Black Participation in the Farmers Home Administration and Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, 1964–1990

VALERIE GRIM

Established respectively in 1938 and 1949, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) and the Farmers Home Administration (FHA) were created to improve the quality of life in rural America and to narrow the economic gap between rural and urban communities. The programs were designed to provide technical assistance to improve farm production, financial aid to help rural families acquire decent housing and economically viable farms, and price supports to protect farmers from the hazards of the market. The farm programs have been successful in reaching many white farm families. However, the New Deal is yet to come for most black farmers. Most still exist in poverty and are being driven from their land because they cannot compete with those who have benefitted greatly from government farm programs. The economic gap has widened between African American producers and their white counterparts, due largely to the discrimination African Americans faced trying to obtain assistance from federal farm agencies.

Critics of the agricultural subsidy programs have charged that black farmers lagged behind due to historical and contemporary discrimination in the implementation of farm programs.[1] This claim was based on research conducted during the 1960s by scholars at historical black land-grant institutions and by agents of the federal government. Research at the Tuskegee Institute

VALERIE GRIM is an assistant professor of Afro-American Studies at Indiana University. She teaches African American history courses and publishes in the areas of agricultural and rural history, with an emphasis on the black experience in rural America.

1. In this context, critics include not only scholars, government agents and agencies, and policy experts, but also black farmers who are presently trying to make a living in the farm business.

Agricultural History / Volume 70 / Number 2 / Spring 1996. © Agricultural History Society

showed that prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, black farmers remained largely disconnected from farm support programs.

In Alabama during the era of segregation, black farmers were almost completely unaware of opportunities available through agricultural programs. Only 35 percent of African American farmers knew they could sell or rent a portion of their cotton allotment. Eighty-one percent did not know they could get their projected yields changed; this is important since subsidy checks were based on projected yields and black farmers typically have been given smaller per acre projected yields than whites. Thirty-four percent did not know that they could get a part of their subsidy prior to picking. Sixty-four percent did not know that they were entitled to technical assistance from ASCS. And 75 percent did not know that federal funds were available to buy fertilizer for the next year's crop. Thus, a substantial portion of the black farm population lacked knowledge about important rules and therefore could not advance.[2]

The records of the FHA during the pre–civil rights movement of the 1940s through 1950s also indicated that black farmers remained largely disconnected from farm programs. The majority of African American producers lacked any knowledge of the loans available to them. Seventy-two percent did not know that the FHA had loans for soil and water improvement. Fifty-seven percent did not know about loans to help build, buy, or fix up a house or farm building. Sixty-five percent did not know that the FHA made loans to help buy land. And 68 percent were uninformed about the loans to meet operating costs. Lack of knowledge about loans, of course, precluded getting the loans. This was evident in the statistics, which showed that only 37 percent of black farmers had ever been to an FHA office, and only 21 percent had actually ever received an FHA loan. Only 15 percent reported ever hearing about FHA meetings. A mere 4 percent said they had received loan help or advice from

2. For a discussion, see United States Commission on Civil Rights, "Equal Opportunity in Federally Assisted Agricultural Programs in Georgia," report of the Georgia State Advisory Committee (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967); William C. Payne Jr., "Implementing Federal Nondiscrimination Policies in the Department of Agriculture, 1964–1976," (paper presented at the Agricultural Policy Symposium of the Policy Studies Organization, Washington, D.C., 26 July 1977); Economic Research Service, "Negro Participation in Decision Making Bodies of Agriculture-Related Programs," staff report from the Agricultural History Branch, USDA, 1967, National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, Maryland (hereafter cited as NAL); ASCS administrators to the chairman of all ASCS committees, "Policies on Equal Opportunity and Civil Rights," 22 March 1965, NAL.

FHA committeemen, and only 13 percent reported such help from FHA members.[3]

Many social and political conditions contributed to the conspiracy to deny black farmers participation. Race, class, and caste discrimination was so firmly entrenched in southern societies that agents of the federal government were threatened if they allowed blacks to participate in their programs. Because black farmers were viewed as a lower caste within a racially segregated nation, many southern planters justified their monopolization and control of government programs, agencies, and agents by arguing that black farmers were ignorant and did not possess adequate ability to take advantage of farm programs. In other words, according to Jodie Hearon, a retired African American cotton grower of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta, "To help Black farmers and Black folk on the farm would have been a waste of money, some people thought, and an unnecessary risk of white agents' lives on a race of people many white farmers, small and large alike, thought didn't know nothin' 'bout farmin'." Because of this prevailing attitude regarding black farmers' ability and participation, the USDA issued statements hoping to improve black participation and to discourage racial implementation of its policies.[4]

Using Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the USDA established a policy of nondiscrimination in federal programs. Regulations implementing the

3. Commission on Civil Rights, *Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965). For further discussion, see Commission on Civil Rights, *Progress in Implementing Civil Rights Policies in Selected Agricultural Programs in the State of Georgia* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966); *Baltimore Sun*, 8 May 1969; *Des Moines Register*, 4 May 1969 and 20 September 1971; Farmers Home Administration, *Information for Farmers Home Administration County Committeemen* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955).

4. Secretary of Agriculture Clifford M. Hardin, "Memorandum to All Employees," 31 October 1969, USDA-ERS, NAL. For further discussion, see Don F. Hadwiger, "Farmers Home Administration Services to Negroes" (paper on file at the USDA, Economic Research Service, History Branch, and the NAL), 1970; *New York Times*, 31 October 1964; *Washington Post*, 1 March 1965. Howard Bertsch, Farmers Home Administration, "Equal Opportunity in Federally Assisted Programs: Farmers Home Administration" (statement at the National Conference on Title VI, Civil Rights Act of 1964, Washington, D.C., 18 January 1965); *USDA Progress Report on Elimination of Discrimination* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965); *Washington Post*, 28 July 1966; Jodie Hearon, interview by author, Memphis, Tennessee, 3 July 1989. For a discussion, see Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman to President Lyndon B. Johnson, 17 June 1965, USDA-ERS, History Division, NAL; *New York Times*, 28 February 1965; Charles J. MacLean, *Analysis of Farmers Home Administration Report of White and Negro Borrowers in Thirteen Selected Counties, 1964*, report prepared for the Commission on Civil Rights (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965).

law were published in the Department of Agriculture in late 1964. Formal efforts to implement the law began in February 1965 with the appointment to the secretary of agriculture of an assistant for civil rights with a small staff. Lending support to these efforts was the United States Commission on Civil Rights' publication concerning discrimination in agriculture programs in the South. The commission report concluded:

> As the group most depressed economically, most deprived educationally, and most oppressed socially, Negroes have been consistently denied access to many services, provided with inferior services when served, and segregated in federally financed agricultural programs whose very task was to raise their standard of living. The Commission's analysis of four major U.S. Department of Agriculture programs has clearly indicated that the Department has generally failed to assume responsibility for assuring equal opportunity and equal treatment to all those entitled to benefit from its programs. Instead, the prevailing practice has been to follow local patterns of racial segregation and discrimination in providing assistance paid for by federal funds.[5]

Because Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 covered only those federally assisted programs that passed through state and county entities on their way to individual beneficiaries, the USDA added to its regulations a prohibition against discrimination in programs where the benefits passed directly to individuals. To regulate its policies, the USDA established a Citizen Advisory Committee on Civil Rights. Guidelines for the collection and evaluation of data on minority group participation in USDA programs were issued, as were guidelines on the integration of previously segregated office facilities. By mid-1965, the USDA had dispatched teams of investigators to determine how widespread were the problems revealed by the Civil Rights Commission. Almost immediately, it seemed, segregated offices began to disappear,

5. USDA, *Report of the Task Force Established to Review the Recommendations of the Civil Rights Commission*, 26 March 1965 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966). For additional discussion, see *New York Times*, 25 July 1971; Commission on Civil Rights, *Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs: Excerpts From An Appraisal of Services Rendered By Agencies of the USDA* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965).

employment of minorities increased and minority program participation expanded.[6]

Despite the apparent soundness of organization and management mechanisms, the civil rights program of the USDA was only marginally effective. Even though African American farmers became more informed and knowledgeable about the operations of farm programs—in terms of what they could rent, plant, sell, borrow, and build—major discrimination continued to exist. While much of it appeared in the areas of minority employment, rural housing and recreation, and access to decision making and program benefits, the majority, in today's society, exists in the FHA's farm loan programs and within the committee work of the ASCS.[7]

These developments, as further discussion will show, were most evident during the post–civil rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s, a time when many Americans began to feel that America's racial and social problems had been corrected, thereby relieving society of its debt to minorities, while at the same time forcing policy makers to begin terminating "racial inclusive programs and policies" that gave minorities special consideration. The push for the elimination of "special minority favors" and the resurgence of conservative ideology during the early 1980s repopularized racism and discrimination, thereby making it possible for those implementing federal farm policies and programs to be less accountable for their discriminating actions.[8]

During the 1980s, the Farmers Home Administration administered five farm loan programs geared toward meeting the essential needs of farmers who were unable to obtain credit elsewhere. These included the farm ownership, farm operating, emergency disaster, economic emergency, and soil and water loan programs. In each farm loan program, the proportion of the total number of loans made to blacks declined during the 1980s. Similarly, the proportion of the total dollar amount loaned to blacks fell in each program. In fiscal year 1981, for example, the Farmers Home Administration obligated almost

6. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in the Alabama Black Belt: A Report of an Open Meeting by the Alabama State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966).

7. *Washington Post*, 28 July 1966. See also *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, 18 November 1970; and *Wallaces Farmer*, 3 October 1964.

8. *Washington Post*, 17 January 1988.

$7 billion under these farm loan programs. Blacks received 5.1 percent of the total number of FHA farm loans, but only 2.5 percent of the total dollar amount loaned. The average loan amount for blacks was $18,290, less than one-half the average loan amount of $39,082 for whites.[9]

According to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, the decline in FHA services to black farmers during the 1980s reflects either a failure on the part of some states to meet minority targets or the setting of declining targets for minority services, or the view that black farmers were benefiting proportionally from farm programs, especially since they comprised only a small percentage of agricultural producers. Examination of each FHA's loan program, however, suggested a failure on the part of this agency to set and meet meaningful goals in serving blacks.[10]

As both a management tool and a civil rights requirement, state FHA offices were asked to provide the national office with loan targets—projected goals of the number of loans they would make, by program type and by race. However, these targets frequently were not met. For instance, in fiscal year 1980 blacks in the farm ownership loan program received 3.1 percent of all the loans provided under the farm ownership loan program. In fiscal year 1981, the number of black farm ownership loans dropped to only 1.9 percent of the total. The total dollar amount loaned to African American farmers also fell from 1.7 to 1.3 percent of the overall dollar amount loaned. For example, in Texas, the FHA targeted 27 loans for blacks in 1979, but actually made only 5 such loans. Rather than striving to meet the original target, the FHA lowered the 1980 goal to 8 loans but made 9. In contrast the FHA in Texas made 496 loans to whites in 1979 and increased this number to 550 in 1980. In 1981, 6 farm ownership loans were made to blacks.[11]

The farm operating loan program, in contrast to the farm ownership loan

9. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Decline of Black Farming in America: A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Commission on Civil Rights, 1982); House Committee on Appropriations, *Farmers Home Administration: Problems and Issues Facing the Emergency Loan Program* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987).

10. Ibid. See also USDA, Farmers Home Administration, Management Information Systems Division, "Racial Program Participation by Fiscal Years, 1980 and 1981," *Report Code 631* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982).

11. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Decline of Black Farming in America*, 98–122.

program, had a higher rate of minority participation. However, an examination of loan data over the 1970 decade showed that minority participation, both in terms of number of loans and as a percentage of all loans, was lower than it was in 1971. At their peak in 1974 minority loans reached 6,824 compared to only 3,024 in 1981. The percentage of loans to African Americans fell from 7.9 percent between fiscal years 1980 and 1981. Disparities in average loan amounts between blacks and whites increased in North Carolina, Florida, and Alabama between fiscal year 1980 and 1981.[12]

The emergency disaster loan program, during the 1980s, provided borrowers with the greatest number of loans and the largest total dollar amount of any FHA farm loan program. Over $5 billion in disaster loan money was provided to farmers in fiscal year 1981, but only 3.0 percent was received by blacks. The average loan was $18,198 for black farmers compared to $38,015 for whites. During 1981 more than $300 million, 10.5 percent of the total disaster loan money, was awarded to millionaires. This action prompted the General Accounting Office to conclude that "little or no assurance exists that disaster assistance loans are not used in frivolous ways, particularly by wealthier borrowers."[13]

The economic emergency and the soil and water loan programs were established to address temporary emergencies and development needs. In fiscal year 1981, the economic emergency loan program provided the second largest dollar amount of any FHA program—$1,160,672,000. Black farmers during the early 1980s received 1.2 percent of the total dollar amount loaned under this program. The average loan amount for a black recipient was $27,997, one-third less than the average loan amount of $43,472 for white farmers. Although the soil and water loan program was relatively small in comparison to other FHA farm loan programs, it, like the economic emergency loan, was relevant to African American farmers who had greater than average conservation and development needs. However, during the early 1980s, blacks, as pointed out by a study of the Civil Rights Commission, received only 2.6 percent of the loans under this program, and only 0.8 percent of the total amount loaned.

12. Ibid.

13. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Decline of Black Farming in America*, 105.

The average loan for African American farmers was $9,136, less than one-half the average loan amount of $21,922 for whites.[14] Although some black participation evolved, it certainly was without equal treatment.

To address the issue of blacks' limited participation in the FHA loan programs as well as the apparent discrimination associated with awarding the loans, Congress created a special program for small farmers, Limited Resource Loans. Twenty-five percent of all farm ownership and farm operating loans were targeted by the FHA as limited resource loans to be provided to low income farmers under special terms and at reduced interest rates. Congress specifically identified minority farmers as among those who needed special assistance and as intended beneficiaries of this program. Due to the relatively small size of their farms, their low incomes, and limited education, it was expected that most black borrowers would qualify for limited resource loans and that African American borrowers would receive limited resource loans at a disproportionately higher rate than white borrowers. But this was not the case. In this loan program, 27.8 percent of the farm operating loans received by whites in Georgia, for example, were limited resource loans compared to only 17.6 percent of the loans to black borrowers; in Florida, 27.7 percent of the loans were given to white borrowers compared to 20.0 percent to blacks; in Arkansas, 32.0 percent of the loans went to whites compared to 25.9 percent to blacks; in Kansas, the rate was 22.3 percent for whites and none for blacks; in Kentucky, 23.5 percent for whites compared to 13.6 percent for blacks; and in West Virginia, 22.4 percent were given to whites and none to blacks. This limited resource loan data, as the report of the Civil Rights Commission suggested, indicated that even in the farm loan program created by Congress to address specifically the needs of small and minority farmers, African American farmers did not significantly benefit from farm loan programs during the 1980s.[15]

14. Ibid., 98–122.

15. Ibid. See also William McD. Herr, *Toward An Analysis of the Farmers Home Administration's Direct and Guaranteed Farm Loan Programs*, USDA-ERS, Agriculture and Rural Economy Division (Washington, D.C.: USDA, 1991); Senate Committee on Agriculture, *Farmers Home Administration: Changes Needed in Loan Servicing Under the Agricultural Credit Act: Report to the Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry* (Washington, D.C.: General Accounting Office, 1990); and Farmers Home Administration, *Farmers Home Administration: Status of Participation in the Interest Rate Reduction Program* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981).

Complaints filed by southern black farmers during the 1980s and later in the 1990s asserted that the FHA denied them equal opportunities by failing to provide them with applications and information regarding loan programs. African American producers also charged that they were awarded smaller loans under less hospitable conditions than whites and that state FHA offices took inordinate time to process their loans. The experiences of Wilson Gerald, an African American farmer, and that of Charles Freeman, a white producer, illustrate this point:

> His [Wilson Gerald's] problems began in 1982 when the Reagan Administration tightened up on Farmers Home loan policies. When Gerald came in for his annual crop production loan, he was told he had to fill out a new 22-page Coordinated Financial Statement that was then being tested as a loan-processing document. Gerald tried but failed to complete the complex form and asked for the old, more familiar four-page application. Randy E. Simmons, the Farmers' Home county supervisor, rejected the request. He wrote Gerald that the new form was in 100 percent use by anyone obtaining financing. This was contrary to the national policy guidelines sent out by Charles Schuman, then head of the Farmers Home Administration, when he authorized the testing of the new form in North Carolina.... Gerald said no help was offered him and, after he tried three times and could not complete the form, he gave up.... A white farmer, Charles Freeman, said in an interview, however, 'I was in the Farmers Home Office when Gerald tried to apply. They told him he had to fill out that new form. He tried and when he couldn't, he left.' The white farmer said that he was allowed to fill out the old forms.[16]

Based on the testimony of both black and white farmers, some politicians encouraged the USDA to investigate to see if politics and racism were influencing Farmers Home lending practices. Apparently, this was the case since targets and actual loans to minorities declined in many southern states dur-

16. *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 1986; Farmers Home Administration, *Farmers Home Administration: Use of Loan Funds By Farmers Program Borrowers* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990); Senate Committee on Agriculture, *Proposed Changes in Farmers Home Administration Credit Regulations: Hearing Before the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry*, 100th Cong., 1st sess., 11 March 1987.

ing the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, the USDA's on-site reviews of FHA offices revealed that targets had not been set or aspired to at the county level where loans were made, nor had adequate outreach, during this time, been conducted to ensure that minority farmers were aware of FHA loan programs, particularly limited resource loans. Hence it seemed that, far from accomplishing its original purpose, the FHA, the Civil Rights Commission argued in the 1980s, failed to advance and in some cases may have hindered the efforts of black small operators to remain a viable force in agriculture.[17]

Like the FHA, the ASCS office became a testing ground for democracy during the post–Civil Rights era. Complaints levied against this agency during the late 1960s and the 1970s included statements that blacks, with rare exceptions, had not participated in the nominations and elections under the supervision and jurisdiction of the department for ASCS county committees in the South. African Americans were not employed in permanent federal or county ASCS positions in the South and were not appointed to important temporary positions filled each year by county committees. Moreover, blacks prior to 1965 had never been appointed by the secretary of agriculture to a state ASCS committee in the South.[18]

The virtual exclusion of blacks from the ASCS structure posed one of the most serious problems for the Department of Agriculture, particularly since this exclusion was compounded by the discriminatory operation of the county committee elections. In rural communities powerful people, especially the planter class, have a great opportunity to punish their local opponents with a wide range of economic, social, and political weapons. As a result, intimate

17. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Decline of Black Farming*, 98–122; Farmers Home Administration, *Farmers Home Administration: Farm Program Debt, Delinquencies, and Loan Losses as of June 30, 1989* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990). See also Farmers Home Administration, *Farmers Home Administration: Debt Restructuring Activities During the 1984–85 Farm Credit Crisis: Briefing Report to Congressional Requesters* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986).

18. Commission on Civil Rights, *Report of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Civil Rights*, 8 October 1968 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968). See also *Report of USDA Citizens Advisory Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968); U.S. Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, *ASCS Loan Task Force: Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971). Commission on Civil Rights, *Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965). See also Cliffton M. Hardin, "USDA Policy on Civil Rights," secretary's memorandum, *No. 1662*, supplement 2, 28 May 1971, NAL.

acquaintanceship with and participation in the local community may lead not to even-handed justice but to subservience to the powerful and neglect of the weak. The lost opportunity to develop African American leadership, to further democratic procedures in federal programs, and to accelerate the economic advancement of black farmers have been the high costs of failure of ASCS to assume responsibility for the manner in which elections for its programs were conducted in those areas of the county where blacks had been denied the ballot.[19]

Contrary to popular thinking about the ASCS's neglects, examination of its activities during the late 1970s and early 1980s revealed some effort on the part of this agency to pay more attention to the needs of black farmers. For example, records of the ASCS showed that black participation improved in each program category: producers of record by racial group, farmers/ranchers requesting and approved for the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP), farmers/ranchers requesting and approved for the Forestry Improvement Program (FIP), public meetings held and number attending by racial groups, appeals and reconsiderations filed and percentage of requests granted, eligible voters, and ASCS county committee members.

According to ASCS records, there were significant increases in the number of black producers (farmers and ranchers). The approval rate of requests from black farmers also improved between 1970 and 1980. And appeals and reconsiderations of requests improved. For example, in 1977, 249 appeals and reconsiderations were requested by blacks. Of these requests 213, or 85.5 percent, were granted. This compared favorably to the 77.8 percent granted to white producers and to the 84.3 percent granted to blacks in 1976. Alabama had the largest number of black requests (87) with 77, or 88.5 percent, granted. Georgia with 53 requests had 48 granted for a percentage of 90.6. In 1978, there were 37,465 appeals and reconsiderations made in the United States, with 33,219, or 88.7 percent of them granted. Minority appeals and reconsiderations were granted at a percentage of 91.5 or 1,463 approved out of the 1,598 requested. There were 98,403 appeals and reconsiderations made

19. Office of Equal Opportunity, *Equal Opportunity Report USDA Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970–1979).

in 1979 with 78,165 (79.4 percent) of them granted. Minority appeals and reconsiderations were granted at a percentage of 85.13, or 710 approved out of the 834 requested between 1978 and 1979.[20]

As a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the USDA equal opportunity program, a significant increase occurred in black voter participation. In addition to attending more public meetings to participate in discussions concerning farm programs and policies, African Americans turned out in large numbers to support minority farmers' election to ASCS committees. County committees were composed of three members and two alternates and the committee decided whose loans would be approved. Members were elected to serve for three years on a staggered basis; therefore, one member was elected each year. In 1977, out of 960 elected members for county committees, 3 were black. Out of 1,793 alternates, 33 were black. In 1976, the number of blacks elected among 984 members was 3, and among the 1,815 alternates were 58 African Americans. Mississippi, Oklahoma, and South Carolina each elected 1 member. Georgia elected 8 alternates; Mississippi and Texas each had 7. In 1978 there were 168 black members and 569 alternates chosen in their minority state grouping out of 12,676 members and 8,442 alternates. This represents 1.3 and 6.7 percents, respectively, of the total elected. These statistics were slightly lower than the 1.4 and 6.8 percents for 1977. South Carolina elected the largest number of African American community committee members (33), and Mississippi elected the largest number of black alternates. In 1977, 3 black county committee members and 33 alternates were elected, or 0.3 and 1.8 percent respectively. Georgia and Texas elected 6 alternates each for the highest elected in the southern states.[21]

Although blacks have served as committee members since the 1970s, their participation has been and continues to be sparse, which represents a continuity of problems black producers have historically faced trying to work with ASCS and other farm organizations. Presently, black farmers feel that their needs are not being met and that their voice is so weak that they are rarely

20. Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, *Report on Participation in ASCS County Programs and Operations by Racial Groups, 1976–1979* (Washington, D.C.: Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, 1980).

21. Ibid.

heard. Some feel that in the 1990s conditions have returned to normalcy, back to a pre-1965 way of thinking and interacting which meant limited participation for blacks, defined by race, class, and caste.[22]

Black farmers and activists from organizations such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives argue that little, if anything, has been done to assist black farmers since 1983, despite two congressional hearings on the issue and the creation of an Agriculture Department task force to study the problem. Speaking about the problems African American farmers encounter, George Ammons, a thirty-seven-year-old producer who farms 125 acres in North Carolina, argued: "Blacks are hit harder by the current farm crisis than their neighbors. When you've got both discrimination and the economy to fight, you got a pretty tough situation to deal with." Johnny Jones, a fifty-five-year-old African American who grows truck crops south of Fresno, California, added: "White farmers complain that the Reagan administration [was] not doing enough to help the beleaguered farm family, [but] this is the way it's always been for black farmers."[23]

While considerable attention was given to improving black participation following the civil rights movement, conservative political attitudes and attacks on affirmative action, political correctness, and special legislation designed to improve minority participation in general have caused some African American farmers to believe they will be further discriminated against. More importantly, black farmers, while experiencing difficulties getting elected to county ASCS committees, also feel frustrated at the inability to be appointed as ASCS and FHA community members.[24] Whites are more likely than not to be appointed to these positions.

What then can we say about black farmers' participation in the Farmers Home Administration and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. At best, the participation has been limited given the scope of the

22. House Committee on Government Operations, *The Minority Farmer: A Disappearing American Resource: Has the FHA Been the Primary Catalyst?* 101st Cong., 2nd sess., 20 November 1990; U.S. General Accounting Office, *Farmers Home Administration: Loan Servicing Benefits For Bad Faith Borrowers* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989).

23. *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 1986.

24. Gerrion Black, interview by the author, Drew, Mississippi, 21 August 1994; Alexander Scott, interview by the author, Drew, Mississippi, 6 August 1995; Howard Williams, interview by the author, Drew, Mississippi, 6 August 1995.

agencies' programs and the large number of black farmers prior to 1964 who could have benefitted from them. Because of discrimination in the implementation of programs, we can expect even less participation because some black farmers have become very skeptical of farm programs, believing that many of them are a ploy to take away their land. Because many believe they will not receive fair treatment, a number of African American producers have decided not to participate.[25]

Supporting black farmers' belief, Richard Douglas, a black Republican agricultural economist and former assistant deputy secretary of agriculture, 1981–1982, added: "Blacks do not have equal access to Farmers Home Administration [because] Farmers Home has failed to live up to its mandate... to help all small farmers." Lowell Pannell, a Democrat who was appointed state head of FHA in California in 1977, stated: "[I] was the first black ever to hold a state directorship. There was racism in Farmers Home when I graduated and started to work for the agency in 1955. There was racism when I was state director, and there is racism in Farmers Home now. And it is the resulting lack of access to credit that stands out as the single most debilitating factor in the minds of most black farmers."[26]

By 1990, the number of black farmers is so small that it is easy to forget that African American producers make significant contributions to the farm economy. Because they are growing cotton, soybeans, rice, and corn as well as producing catfish, livestock, and food products, black farmers need opportunities that would enable them to farm more efficiently and profitably. Consequently, agents of the FHA and the ASCS must become more innovative in thinking about ways to include African American growers. This means that the USDA might need to consider establishing a more aggressive and intensive education campaign to assure that small farmers have knowledge of all funds and programs available to them. The USDA may also want to pay special attention to small farmers in terms of more practical technical assistance, primarily in budgeting, financing, and management.

In July of 1969, Vivian W. Henderson, president of Clark College in At-

25. Leroy Vassel, interview by the author, Minter City, Mississippi, 23 August 1989; Edward Scott Sr., interview by the author, Drew, Mississippi, 7 July 1988.

26. *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 1986.

lanta and chairman of the Georgia State Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, testified before the Agricultural Listening Committee at the University of Georgia. She stated that USDA agencies, like the FHA and the ASCS, were minimally successful in assisting black farmers because the agencies' "rural constituency is basically conservative in economics, in politics, and in social change; that the Department [USDA] is more responsive to the powerful commercial agricultural interest groups who historically have opposed those programs which would operate to the benefit of the small, low-income farmer; that the nature of the Agriculture Department bureaucracy, with its peculiar reliance upon acquiescence to local control, has a built-in inertia which resists change; and that the perceived influence of agricultural committees in Congress, which are controlled by men of seniority, many of whom are from states which historically denied the vote to men of color, is often more persuasive in developing and administering programs than are the needs of the people to be served."[27]

Although Henderson made these statements decades ago, some agencies of the Department of Agriculture are still viewed as part of a system which serves to perpetuate economic and social bondage—an image many black farmers think is essentially true. Robert Mays, an African American farmer in eastern Arkansas, believes "that the USDA makes the problem worse because it does not treat blacks and whites equally."[28]

Meanwhile, the persistence of an entirely white structure in county after county where the economic welfare of African American farmers is being decided, in their absence, cannot help but raise questions as to the equity with which FHA and ASCS programs are being administered.[29] Blacks have been further isolated because they have not been employed much above the menial level in FHA and ASCS offices—two of the most important economic institutions in rural towns. The extension of economic benefits, through

27. Dr. Vivian W. Henderson, "Reasons for USDA Inertia" (statement before the Agricultural Listening Conference, University of Georgia, Athens, 24 July 1969).

28. *Los Angeles Times*, 14 April 1986. See also *Washington Post*, 27 October 1986; "Lean Years For Black Farmers," *Progressive* 10 (15 August 1987): 27.

29. *Washington Post*, 5 August 1982. See also *New York Times National News*, 8 March 1988; House Committee on Agriculture, *Farmers Home Administration's Use of Offset Procedures For Collecting Delinquent Debt: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Conservation Credit and Rural Development*, 100th Cong., 1st sess., 3 December 1987.

larger allotments and increased participation in cost-sharing grants, will require objective evaluation of the present situation and the establishment of increased participation by African American farmers who are presently not part of these programs' goals.[30] Access to these programs, as the research has shown, has been essential to white farmers' success, while a lack of access has been black farmers' handicap.

30. *Washington Post*, 17 January 1988. See also Senate Report, *Farmers Home Administration: Farm Loan Programs Have Become a Continuous Source of Subsidized Credit: Report to the Honorable Jessie Helms* (Washington, D.C.: General Accounting Office, 1988).