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The High Cost of Water:  
African American Farmers and the Politics of Irrigation in the Rural South, 1980–2000

VALERIE GRIM

Only in the last two decades have African American and southern farmers had to think about drought and irrigation needs in a significant way. Since 1980 farmers in the South have been slowly adopting schemes to address the economic stress of drought and a lack of irrigation systems. For many producers, especially African Americans, insufficient water for irrigation has resulted in low yields, low profits, long-term debt, and a need for resources to reverse these trends.

Irrigation needs of southern farmers have received less attention than those of farmers in other regions of the United States, particularly the West.¹

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¹ Scholarship on the history of irrigation developments in the West, East, and Midwest is voluminous, with the majority of attention focusing on the West because this region has led the way in helping farmers understand how they, the federal government, and private corporations can work together to manage and control water needs. See Ira G. Clark, Water in New Mexico: A History of Its Management and Use (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Robert G. Dunbar, Forging New Rights in Western Waters (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Mary W. M. Hargreaves, “Land Use Planning in Response to Drought: The Great Plains Experience of the Thirties,” Agricultural History 50 (October 1976): 561–82; Mary W. M. Hargreaves, Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920–1990 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).
The limited research on this subject is largely from the perspective of white farmers. Their race, gender, and class as well as ownership of vast amounts of prime land, and the use of modern farm machinery, computers, and chemicals has positioned them to benefit the most from federal farm programs and policies. Government-funded research has concerned ways western and eastern irrigation systems could benefit these southern white agriculturists with large holdings.²

Among southern farmers, the most important question during the second half of the twentieth century concerned the irrigation of crops other than rice. Before 1950, rice growers had nearly perfected ways to irrigate their crops while controlling effects of drought. Rice growers’ irrigation models, however, did not fit the needs of southern cotton, corn, soybean, peanut, and tobacco producers.³

As a result, during periodic years of drought between 1970 and 2000, southern white farmers with large land holdings approached irrigation independent of federal assistance. No federal farm agencies or government offices, similar to those that managed western irrigation, proposed solutions when southern farmers experienced drought. Instead, individual operators of

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large farms integrated advanced technology, using pipes, wells, pumps, sprinklers, canals, and ponds. They defined the approach to drought for the last two decades of the twentieth century. Small producers realized that river irrigation and other older forms of watering were inadequate to combat the increasing periodic dryness.4

Living near white farmers who successfully integrated irrigation into their production operations, African American farmers saw how bringing water to the surface produced profitable crops. This article discusses how they have addressed problems with drought and irrigation. The following limitations have frustrated them: 1) capital, credit, and markets; 2) good irrigable land and easy water access; 3) labor problems; and 4) lack of information about irrigating small-scale operations. Some came to believe irrigation is expensive water that runs through political pipes not open to them.

Twenty-three interviews with African American farmers from five southern states, provide a broader perspective on how black farmers have dealt with drought.5 Between 1945 and 1965, as government farm programs and policies were continuously implemented in a racist manner, most of the money, credit, and research information went to white farmers. The African American farmers lagged behind, using outdated equipment and applying insecticides and fertilizers marginally. They lacked the money and influence to

4. For a discussion of the development of irrigation between 1970 and 2000, see Mark Friedberger, Farm Families and Change in the Twentieth Century (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988); Green, Land of the Underground Rain; Hargreaves, Dry Farming in the Northern Plains; and Kromm and Whites, eds., Groundwater Exploitation in the High Plains.

5. Discussions in this article are based on data collected since the 1980s from African American farmers in the South. Through field research, I have been able to document a variety of farming practices that have influenced how some American black farmers think about developments in agriculture and their ability to compete. Interviews were conducted with three farmers in North Carolina, two in Georgia, three in Arkansas, three in Tennessee, and twelve in Mississippi. The set of questions is reproduced in an appendix to this article. The majority of African American farmers continue to live in the South. These twenty-three managed 10,420 acres of farmland—they owned 3,620 acres and rented 6,800 acres owned by other African American families. Acreage in production ranged from 60 to 1,300. These men ranged in age from thirty-five to eighty-five. Their level of education varied, with some having as little as five years of schooling, others having finished high school or graduated from college. Each had been raised by parents who were farmers. Landownership had been part of their existence for more than twenty-five years; some came from families whose land had been part of their history for more than fifty years. These twenty-three farmers were not randomly selected but were chosen because of their efforts to have discrimination against African American farmers addressed. Yet, I think their experiences with irrigation should be considered.
force local government agents to come to their aid. Discrimination against African American farmers persists; they still have small holdings, no market control, sizeable debts, and limited access to irrigation at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Since the 1950s, irrigation needs were addressed through crop selection, according to the twenty-three interviewed. During the early 1970s, many African American farmers were advised to grow cotton by their local agents of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS). Until the late 1970s and early 1980s, they primarily raised cotton, because they lacked the money to grow rice and the equipment to harvest soybeans. If raised in large acreages, cotton yields more than covered their debts. They could use outdated tractors and planters to get the cotton crop in the ground, the hoe to keep the weeds out, and manually harvest the crop. African Americans considered cotton generally drought resistant. Because it typically needed sunlight, warmth, and little water, they believed cotton was foolproof, and it did not require irrigation. Their farming was labor-intensive, because between 1945 and 1970 the majority could not get loans from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) or the ASCS to support extensive production.  

Borrowing from family members, banks, and private lending institutions, they upgraded their equipment during the 1970s, ten to fifteen years behind most white farmers. They purchased tractors, improved planters, cultivators, cotton-pickers, and combines, and relied less on hoeing to control weeds. According to the interviewees, African American farmers believed these changes in their farm operations made them more competitive by the early 1980s.


7. For a discussion of ways in which agriculture and crop production changes affected African American and limited resource farmers, see Fite, American Farmers, 207–25; and Daniel, Breaking the Land, 134–52, 155–83, 271–89.
At least 50 percent of these African American cotton farmers made a conservative to moderate profit. This growth stemmed not only from improved technology and chemicals, but from additional land use. Each man in the study improved his personal landholding by 10 percent, and increased the amount of land he rented by 50 percent. Cotton production was their solution until frequent droughts began in the mid-1980s. As cotton yields declined and remained consistently low, more than half of them switched to soybeans and a small percentage to rice.

The decision by African American farmers whether to continue producing cotton was influenced by a number of considerations: How much land should they farm? Did they need more land to hedge against drought and their debts? How much financing in the form of loans, and credit would be available to them? Most chose to diversify their operations. Some switched to a three-crop system, planting corn and soybeans during the spring and wheat during the winter. Others followed this pattern, but added livestock production, turning some of their farmland into pasture. Still others added truck farming and poultry production; one African American farmer turned to catfish farming and rice production.

Earnest McWilliams also discussed early irrigation practices of African American farmers: “I have farmed for a long time and there was plenty of times that it got so hot and dry. Our choices to do somethin’ about it was very limited before 1980s. Until then, we mostly prayed for rain. Some of the small farmers and growers on real small acres use a system where they water the fields by hauling hundreds of gallons of water to their field in wagons. They took buckets and barrels of water on a wagon over their field and throwing water in every direction. This was hard work and at best, it work for a farmer with only one or two acres or a truck farm. Later, you could see some of the farmers takin’ their pumps over to canal ditches that some of the other farmers with wells had allowed to be filled with water from they well,

and they would pump the water out of the canal ditches into their fields so that could save some of their crop.”

While McWilliams understood that most African American farmers were using the only technology available and affordable, he was increasingly frustrated by the choices and practices: “I been all over this country, travelin’ as a soldier, a veteran of World War II, and I been especially out in the West in Nevada and California to visit family, and I could see for miles in these states how the government had help the white farmer out there get irrigation goin’. In fact, some of the black people out in California who came from the farms in the South would ask me why don’t I and some of the other black farmers down in the South get the government to give us money or loans to buy wells and pumps and sprinklers like they have help the white farmers.” McWilliams continued to feel that the irrigation needs of black farmers were not going to be addressed because they were not valued as producers.

With each new generation, however, improvements came. Although their resources remained limited, in the 1970s some established a new system, as Willie Ivory explained: “Durin’ the 1970s, when it got hot and dry, gone was the days when folk could go to the fields with wagonloads of water and buckets and barrels to save their cotton or vegetable. It was now time out for haulin’ men, women, and children across the fields with a big tank and hosing water out of it to cool the crops. It was no use in the men gettin’ on the tractor and attacin’ iron rods to them so they could loop drippin’ hoses of water around them so that water would drop on the plants; and it was time out for ridin’ children up and down the fields on seats built on a planter so that they could spray water all over the fields. These kinds of waterin’ plans was’t gonna’ help no mo’. Too much money had been spent rentin’ land, buyin’ fuel, seed, fertilizer, and chemicals. So the younger generation of black farmers had to do somethin’ different in the 1970s if they want to save they crop from drought. This time you could see them goin’ to the implement stores buying a few pipes and borrowin’ or rentin’ a pump so that they could

water their crop faster and with mo’ success. Some even started pipin’ water from the rivers. The farmer would lay them pipes in the river and draw water into they fields. Sometimes, this work well and at other times, it did not.”

According to Ivory and other participants, piping technology was not new to them. Many had grown up seeing white farmers pipe water to their rice fields. They were also aware that different kinds of pumps existed; the major problem was money. Not until the 1970s and 1980s did most African American farmers have any more cash to invest in irrigation. Only those who farmed close to rivers, whose holdings were large enough to be used for collateral, or who could afford to dig wells and buy pipes were able to irrigate.

By the mid to late 1980s, soybeans, corn, and wheat were cheaper to grow than cotton. During the summer, corn and soybeans generally required a shorter growing season, while wheat, which needed the winter to mature, was not threatened by drought. Some producers hoped that farming during two seasons would make a profit or at least cover their debts. For twenty of the men interviewed, this organizational scheme kept them in business until the early 1990s when drought attacked once again.

This time, corn and soybean crops were struggling to survive in the July and August heat. Many farmers faced foreclosure and could not get government support. If given, loans usually arrived too late, around the first or the middle of June. Consequently, African American soybean-growers during the mid-1990s were facing drought as they planted their crops. Diversification was not going to help them turn a profit. They had arrived at a critical point—whether and how to irrigate, even if they could not afford it.

The African American farmers interviewed believed that racist farm agents added to the difficulty. William Hemphill explained black farmers’ irrigation difficulties: “Down here in Greenwood, you can see clearly who was gettin’ the money to farm and water they crop. It sure was not the poor black farmers. We can’t never get any of that ‘good’ government money to help us. We can’t never get any of that money to buy them irrigation machines. Those machines start at ’bout $30,000 or $40,000 for one system. They cover a lot of land, but they cost too much for poor farmers like us, if we can’t get sup-

14. Ibid.
port. Those big white farmers control who the money was gonna go to ’cause they control the committee and the whole farm business. If we gonna get ahead or break even these days, we better learn how to work and farm together and use what each other has.’’

In 1997 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), responding to complaints and a class action lawsuit, initiated listening sessions throughout the rural South to establish whether these claims were valid. The sessions revealed what had been known since the era of New Deal programs: African American farmers were victims of racism. The USDA concluded that the racist implementation of its policies had violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As a result, African American farmers had been unable to compete in the market or gain access to resources critical to profitable farming. Discrimination since 1965 led to the lack of technological development, including sprinklers and the equipment to sink wells.

Exhausted by the demands that irrigation placed on farmers with limited resources, Jodie Hearon explained: “Waterin’ a crop at times was pure hell. It could be one of the hardest things to do when rain was short and the farmer had a drought. When you was farmin’ hundreds of acres, like I was in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, you needed more than barrels, wagons, and hundreds of buckets. You need better equipment and money to buy it; you need laborers to help you organize and manage the irrigation of the crops. More than anything, you need money, money and support from the government, and all them agents who was supposed to help you organize the system. We need some programs just to help the small and black farmer get ahead; our need was different from the large white farmer who control everything at their level and force us to pay the same prices even though we was not gettin’ the same percentage or kind of government support.”


Hearon believed that the federal government had done little to support the irrigation needs of small farmers; because of race and class status, the government had ignored them. He thought research could have been initiated with “equipment enterprises and scientists at the research stations to create an irrigation program, complete with small implement design, to meet the particular need of farmers like us, workin’ two to four hundred acres of land.”

Drought in the 1980s forced some African American farmers to go out of business. Howard Williams explained: “Whenever a drought happen ‘round here on these farms, things get hard. The last money we have, which we will need later at harvest time for fuel and break downs, have to go to tryin’ to fight the drought, savin’ the beans and cotton and even our gardens. This was hard because the old way of waterin’ wasn’t no good. We had to find a better way to irrigate, if we are goin’ to farm. In the 1990s, some of the black farmers started to buy additional equipment so they could rely less on pumpin’. A few I know dug wells.”

Recognizing that he had little choice but to create an irrigation system for himself, Edward Scott spent thousands of dollars trying to save his 1,300-acre operation during the mid-1980s drought: “To irrigate my crops (rice, soybeans, corn, and cotton), I invest money in wells. I had wells dug and piped water to my fields with gas and electric pumps. This was very expensive; it cost thousands of dollars to dig them wells. Lots of money in fuel to run them and I paid out quite a bit in labor to workers so that I could keep eye on the water level, the way the pumps was workin’, and to make sure water was gettin’ to the right places. I had three in different areas and hired hands to help me pipe the water, lay the pipes in the field to get the water out there to the crops. These wells run all day and night; cost of fuel add more expense to the farmin’ operation, but, if I was goin’ to make anything, I had to find a way to water my crops.”

Even with hard work and some inventiveness African American farmers rarely saved more than a fourth of their crops and vegetables. Son Carter,

18. Ibid.
nearing eighty years of age, recalled how many black farmers struggled during the last decade of the twentieth century: “I have seen it dry many a years and the poor farmer could make no money. But I have not seen nothin’ like the heat we gettin’ these days now. Long time ago, we, black farmers, could handle a little drought; but we can’t do nothin’ with it now ’cause we got bigger farms in the 1990s, and we can’t afford to go to the next level. This don’t mean the black farmers is sittin’ down ’cause he ain’t. I was drivin’ over the Delta the other day and I saw black farmer layin’ pipes and tryin’ to get water out of the Quiver River. The problem with this form of waterin’ is that all the rivers and brooks and canals have dried up and we don’t have dams close to our land. We don’t even have anybody comin’ out to our farms tryin’ to show us what we can do different. So the best that some of us could do was to drive ’round the Delta and look at white farmers’ waterin’ and see what we could learn and go back to our land and try somethin’ different if we could.”


22. Gerrion Black, interview. See also D. S. Harrison et al., Irrigation in Florida Agriculture in the 1980s, Florida Cooperative Extension Service Bulletin 196 (Tallahassee: Florida State University, 1983), 1–17.
against African American farmers has made it difficult for them to acquire significant landholdings and to expand their operations.23

Some government agents have attempted to support black land acquisition through irrigation, however. African American farmers are more likely to receive federal farm support if they agree to dig wells. The promise of a well also makes it easier for renters to get loans; they must sign a five-year contract with the landowner to develop an irrigation system. When irrigation can be connected to profit making and land acquisition, the likelihood of obtaining a loan or participating in federal farm programs increases.24

Because of the expense of irrigation equipment—pipes, pumps, wells, and sprinklers—many continue to seek other means to handle drought. By purchasing crop insurance and drought-resistant seed, some believe they can at least hold onto their land. Each of the participants believed that insurance and seed would keep them afloat. Some African American farmers suggested that agents, implementing the federal farm programs, would rather see them depend on insurance than give them support.25

In addition to a lack of funds, many African American farmers believe that the inability to improve their irrigation practices is tied to their labor needs. Except for sprinkler systems, other forms of irrigation require labor. Farmers


need field hands to lay pipe, keep drains clear, and fuel pumps or the tractor that may be driving the well.  

Electricity to run a pump is costly, sometimes increasing the electric bill by 40 percent. Farmers initially must make a down payment of $700 to have it installed and turned on. Wells operating on diesel fuel may use up to fifty gallons per day. The power-take-off on the tractor incurs more expense because the engine has to run continuously, possibly burning out. Only farmers with more than one tractor can use this method in operating pumps and wells.  

Each of the study participants indicated the need for greater contact with agents of farm programs, agricultural research offices, and extension services who could provide technological and market data. Information dissemination is vitally important in helping these farmers become competitive. Most do not have access to computers, satellite dishes, newspapers, farm magazines, or journals. The black land-grant colleges, such as Tuskegee Institute and Alcorn State University, have offered considerable assistance. Non-profit organizations, including the Southern Farm Cooperatives and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, have supplied pertinent information.  


Among many needs the greatest and most immediate is encouragement of young African Americans to study agricultural fields at land-grant colleges. Each of the participants suggested that the future is tied to their having access to other African Americans educated in many different fields and working in key positions—as agricultural agents for federal and state offices, as researchers who specialize in the needs of minority and limited-resource farmers, and as market analysts keenly aware of the marketability of crops produced by blacks.

According to the participants, some African Americans should train to become managing producers who would practice the most efficient form of agricultural production and would later mentor younger black farmers and share intellectual, physical, and financial resources when needed. Many blacks trained in agriculture could also become buyers, contracting directly with African American growers to help them expand into other areas. Black investors could provide assistance in helping farmers plan. The black community—rural and urban people as well as religious and commercial institutions—would also be invited to invest in farm operations. To capitalize on such investment, agricultural engineers could pioneer a field of technological development designed to produce farm technology, at a reduced cost, for limited resource farmers. Finally, African Americans need to study banking and rural development so that black agriculturists could have access to lending institutions that would be willing to take risks and make loans to them.

The data collected from field research conducted with African American farmers in the South indicate that the most important issue pertaining to irrigation concerns access and support. Their access to capital, credit, and markets to develop high-value operations is limited. African American farmers also need access to good irrigable land and water supplies. Greater support from family members as investors and resource persons can assist with the planning and funding of farm operations, especially from those who can offer their labor at a minimal cost. African American farmers, if advised correctly by farm support offices in their counties, can still benefit from the USDA 2501 loan program (loans for socially disadvantaged people), which targets

minority farmers, and funds the installation or improvement of irrigation systems. Technical and financial management assistance are part of the lending program, however, limited funds have affected the number and size of the loans as well as the program’s capacity for outreach and continuing technical assistance. Finally, the support of federal and state offices is needed to increase the farmers’ access to agricultural education, extension information, and programs about irrigation for low-sales, small-scale operations.

Because data on African American farmers and irrigation are limited, more research is needed. Both scientific and anecdotal data would help policy-makers and those who implement policy to understand the kinds of farm and rural cultures that aid or hinder successful agricultural production.

Appendix. Questions asked by the author of participants in survey of southern African American farmers.

1. How long have you been farming?
2. What has been your farm status?
3. How much land have you farmed?
4. Has your operation relied more on labor or capital, or have you been a labor or capital intensive farmer?
5. What has been your farm budget?
6. What did/do you grow?
7. Was your operation diversified?
8. Did you practice any form of land improvement or conservation or environmental safety measures?
9. What kind of weather conditions have you had to deal with while farming?
10. Which weather conditions have proven the most difficult for your crops, and how have you handled these situations?
11. Were your crops ever lost due to weather factors, and if so, what did you do to deal with the problems?
12. What plans did you make to help combat weather problems?
13. Was drought the most serious weather problem to handle?
14. Did you plan a system of irrigation or attempt to think through issues about it?
15. Did you borrow money for irrigation?
16. What lending agency loaned you money to irrigate your crop?
17. How exactly did you plan to use the money you borrowed or made to buy pipes, put down a well, or to create some other water system?
18. Did you need to be farming a certain amount of acres before you could borrow money?
19. Did FHA, ASCS, or FSA offices make information concerning irrigation and how it could be financed available to you?
20. Do you buy drought insurance?
21. Do you buy drought-resistant seeds to work alongside the irrigation you plan to use?
22. Are your crops more likely to be insured at a lower premium if you have watering or an irrigation system on the land you are farming?
23. How do drought-resistant seeds help you address irrigation needs?