies. A number of the works cited provide possible ways to slow the loss of black-owned land, including strategies to increase the profitability of individual farms and increased funding of programs (e.g., by 1890 land grant universities and community-based organizations) that provide assistance to small-scale, limited-resource farmers. The paper concludes with suggestions for additional research and legislative action.

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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 (93 percent) 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 African-American farmers in the United States by the year 2000. On the other hand, another commonality in the scholarly literature is that the black farmer and rural landowner must be sustained, even brought back.

Among the studies reviewed here are those claiming that landowners make up the backbone of civic and political life in rural black communities. In fact, black landowners were among the first to join and support the Civil Rights Movement in the rural South. Furthermore, studies have shown that other advantages of landownership include increased personal pride, higher educational achievement of children, and an overall better sense of well-being. Property ownership, in other words, goes hand in hand with active citizenship and social independence.

This paper reviews 115 journal articles, reports, chapters, and books on African-Americans and farming, offering explanations and possible solutions for the land loss problem. These works comprise almost all of the scholarly literature on the issue published since 1971, most from the mid-1980s on. Omitted from this review are primarily historical studies that deal with blacks in agriculture before about 1945.<sup>1</sup>

In 1920, 14 percent of all U.S. farmers were black (926,000), and all but 10,000 were in the South. They owned over 16 million acres. By 1997, fewer than 20,000 were black, and they owned only about 2 million acres, according to the Census of Agri-

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<sup>1</sup>For a sampling of historical works, many of which also covers recent times, see Gilbert and Eli (2000), McDougall (1984), Brown (1976), Grim (1998), Shimkin, Louis and Frate (1978), Schor (1992), Darling (1982), Bethel (1981), and Nesbitt (1979).

culture (USDA 1999).<sup>2</sup> While black farmers comprise only about 1 percent of farmers nationally, within the South they account for many more farmers. In the counties studied by Hoppe, Bluestone and Getz (1986), 9.7 percent of farmers were black. African-American 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; Schor 1996). Compared to white farmers, black farmers generally have less formal education, lower literacy rates, are older, and have lower farm incomes (Schulman 1989; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982; Molnar and Adrian 1980). According to Banks (1986), about half of black-operated farms were under fifty acres and produced less than \$2,500 in annual sales. Demissie (1990) found that in 1987, 89 percent of black-operated farms had annual sales of less than \$20,000. Schulman discovered in North Carolina 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. Wood and Gilbert (2000) and Molnar and Adrian (1980) found that most African-American farmers depend principally on off-farm income, with farming as a secondary source. Hoppe et al. (1986) claim that black farmers also have lower 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. Tackie et al. (1997) provide a concise overview of the characteristics of southern black farmers. The works presented below cover a wide range of issues that further differentiate black farmers by sub-region, farm size, land tenure, crops raised, and socio-economic situation.

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<sup>2</sup>A follow-on study to the 1997 Census of Agriculture, the Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey of 1999, attempted to enumerate all farmland owners, whether they operated a farm or not. It estimates that 68,000 African-Americans own over 7.7 million acres of farmland (USDA 2001, Table 68). These numbers are much higher than those given in the 1997 Census of Agriculture. The comparable estimate for 1920 is not known, but it would obviously be much higher than 16 million acres. For discussion of these two sources, see Gilbert, Wood, and Sharp (2002). An earlier study by the Emergency Land Fund (1981) also indicated that the Census of Agriculture drastically under-reported black-owned farmland.

### **Definitions and Methodology**

Most of the works cited here rely on the U.S. 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. A “farmer” operates a farm but may or may not own the land. A farmland owner is of course the owner of farmland; this person may or may not farm. The Census of Agriculture studies only farmers. For all Americans, including 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.

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 farmland owned by blacks (or any other group, for that matter) is not known; 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. Currently a “farm” must make at least \$1,000 in annual agricultural sales. Because farms owned or operated by African-Americans are usually much smaller than other farms, changes in the definition of a farm affect their reported numbers disproportionately (Wimberley 1996).

Another change came in 1997, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), instead of the Department of Commerce’s Bureau of the Census, conducted the Census of Agriculture for the first time. 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 in the 1990s as in previous decades. However, the reported decline between 1992 and 1997 is quite small (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.”<sup>3</sup>

Fisher (1973, 1978) demonstrates the problem in relying only on the Census of Agriculture to provide a comprehensive picture of African-American farm landownership. Using county tax digests in the state of Georgia, Fisher (1978) found a 21 percent decrease in black farmland ownership between 1920 and 1960, while the Census of Agriculture for the same time period shows a 51 percent decrease. Unfortunately, only Georgia has such tax digests, so comparable numbers for other states are unavailable.

Despite the drawbacks of the 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 recurs every five years, is accessible, and easy to use. Nevertheless, some activists and researchers advocate for a land registry to account for land and landowners not covered by the Census of Agriculture.

### **Landownership and Community Well-being**

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 Black Belt of the rural 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

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<sup>3</sup> The 1997 Census of Agriculture discusses its “special efforts for minorities and American Indians” (USDA 1999: viii). Moreover, USDA researchers Effland, Hoppe, and Cook (1998: 21) claim that as a result of the Civil Rights Action Team (USDA 1997), the department made “additional efforts to ensure accurate counting of minority farms.” Both of these sources detail the ways that the USDA improved its count of minority farmers. Zabawa (1999) and Pennick and Gray (2000) argue that the 1992-1997 leveling-off of black farm loss is attributable, at least in part, to the USDA’s Section 2501 program, implemented through 1890 land-grant universities and community-based organizations (discussed later in this article). Pennick and Gray also allow the likelihood that USDA’s collection of the 1997 Census of Agriculture played a positive role in increasing the count of African-American farmers.

Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, through populists and progressives of yesterday and today, widespread property ownership has promised fuller citizenship and a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and power.

Landownership, then, is important for more than economic reasons. Salamon (1979a, 1979b) interviewed 100 tenants and 178 participants in eight all-black Resettlement communities to evaluate the socioeconomic well-being and civic participation of those who became landowners through a New Deal program. He found that the Resettlement participants fared better than tenant farmers in every respect, and landowners felt more of a sense of optimism and independence than did tenants. Twenty years later they also played crucial roles in the Civil Rights Movement. Salamon concluded that the program was extremely cost-effective and successful. Trend and Lett (1986), however, present an opposing interpretation of one Resettlement community.

Other studies confirm Salamon's findings. Darling (1982) argued 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) found that black farmers and landowners contribute to rural economies through property taxes and by patronizing local businesses. Couto (1991) described how black landowners were able to provide housing for Civil Rights workers and often became community leaders. Barlett (1993) and 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) and Stack (1996) provided similar accounts. Beauford, Miller, and Walker (1984), Nelson (1979), Pennick (1990) and Smith (1991) argued that landownership is essential to developing a political power base and improving the quality of life for rural African-Americans. Groger (1987) and Staten (1999) concluded that landownership is a key determinant of the well-being of elderly black residents. Grim and Effland (1997) documented a sense of community and shared values among landowners that was absent in black communities with less landownership. Finally, Pogue (1979) and Stack (1996) suggested that landownership and the stability it brings will continue to be

important, as many blacks from northern cities are returning to the rural South.

### **Land Loss and Farmer Decline**

The modern study of black land loss dates to 1971, when the Black Economic Research Center sponsored a two-day conference at Clark College in Atlanta. The Emergency Land Fund grew out of these efforts (Brooks 1979). Another major result of the 1971 conference was the report by Browne (1973) describing the outcome of approximately a dozen projects dealing with land loss. Browne's report was the most comprehensive look at the situation of black land loss. He found that between 1950 and 1969, the number of acres of farmland fully or partly owned by blacks dropped from 12 million to 5.5 million. Little of the research appearing in the ensuing three decades covered topics not already broached in Browne (1973).

The general decline of farm landownership is not a problem exclusive to the black community. However, Christy (1991) argues that the disappearance of black farmers cannot be explained by general economic trends alone. Similarly, Hickey and Hickey (1987) hold that African-American participation in and success at farming is primarily determined by the social and economic power structures operating in agriculture. Marshall and Thompson (1976), among others, claim that blacks have been hit harder than other groups. This is partially because minority farmers are disproportionately small-scale farmers (Beale 1991; Lewis 1976, 1979b). 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.

### **Heir or Partition Sales and Tax 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), the Housing Assistance Council (1984), and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1982) describe the ways in which joint inheritance of this sort leads to forced 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 co-owner can legally demand his or her share of the property. This usually forces 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.

Graber (1978a, 1978b), Tinubu (1977), and Tinubu and Hite (1978) found that heir property cannot be used as collateral for a loan, since lending agencies generally will not provide mortgages to individuals without clear title. Thus, heir property arrangements often prevent economic development of the property. The Housing Assistance Council (1984) found similar difficulties.

Many researchers note the lack of wills among black landowners. Zabawa and Baharanyi (1992) present a survey of 120 black landowners from 5 Alabama counties. Of these respondents, 56 percent had not written wills. Schulman et al. (1985b) interviewed 60 small-scale operators in North Carolina and found that 53 did not have wills. Ball (1980) also found that black landowners failed to leave wills, and claimed that one-third of black-owned land in the Southeast was "heir property." The Emergency Land Fund (1981) conducted a survey of black landowners and found that 86 percent had not written wills. 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. Lewis (1979a) reviews government records and previous empirical studies and suggests that poor quality farmland, inefficient use of land, and input cost increases all contribute to the inability to pay property taxes. Lewis recommends that farmers be educated on tax laws specific to their locale, since they may differ significantly by state. Ball (1980) found that owners of "heir property" have particular difficulties avoiding forced tax sales. Because they are often dispersed and disorganized, heirs frequently are unable to act together to save the property before a forced tax 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. The Housing Assistance Council (1984) argues that legislation is needed at the state and federal level to discourage land speculators from taking advantage of co-owners of heir property. The Emergency Land Fund (1981) calls for increased protection of those owners that are actively using land held as heir property, loans and insurance programs to protect heir property from forced sale, and increased legal assistance and education regarding wills.

### **Non-Participation in Government Programs**

The federal government provides a wide variety of programs to assist farmers. Black farmers, however, have never participated in these programs in proportion to their numbers. According to Grim (1996), African-American farmers were basically uninvolved in or unaware of many government programs prior to the Civil Rights Movement. Racism contributed greatly to 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. They resulted in more farm program participation by minorities and increased numbers of minority employees in local offices. 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 1996).

A number of researchers investigate black farmer participation in government programs. Grim (1995, 1996) reviews research regarding African-American farmers' participation in and knowledge of FmHA and ASCS programs. Jones (1994) uses Census of Agriculture data to compare white and black rates of participation and levels of program benefits. Munoz (1985) argues for increased federal programs for black farmers. Grim, Jones, and Munoz all found that blacks participate at rates below their proportion in the farming population and that those blacks that do participate often receive far fewer benefits than whites. Carpenter and Roth (1996) similarly argue that minority farmers benefit less from government

programs due to racism and discrimination. Schor (1996) describes the outcomes of several programs that targeted black farmers.

In addition to racism, the low rate of black farmer participation in government programs is also the result of poor education and lack of information. McLean-Meynsse and Brown (1994) interviewed 15 farmers chosen as outstanding black conservationists 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 farmer in that they were younger and better educated. Dishongh and Worthen (1991) describe efforts by the Soil Conservation Service in Florida to use non-traditional channels to reach black farmers. While adoption rates were still low, those black farmers who knew about and understood available programs generally took advantage of them. Simon and Anderson (1992) provide an account of a similar effort in Kentucky. Simon (1993) identifies lack of information, distrust, and negative past experiences as reasons farmers did not take advantage of programs. Campbell (1990) urges increased outreach to black farmers to increase use of government programs, while Clearfield (1994) stresses the need to tailor programs to the needs of minority groups.

## **Racism**

Racism stands out both by itself and as a contributing factor to many of the other causes of black land loss. 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 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1982) issued a major report describing the difficulties black farmers face. The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Operations (1990) documented continued discrimination: black farmers were misinformed about government programs, received less money than they requested, and did not receive loans in a timely manner. The 12-part Associated Press series "Torn from the Land" (Lewan and Barclay 2001) provides an in-depth account

of the ways in which black farmers have lost their land due to racial discrimination.

A recent report by the Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (1997) found that such discrimination still occurs. CRAT conducted “listening forums” for minority farmers to share their experiences of treatment by the USDA. They described a pattern of discriminatory behavior, including loans arriving long after planting season, arbitrary reductions in loan amounts, and a much higher rejection rate than white applicants received. 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 official 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 little accountability within the USDA: Employees and county committees that discriminate against minority farmers are not punished for their illegal behavior. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman (Glickman 1997) delivered a speech at Tuskegee University discussing the implementation of the CRAT report and the many changes that had occurred in USDA procedures in response to complaints.

African-American farmers filed a class-action lawsuit against the USDA in 1997 (Wood and Gilbert 2000; Pigford v. Glickman 1999). The lawsuit accused the USDA of systematic discrimination against black farmers (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1997; Havard 1997). Nearly 15,000 African-Americans joined the class action lawsuit. In the settlement, the USDA offered each certified claimant a settlement of \$50,000 plus possible forgiveness of debt owed to USDA (but not to private lenders). Claimants could also choose arbitration, in which the settlement is equal to actual cash damages. Because this option requires more proof of damages, the majority of claimants have chosen the first option.

The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture (1999) recently held hearings to follow up on the class-action lawsuit and the implementation of the CRAT Report (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1997). 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 disci-

plinary actions against some employees, and plans to increase the diversity of its staff. However, many participants in the hearing claimed that employees are still not held accountable for acts of discrimination. Black farm activists testified that settlement payments from the lawsuit were being delayed. The U.S. General Accounting Office also investigated the implementation of the CRAT recommendations and the processing of formal discrimination complaints (Robertson 2000). It indicated that the USDA Office of Civil Rights is not following its own guidelines regarding processing discrimination complaints and that in general the CRAT recommendations have not been effectively implemented. Zabawa (1999) says that the USDA's "culture of discrimination" persists, especially in the local county offices.

### **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 communities that have lost a significant number of black farmers (Beale 1991; Christy 1991; Zabawa 1999). Fisher (1973) says 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 no one plans to follow them in farming. Schweningen (1989) even argues 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.

However, most researchers call for steps to restore some African-Americans to the land. The farmers themselves, as seen in the CRAT Report (USDA 1997) and the U.S. House Committee report (1999), want a fair chance to continue farming. Wood and Gilbert (2000) also found that black landowners were very committed to farming. The following sections summarize the most commonly proposed remedies for black land loss.

## **Survival Strategies and Public Programs**

Yeboah and Wright (1985) say that effective land-loss prevention measures have to involve individual farm-level changes. After conducting 217 interviews in North Carolina, they examined “allocative efficiency”—that is, “what enterprise combination can provide a farmer with the highest income given his resource constraints” (Yeboah and Wright 1985:46). They found that the farmers could dramatically increase their income by changing the mix of crops, using less hired labor, and bringing idle farmland back into production. They also recommended better use of Extension personnel.

Barlett (1993) discovered that some black farmers focus on high-value vegetable crops to compensate for the small sizes of their farms, while Staten (1999) and Webber (1987) found that older black farmers engaged in subsistence gardening and also sold crops through roadside stands. Donald (1985) and Tackie, Findlay, and Baharanyi (1998) concluded that alternative marketing strategies can be useful for small-scale farmers. Schulman, Garrett, and Luginbuhl (1985a) and Schulman and Newman (1991) found that access to tobacco allotments and household labor were key determinants of economic well-being. Darby (2000), Field (2000), and Zabawa, Siaway and Baharanyi (1990) urge assistance in production of alternative crops and direct or cooperative marketing as well as youth outreach programs and legal services aimed at encouraging black farmers to write wills. McDougall (1984) describes a number of projects by black organizations 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 CRAT Report (USDA 1997). However, Adutwum (1990) found that increased access to credit may lead to permanent indebtedness unless black farmers also use technologies that increase productivity.

Non-crop use of land may also be an option. Jones’s (1994) study of federal agricultural programs summarizes, among other forms of assistance, the forestry and conservation incentive programs. Blacks lagged far behind whites in participation rates.

McLean-Meynsse and Brown (1994) interviewed 15 black landowners who successfully participated in programs that enabled them to profit through non-crop alternatives. Other uses for farmland included hunting for personal use as well as leasing to other hunters and contracting with paper companies to grow trees (Donald 1985). All these authors recommend methods to spread information about various government programs and alternative enterprises to black farmers. According to Zabawa et al. (1990), owners of small plots may find information on alternative uses for their land especially useful.

Several studies suggest that personal characteristics of farmers make a difference in success or failure at farming. Brown and Larson (1979) and McLean-Meynsse and Brown (1994) 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, and have high educational aspirations for their children, as well as a strong work ethic. Cotton et al. (1997) and Beauford and Nelson (1988a) discovered that education and off-farm income were more closely related to increased incomes than value-added farm activities. However, Beauford and Nelson (1988b) suggest that increasing the farm income of black farmers will be difficult because black farmers generally are unwilling to take risks, lack access to capital, and do not have information on new management practices. These studies also conclude that successful black farmers were younger, better educated, and had stronger family support.

Gladwin and Zabawa (1985) and Bhola (1988) found that the main survival strategy used by black farmers was holding an 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. Hoppe et al. (1986) show that black farmers are concentrated in counties with few non-farm employment opportunities. The Housing Assistance Council (1984) and Graber (1978a, 1978b) argue for legislation that would allow USDA agencies to provide loans to co-owners of heir property even when they do not have clear title to the entire property.

## **Black Land Grant Universities and Community-Based Organizations**

In 1890 Congress established colleges of agriculture for African-Americans, and today there are seventeen such schools throughout the South (Schor 1985). Although the main mission of land grant institutions is to assist farmers and rural populations, they have come under criticism. Marbury (1979) contends that the land grants in general have geared their efforts toward helping industry and big business and have caused the loss of farms by small-scale and black operators. He recommends that “the 1890s” especially reorient their focus toward the needs of small-scale farmers. Marshall and Thompson (1976) and Nelson (1979) make similar arguments. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1982) found that Black Land Grant Universities have helped small-scale and limited-resource farmers, and would do more if they received additional funding. Lyson (1980) also presents an optimistic view of the 1890s. He surveyed 600 male students and found that 12 percent had farming aspirations. These students were more likely to come from farming families and have expectations of inheriting a farm. Wimberley (1991), Donald (1985), and many others argue that the 1890 Land Grants are ideal institutions to provide services to the rural black community.

Several related studies cite the USDA’s Small Farmer Outreach Training and Technical Assistance Program (Section 2501), which works through the 1890s and community-based organizations. Pennick and Gray (2000) and Zabawa (1999) argue that increasing numbers of black farms in some counties are due to this program. Tackie et al. (1998) interviewed farmers who participated in the program and identified further areas for research, such as marketing and access to credit. In addition, Tuskegee University hosts the annual Professional Agricultural Workers Conference, which often focuses on minority and limited-resource farmers (e.g., Baharanyi, Zabawa and Hill 1997).

Darby (2000), Marshall and Godwin (1971), and Macfie (1994) stress the importance of cooperatives in the rural South. They focus especially on the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), which provides assistance to cooperatives involved in agricultural marketing, supply purchasing, and credit assistance. These researchers believe that cooperatives are beneficial because they

build local political leadership, provide economic independence, allow poor people to plan their own solutions, and engage in education and technical assistance. However, cooperatives face a number of challenges, including inefficient management, lack of resources, lack of marketing expertise, and an inhospitable political environment (Grim 1995; Marshall and Godwin 1971).

When cooperatives overcome some of these problems, they provide valuable services to farmers. Brooks (1979) and Clift (1974) describe the services provided by the Emergency Land Fund (ELF), including purchasing black-owned land at forced partition sales, creation of a notification system to alert black farmers if they owed property taxes, and provision of loans and technical assistance. In 1984, ELF and FSC merged, forming the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund. The FSC/LAF and many other groups have proposed providing additional resources to black farmers (Pennick 1990; Pennick and Gray 2000; Paige 1994). Zippert (1994) describes the land retention program of the FSC/LAF and urges the creation of land trusts. Zabawa (1991) argues that both land-grant universities and non-governmental cooperatives can educate their clientele about the importance of writing wills and the implications of heir property. Both types of institutions provide very important legal, educational, and financial assistance to black farmers and landowners.

### **Conclusion: A Time for Action**

Practically all of the relevant research concludes that widespread black landownership has very positive effects on rural communities. As summarized in the "Landownership and Community Well-Being" section early in this article, these impacts are social and political as well as economic. Given this key research result, the question is: What can be done to halt the loss of African-American farmers and land?

The answer to this question is no secret. Various actions to assist black farmers and landowners have recently been elaborated at length in reports issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture itself (1997, 1998). Many of the policy recommendations made by the Civil Rights Action Team and the National Commission on Small Farms are also supported by the research reviewed in this article (e.g., Pennick and Gray 2000; Zabawa 1999). Based on our



close reading of the literature, we believe the following measures are most critical and promising for slowing or reversing black land loss:

- enforcement of the nation's civil rights laws
- full funding (to the level authorized) of the USDA's "Section 2501" program of outreach and technical assistance for minority farmers.
- a general strengthening of the department's and land grant universities' efforts toward small-scale farmers (in research, education, extension, rural development, marketing, conservation, and credit—for example, the Farm Service Agency's Ownership and Operating Loan program).
- increased support for the 1890 land grants as well as community-based organizations.

The Congressional Black Caucus has recently introduced a number of bills that would achieve these goals. To borrow the title from the National Commission on Small Farms, it is truly "a time to act" (USDA 1998).

Another major need, emphasized in much of the research, is for increased legal services. African-American landowners often have little access to good legal assistance, especially in the more rural parts of the South. The reluctance to write wills, with all the resultant problems brought on by heir property, can be addressed by community legal education. Several organizations are trying to deal with these issues, including the Land Loss Prevention Project in Durham, North Carolina; the Farmers Legal Action Group in St. Paul, Minnesota; the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, based in Atlanta; and the new Center for Minority Land and Community Security, based at Tuskegee University. Their main problem, as in all of the work on black land loss, is an on-going lack of resources.

Better data are also essential. The Census of Agriculture should improve its enumeration of minority farmers. A related 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 United States, including African-Americans. While property transactions are recorded in more than 3,000 county courthouses across the country, there is no racial identifier, nor any aggregation at the state or national level. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund and

other advocates have proposed the creation of a voluntary registry of black farmers and landowners (USDA 1997:68, 1998:40; Zippert 1994). This record-keeping device could monitor changes at the local, state, and 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.

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 thus contributes to American democracy. There are many ways, as suggested above, to slow if not reverse the decline of African-American farmers and landowners and to sustain those who remain on the land. Do we as a nation have the political will to carry out these desperately-needed remedies?

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