

# Exploring Innovative Solutions to the Challenges Faced by Socially Disadvantaged Agricultural Producers



Report from a project conducted by the Rural Coalition, its member organizations, and the Institute for Community-Based Research

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# Research Focus

- There are numerous sources of scholarly information concerning the status and challenges faced by socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.
- Less developed, however, is the knowledge base concerning potential solutions to some of these challenges.
- From a community-based action research perspective, it is necessary to focus on policies, programs and other strategies for securing the livelihoods of under-served producers.

# Defining “Social Disadvantage”

The concept of “social disadvantage” was given official attention in the 1990 passage of the Outreach and Technical Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers, the result of significant work on the part of nongovernmental organizations.

Under this program, socially disadvantaged producers are viewed as those who have been “subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities.”

See Section 2501(e)(2) of the *Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act* of 1990 [7 USC 2279(e)(2)].

# Project Objectives

- Develop a template for a County and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Area profile of producers, production, program participation and overall county demographics for baseline assessment and evaluation.
- Document the barriers that socially disadvantaged farmers face when attempting to access services.
- Develop recommendations for potential solutions to identified barriers and exclusions to more effectively connect socially disadvantaged producers to the USDA.
- Analyze data on the success of the intervention strategies developed to increase equity in USDA programs and prosperity for socially disadvantaged producers.

# Project Leading Collaborators

Rural Coalition

Institute for Community-Based Research

Rural Advancement Fund

Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project

National Immigrant Farming Initiative

Accokeek Foundation

National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association

Mississippi Association of Cooperatives

Land Loss Prevention Project

Flats Mentor Farm

Federation of Southern Cooperatives Rural Training and  
Research Center

Santa Cruz Farm

And OTHERS!



# Building a Body of Work

- Green, J., E. Green & A. Kleiner. In Press. “From the Past to the Present: Agricultural Development and Black Farmers in the American South.” In *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability*. Edited by A. Alkon & J. Agyeman. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
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- Green, J. & A. Kleiner. 2009. “Exploring Global Agrifood Politics and the Position of Limited Resource Farmers in the United States.” In *The Politics of Globalization*. Edited by S. Dasgupta & J. Pieterse. London: Sage Publications.
- Kleiner, A. & J. Green. 2008. “Expanding the Marketing Opportunities and Sustainable Production Potential for Minority and Limited Resource Agricultural Producers in Louisiana and Mississippi.” *Southern Rural Sociology* 23(1): 149-169.
- Picciano, L., B. Toommaly & J. Green. 2004. “Assessing the Needs and Interests of Women in Agriculture: A Summary Review of Results from Community-Based Research.” Working Paper for the Rural Coalition and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Services Agency.
- Green, J., T. Harbin, C. Pope, L. Picciano & H. Fenney. 2003. “A Multi-Community Assessment of the Risk Management Needs of Small, Limited Resource and Minority Farmers.” Working Paper for the Rural Coalition and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Risk Management Agency.
- Green, J. 2002. “Community-Based Cooperatives and Networks: Participatory Social Movement Assessment of Four Organizations.” Doctoral Dissertation. Columbia, MO: Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri.
- Green, J. & L. Picciano. 2002. “Amplifying Voices through Action Research: Obtaining Input from Grassroots on Agricultural Programs.” Working Paper for the Rural Coalition.

# Methods

- Community-based action research framework
- Compilation and analysis of secondary data
- Evaluation and focus group workshops
- Focus groups with producers
- Survey of focus group participants
- Participant observation in other activities (meetings, conferences, and farm tours)



Focus group discussions were organized around three broad topical areas.

- ✓ Future hopes and dreams for people's farms/agricultural businesses, as well as the challenges facing them and the programs and services needed.
- ✓ Positive and negative experiences in terms of accessing programs and services, including particular farm programs and services that have been most important or helpful.
- ✓ Recommendations for how programs and services could be improved to help producers achieve their goals for their farms/agricultural businesses.

Notes were taken by assigned documenters during the focus groups. Participants also completed written questionnaires.

### Focus Groups and Locations (Rural Coalition 2011)

Sponsoring Organization	Total # of Participants	Location	
		City (Counties)	State
Mississippi Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and Delta Fresh Foods	8	Shelby (Bolivar, Coahoma)	Mississippi
Indian Springs Farmers Association	9	Petal (Forrest)	Mississippi
Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project, Inc.	11	Oklahoma City (Caddo, Okfuskee)	Oklahoma
Hampton County Young Farmers Association	14	Hampton (Hampton)	South Carolina
Florence Small Farmers Association	27	Florence (Florence)	South Carolina

Focus groups included both men (61%) and women (39%).

A majority of the participants were Black/African American (93%), with other race/ethnicities including Hispanic/Latino and White.

# Summary Results from Focus Groups

Several common themes emerged through the focus group discussions with socially disadvantaged farmers in three states. These include:

- ✓ Shared goals of achieving profitability, sustainability, and inter-generational succession of farms and land.
- ✓ View that well-functioning and fair federal farm programs/services are critical to producer success.
- ✓ Key challenges include those facing agricultural producers in the US for several decades, along with growing concentration of wealth and market power in the global agrifood system.
- ✓ Desire to amplify collective voice in the marketplace and at the policy level through producer networking and mentoring, cooperatives, bulk purchases of inputs, and an overall recognition of the value of small and minority farmers by agency personnel.
- ✓ Some successes with particular programs and services, most notably with irrigation projects, hoop house projects, and the use of vouchers and EBT machines at farmers markets.
- ✓ Numerous barriers to receiving programs and services, including a general lack of financial resources for many aspects of a farm operation (e.g. for land, labor, and equipment), limited access to collateral and credit, and insufficient accurate and clear information about programs and services.

# Focus Group Participants' Policy Recommendations

Participants offered several recommendations to improve programs and services.

- ✓ Adequate numbers of agency staff should be placed in agency field offices to better serve producers.
- ✓ Staff needs to be better trained and more knowledgeable about the programs and services available to producers.
- ✓ The various procedural steps required for accessing and using programs and services must be clarified and consistently promoted and implemented by agency staff.
- ✓ Agencies should do outreach to producers and adequate follow-up to their inquiries.
- ✓ Red tape must be reduced, and all information through agency websites and on forms found at field offices should be consistent, up-to-date, and specifically labeled for socially disadvantaged farmers (where appropriate).

# Next Steps

This is an ongoing research project. Next steps include:

- ✓ Additional focus groups and/or group meetings.
- ✓ Detailed analysis of Census of Agriculture and general Census data for the states and counties represented in the study.

Attention to the official statistics and interpretation of those numbers from the perspectives of the partner organizations and the focus group participants.

- ✓ Documentation of lessons learned, best practices and recommendations for policy and program changes from the partner organizations.
- ✓ Evaluation feedback strategies for organizations serving socially-disadvantaged producers.

# Additional Information

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