



Black Farmer Roundtable: Reforming the Federal Farm Bill
Atlanta, Georgia
June 15-16, 2005

Forty-two key leaders of the black farming community met recently in Atlanta, Georgia, for a roundtable discussion on the future of federal farm policy. Participants from 15 states—Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia—explored proposals for farm policy reform that could better meet the needs of black farmers.

The forum, held June 15–16, was sponsored by American Farmland Trust (AFT) and convened with the assistance of advisors Lloyd Wright and Pearlre Reed as part of a national campaign to reform federal policy in the next U.S. Farm Bill in 2007. Ambassador Carol Moseley Braun welcomed participants at an opening night reception and outlined the history of struggle for black farmers and the importance of reversing the trend of black farm loss.

Ralph Grossi, president of AFT, opened the forum with an overview of AFT’s 25-year history of protecting productive farmland, promoting conservation practices and building bridges between farmers and environmentalists. Grossi detailed the case for reforming U.S. farm policy and the factors initiating change: globalization, budget deficits, transparency of farm programs (in terms of which farmers get subsidies and how much), and the unmet needs of agriculture resulting from underfunded farm and conservation programs. He outlined AFT’s four-part campaign strategy: 1) to work with farmers, ranchers and other stakeholders to develop and analyze alternative policies; 2) to build an alliance of groups supporting change; 3) to cultivate congressional champions; and 4) to communicate the potential benefits of a new U.S. farm policy for farmers, taxpayers and consumers.

Lloyd Wright, AFT adviser and former director of the USDA Office of Civil Rights, outlined the history of black farmers in the U.S., identifying the conditions and institutions that have contributed to the decline of black farm ownership—from 14 percent in 1920 to less than 1 percent today. He laid out the goal for the day: to bring together a diverse group of farmers and agricultural leaders to develop specific recommendations to address the unique concerns of black farmers. The roundtable was an opportunity to highlight the top issues of participating individuals and organizations as they seek to build a broader coalition in support of their policy recommendations for the next farm bill.

Two brainstorming sessions identified the positive features of current farm policy as well as those aspects not supporting the needs of black farmers. Funding for the 2501 program (a minority outreach program) ranked as the highest priority to maintain, followed by the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Small Farm Initiative and the Women, Infant, Children (WIC) food and nutrition program. Participants noted that the programs were good as written, but there are major problems with implementation and level of funding. Additional positives identified included risk management programs (such as Disaster Assistance) and various loan programs for farmers, ranging from beginning and youth programs to limited resource, emergency, direct and guarantee programs.

In discussing the problems with current policy, two top concerns emerged: the cumulative effect of past discrimination, which continues to make black farmers ineligible for current programs, and the Farm Serve Agency (FSA) committee system, which does not provide adequate representation for black farmers. Additional problems named were underfunding of research and extension at 1890

institutions (black land grant universities); a host of problems related to the ineffective implementation of outreach programs to black farmers; poor support of community-based organizations; lack of crop insurance for small produce farmers; non-uniform program guidelines across the country; policies that prevent forest landowners from obtaining loans to purchase land; and the deauthorization of the Direct Loan Authority program.

Participants also created specific policy recommendations for the next farm bill. Policy discussions and ideas were broken into four main categories:

- **Credit:** Melvin Crum of South Carolina introduced the Credit title, citing examples of past discrimination by local USDA employees and committees. Among the recommendations from the attendees to address credit concerns were suggestions to eliminate the county committee system, create a reentry and restoration program to repair credit history, have mandatory funding for the 2501 program (in which more funds would be provided to the 1890 universities to provide research and outreach programs for black farmers) and restore direct loans to black farmers.
- **Commodities:** Dewayne Goldmon of Arkansas shared a case study from a county FSA office that documented discriminatory treatment against black farmers. He also explained how the 2002 Farm Bill had widened the racial subsidy gap. To address the commodity concerns, participants suggested requiring an independent study to quantify racial discrepancy in the Crop Acreage Base (CAB) payments, recalculating CAB to rectify past discrimination, equalizing subsidy payments for black and white farmers, and giving black farmers first right to purchase inventoried USDA lands (with financing assistance).
- **Conservation:** Henry King of South Carolina noted how well-intended federal policies can be implemented very differently on the local level. Proposals to expand conservation among black farmers included providing more funding to conduct and implement whole farm conservation plans, providing grants/loans to cover producer cost-share requirements, improving access and awareness of conservation programs, and fully funding the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection program (eliminating matching requirements in states with a high loss of black farmers).
- **Other:** This category included all other farm bill concerns. Abraham Carpenter of Arkansas raised the need for a stronger safety net, better support for alternative crop production, removing the penalties for write-downs of FSA loans and raising the \$200,000 limit on crop production loans. In the final catch-all category, attendees proposed giving black farmers first option to buy all foreclosed FSA land, establishing a national public awareness program about the plight of black farmers, dramatically increasing funding for 2501 and other outreach/ technical assistance programs targeting black farmers, the elimination of the County Committee system, the creation of a USDA office of Black Farmer Affairs, and broadening the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program to provide an adequate safety net for farmers.

Pearlie Reed, former chief of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, summarized the main areas of need that were identified during the day:

- Current outreach efforts are not working; need accountability to ensure it is working.
- The county committee system should be modernized and managed to ensure appropriate accountability. (The political reality is that this will be very challenging.)
- The crop acreage basis needs to be fixed to adjust for past discrimination.

In addition to this farm policy roundtable with black farmers, AFT has held seven other forums with farmers and ranchers nationwide to collect ideas on farm policy and gain a better understanding of the challenges they face. AFT will use the information from these sessions to design a draft policy reform framework, determine the impacts that these policies would have across the country and then share the findings with farmers and ranchers to get their reaction and feedback.