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Re-Entering African-American Farmers: Recent Trends and a Policy Rationale

Spencer D. Wood and Jess Gilbert

Land Tenure Center

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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN —
MADISON

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CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Overview of the decline of black farmers 2

Delta County 9

Civil rights violations of the former Farmers Home Administration 12

Conclusion: Re-entering black farmers 14

Appendix figure 1: Black-operated farms, 17 southern states, 1992 16

Appendix figure 2: Black-operated land in farms, 17 southern states, 1992 17

References 18

ABSTRACT

Today, there are only about 15,000 black farmers in the United States. Declining by 98 percent since 1920, black farmers have suffered losses attributable to public policy, economic pressures, and racial oppression. All of these factors must be addressed if African-American farmers are to survive.

In this paper, we use Census of Agriculture data and a follow-on survey in one Mississippi Delta county to review the current situation of black farmers. We introduce the concept of "re-entering farmers" to suggest that a significant number of black farmers, who are not defined as "farmers" by the Census, still own land and want to farm again. The first section of the paper provides a brief overview of the historical and current trends of black farmers in the U.S. The second section discusses Delta County, drawing upon our survey and the Census of Agriculture. The third section discusses the implications of civil rights violations by the former Farmers Home Administration of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Civil Rights Action Team 1997). Finally, we conclude with a policy recommendation to slow the drastic decline of African-American farmers.

RE-ENTERING AFRICAN-AMERICAN FARMERS: RECENT TRENDS AND A POLICY RATIONALE*

by

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INTRODUCTION

Today, there are only about 15,000 black farmers in the United States. Declining by 98 percent since 1920, black farmers have suffered losses attributable to public policy, economic pressures, and racial oppression. All of these factors must be addressed if African-American farmers are to survive.

In this paper, we use Census of Agriculture data and a follow-on survey in one Mississippi Delta county to review the current situation of black farmers.[1] We introduce the concept of "re-entering farmers" to suggest that a significant number of black farmers, who are not defined as "farmers" by the Census, still own land and want to farm again.[2] The first section of the paper provides a brief overview of the historical and current trends of black farmers in the United States. The second section discusses Delta County, drawing upon our survey and the Census of Agriculture. The third section discusses the implications of civil rights violations by the former Farmers Home Administration of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Civil Rights Action Team 1997). Finally, we conclude with a policy recommendation to slow the drastic decline of African-American farmers.

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[1] Based on a complete enumeration of farmers in Delta County, the earlier study (in 1987) included interviews with seventeen African Americans. In 1997, we re-interviewed twelve of these farmers. Of the other five, two had died, two were unavailable, and one had not farmed since 1986. See Pfeffer and Gilbert (1989).

[2] Within the sociology of agriculture there is a subfield, known as "entry/exit" studies, which examines the processes of farmers' beginning and ending careers. Our term "re-entering farmers" draws from this field. The term also highlights the potential action role of public policy in "re-entering:" them into agriculture.

OVERVIEW OF THE DECLINE OF BLACK FARMERS

The South always had the greatest number of farm residents until about the middle of this century (Banks and Kalbacher 1980). The loss of most of this farming population was due to the twin engines of increased mechanization and the dismantling of the sharecropping system, the latter at least partially a product of federal policy implementation (Daniel 1985; Wimberley, Morris, and Bachtel 1992; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982).

White farmers outnumbered black farmers both in terms of leaving and staying in farming. However, black farm operators have endured much higher rates of loss than white farmers (see Table 1). The number of black farmers in the United States peaked at approximately 926,000 in 1920 (Banks 1986; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982; Beale 1966; Wimberley et al. 1992). Between 1920 and 1969 there was a 90 percent decrease and a 98 percent decrease by 1992. This compares to an overall decline among white farmers of 65 percent. To be sure, many black and white Southerners who left agriculture were destitute tenant farmers with no real possibility of improving their situations. The 1930s Farm Security Administration photographs by such people as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans convey this sense of hopelessness. Still though, some farmers were getting along and many more wanted to remain on the land. Among these were black farmers who have subsequently lost land they once owned.

Most black-operated farms have always been in the South. By 1992 approximately 94 percent of all black farms were in seventeen Southern states (see Table 2). When speaking of black farmers, then, the regional figures for the South virtually equal the national figures. Since 1982 the number of black farmers in these states has declined by nearly 44 percent; states in the core of the region tended to experience losses closer to the national average and often worse. In 1992, eight states each claimed over 1,000 black farmers, accounting for nearly 75 percent of all black farmers in the country. Of these eight, only Texas can be considered on the periphery of the South (see figures in Appendix). Texas not only claims the largest number of black farmers, but also boasts the smallest percentage decrease between 1982 and 1992. If Texas is excluded from the national total, the national decline in black farmers worsens from 43.4 percent to 46.7 percent over the ten years and more accurately reflects the losses experienced in most of the seventeen states. With losses approaching 50 percent every ten years since World War II, it is understandable that the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights predicted, “At this rate of loss, there will be virtually no blacks operating farms in this country by the end of the next decade” (1982, p. 2).

That there has been a drastic national decline in the number of black farmers is obvious. But is the decline based only on scale (most black farms are very small), or is race a compounding factor? Race matters even if one controls for scale of operation (based on gross sales). Black-operated farms have decreased at a faster rate than have white-operated farms regardless of size (see Table 3). For farms with less than $10,000 in sales (the majority of all farms), the number of black farms decreased at a higher rate in every state in the region. The pattern is the same for farms with sales over $10,000 except for Oklahoma, Texas, and West Virginia. None of these exceptions are in the center of the South, but rather are situated on the periphery (see figures in Appendix).

TABLE 1

U.S. farms operated by Blacks and Whites, 1900–1992

YEAR	BLACK	% CHANGE	WHITE	% CHANGE
1992	18,816	-18.0	1,906,484	-7.7
1987	22,954	-31.0	2,064,805	-6.5
1982	33,250	-41.9	2,207,726	-8.0
1978	57,271	-57.3	2,398,726	-22.4
1969	133,973	-50.8	3,089,885	-9.6
1959	272,541	-51.3	3,419,672	-28.8
1950	559,980	-17.9	4,802,520	-10.7
1940	681,790	-22.8	5,378,913	0.1
1930	882,852	-4.6	5,373,703	-2.3
1920	925,710	3.6	5,499,707	1.1
1910	893,377	19.6	5,440,619	9.5
1900	746,717	-	4,970,129	-
Overall percentage loss, 1920–1992		-98.0		-65.3

Source for 1900–1978 data: United States Commission on Civil Rights (1982, p. 3).

Source for 1982–1992 data: *1992 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM.

Table 2

Black-Operated Farms: Southern States and U.S., 1982-1992

	1992	1987	1982	% Change
United States	18,816	22,954	33,250	-43.4
Alabama	1,381	1,828	2,759	-49.9
Arkansas	658	784	1,249	-47.3
Delaware	19	28	32	-40.6
Florida	612	708	835	-26.7
Georgia	1,080	1,253	2,068	-47.8
Kentucky	590	673	935	-36.9
Louisiana	1,097	1,198	1,888	-41.9
Maryland	253	371	551	-54.1
Mississippi	2,480	3,016	4,802	-48.4
Missouri	160	193	238	-32.8
North Carolina	1,866	2,640	4,413	-57.7
Oklahoma	556	648	795	-30.1
South Carolina	1,765	2,015	3,147	-43.9
Tennessee	938	1,202	1,598	-41.3
Texas	2,861	3,211	3,292	-13.1
Virginia	1,298	1,692	2,728	-52.4
West Virginia	20	23	29	-31.0
Total -- 17 States	17,634	21,483	31,359	-43.8
% of U.S. Total	93.7	93.6	94.3	--

Source: *1992 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-Rom

Table 3

All Farms and Black-Operated Farms by Sales Category, Southern States and U.S., 1982-1992

	< $10,000 Sales (% Change)		$10,000+ Sales (% Change)	
	All Farms	Black Farms	All Farms	Black Farms
United States	-17.3	-45.8	-10.9	-34.6
Alabama	-27.5	-53.0	-9.0	-26.0
Arkansas	23.2	-55.2	1.5	-23.4
Delaware	-26.0	-39.1	-18.5	-44.4
Florida	-6.0	-26.0	1.3	-28.6
Georgia	-17.1	-49.7	-18.8	-43.5
Kentucky	-16.0	-42.3	-3.7	-19.2
Louisiana	-25.0	-44.4	-7.9	-30.8
Maryland	-19.3	-54.4	-19.4	-53.2
Mississippi	-29.3	-52.1	-14.5	-18.8
Missouri	-16.9	-26.8	-7.8	-44.4
North Carolina	-32.1	-59.8	-24.7	-53.8
Oklahoma	-13.3	-35.0	0.7	2.1
South Carolina	-17.1	-44.8	-21.9	-40.2
Tennessee	-22.1	-42.9	-4.3	-34.1
Texas	-8.8	-18.3	10.0	47.2
Virginia	-25.1	-57.1	-6.1	-38.9
West Virginia	-16.7	-35.7	34.6	100.0

Source: *1992 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM

A closer look at recent trends in the eight states that each had over 1,000 black operators in 1992 is provided in Tables 4 through 6. Regionally, black-operated farmland declined by 13 percent between 1987 and 1992. Alabama and Mississippi are close to the regional average, while North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia experienced a higher rate of loss of their black-operated farmland. In contrast, Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina were substantially below the regional average, with Louisiana even experiencing a modest gain. Furthermore, in every case except Texas, the average farm size of black-operated farms increased between 1987 and 1992. As can be seen in Table 4, most black farms are smaller than 140 acres with gross sales less than $10,000. These characteristics are consistent across the eight states.

Table 4

Black-Operated Farms:
Land in Farms, Farm Size, and Farm Sales for States with 1,000+ Black Farms, 1992

	Regional Total or Average[a]	Regional Percent[a]	AL	GA	LA	MS	NC	SC	TX	VA
Land in Farms (acres)	**Total**									
1992	2,064,757	--	170,824	169,768	133,663	303,879	164,728	146,193	376,541	158,477
1987	2,361,525	--	198,315	170,256	131,685	354,404	200,253	149,185	453,245	190,069
Average Farm Size (acres)	**Average**									
1992	117	--	123.7	157.2	121.8	122.5	88.3	82.8	131.6	122.1
1987	110	--	108.5	135.9	109.9	117.5	75.9	74.0	141.2	112.3
Farms by Size (acres)	**Total**		Percentages							
1-9	2,120	12.0	9.1	9.8	12.6	6.7	15.0	14.8	9.3	12.3
10-49	5,930	33.6	35.0	28.7	38.0	29.0	39.0	41.2	31.9	27.9
50-139	5,810	33.0	32.8	29.3	29.8	40.7	30.4	29.8	36.6	34.9
140-219	1,748	9.9	9.8	14.8	7.7	12.1	6.8	6.7	11.0	11.3
220-499	1,416	8.0	10.1	11.8	7.6	8.2	6.3	5.7	7.9	10.1
500 +	574	3.3	3.0	5.2	4.0	3.2	2.4	1.5	3.2	3.3
Farms by Value of Sales ($)	**Total**		Percentages							
<$1,000	3,344	19.0	20.9	18.1	24.4	23.6	11.6	24.4	20.7	14.3
$1,000-2,499	3,835	21.7	25.1	17.5	19.9	24.9	15.5	22.0	27.8	17.6
$2,500-9,999	6,315	35.8	37.1	30.8	33.7	33.7	34.8	33.4	38.0	35.1
$10,000-19,999	1,773	10.1	8.5	8.8	9.1	8.3	15.1	8.9	7.3	13.6
$20,000-24,999	393	2.2	1.4	3.1	1.5	1.5	2.9	2.4	1.6	4.3
$25,000+	1,974	11.2	7.0	21.7	11.4	7.9	20.0	8.9	4.6	14.9

Source: *1992 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1C,* CD-ROM
[a] Regional totals, averages, and percentages are for the 17 Southern states.

Table 5

Black-Operated Farms by Commodities Sold, States with 1,000+ Black Farms, 1992

	Regional Total[a]	Regional Percent[a]	AL	GA	LA	MS	NC	SC	TX	VA
SIC[b] Codes										
			Percentages							
Cash Grains	2,269	12.9	7.5	14.0	10.8	13.5	16.6	25.7	1.9	14.1
Field Crops (Except Cash Grains)	3,466	19.7	9.1	20.8	18.3	10.5	44.1	16.5	5.6	38.0
Cotton	484	2.7	2.4	0.6	9.2	7.5	0.6	0.4	0.6	0.0
Tobacco	1,946	11.0	0.1	4.0	0.0	0.0	37.9	12.4	0.0	27.5
Other Field Crop	1,036	5.9	6.6	16.2	9.1	2.9	5.5	3.7	5.0	10.5
Vegetables & Melons	635	3.6	3.1	5.2	3.6	3.5	3.2	7.8	1.8	2.2
Fruits & Tree Nuts	218	1.2	1.4	3.2	1.6	0.5	0.2	0.7	1.1	0.8
Horticultural Specialties	129	0.7	0.4	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.4	0.6
General Farm (Primarily Crops)	485	2.8	1.8	5.3	1.9	1.7	5.5	3.1	1.5	3.5
Livestock (Except Dairy, Poultry, and Specialties)	9,604	54.5	70.7	46.1	58.0	64.0	25.8	43.0	82.6	36.8
Beef (Except Feedlots)	7,304	41.4	59.1	24.3	50.9	56.5	9.7	17.3	74.9	27.2
Dairy Farms	255	1.4	2.5	1.5	2.1	2.5	0.2	0.4	1.7	1.1
Poultry & Eggs	272	1.5	0.9	2.1	2.4	2.4	3.1	0.8	1.3	0.8
Animal Specialties	221	1.3	1.9	0.4	0.9	1.0	0.6	0.5	2.3	1.1
General Farm (Primarily Livestock and Animal Specialties)	163	0.9	0.7	0.6	1.7	1.6	0.4	1.0	1.0	0.9

Table 6

Black Farmers by Principal Occupation, Age, and Gender for States with 1,000+ Black Farms, 1992

	Regional Total or Average[a]	Regional Percent[a]	AL	GA	LA	MS	NC	SC	TX	VA
Principal Occupation	**Total**					Percentages				
Farming	7,720	43.8	36.5	48.9	45.5	38.7	54.4	45.9	36.1	52.2
Other	9,914	56.2	63.5	51.1	54.5	61.3	45.6	54.1	63.9	47.8
Age Groups (years)	**Total**									
<25	85	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.2	1.0	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.8
25-34	721	4.1	4.0	6.6	5.5	4.0	3.7	3.1	3.6	4.2
35-44	2,527	14.3	13.8	15.9	12.4	15.2	11.3	16.5	13.7	11.2
45-54	3,322	18.8	20.5	16.3	19.2	18.9	17.0	20.6	19.3	17.7
55-59	1,973	11.2	10.4	9.9	11.5	9.2	12.5	10.7	11.5	13.9
60-64	2,197	12.5	11.9	12.3	13.9	10.7	13.5	12.8	12.7	11.9
65-69	2,207	12.5	10.9	13.7	11.6	12.0	14.8	12.2	12.3	14.6
70+	4,602	26.1	28.2	25.2	25.7	28.9	26.7	23.8	26.7	25.7
Average Age(years)	**Average**					Years				
1992	58	--	59	58	59	59	60	58	60	59
Gender	**Total**					Percentages				
Male	15,936	90.4	93.1	92.1	91.1	88.3	91.2	92.6	87.9	91.3
Female	1,698	9.6	6.9	7.9	8.9	11.7	8.8	7.4	12.1	8.7

Source: *1992 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1C,* CD-ROM
[a] Regional totals, averages, and percentages are for the 17 Southern states.

Table 5 shows that most black-operated farms engage primarily in livestock production with some field crops and cash grains. North Carolina stands out in that a higher percentage of its black farmers produce field crops and tobacco rather than livestock. Only in Louisiana and Mississippi are even modest numbers of black farmers producing cotton. Table 6 reveals that only in North Carolina and Virginia do most black farmers make the majority of their income from farming. Across the region and in the rest of these eight Southern states, most black farmers identify something other than farming as their principal occupation. The largest single age category of black farmers is "greater than 70 years," indicating a top-heavy age distribution. While there is a substantial number of black farmers between 35 and 55 years old, the regional average and that for each of the eight states is approaching 60. Finally, an overwhelming majority of black farmers are men.

In sum, the number of black farmers and the land they farm are both continuing to decline and doing so at a faster rate than for white farmers—even controlling for size of operation. However, the amount of land operated by black farmers is declining slower than the number of black farmers. There is very little evidence of concentration in production as average farm sizes crept upward by only seven acres in the last five years. Most black-operated farms are very small in acreage and gross sales. Also, most black farmers are older men who are primarily engaged in livestock, cash grain, and field crop production, and they derive the majority of their income from sources other than farming.

DELTA COUNTY

Delta County is, as it was when selected for the original study (Pfeffer and Gilbert 1989), still predominantly agricultural, entirely rural, mostly African-American, and very poor. Situated in the alluvial plain of the Mississippi River, it is typified by extremely large cotton farms (modern descendents of old plantations) that are highly mechanized and capital intensive. The land is some of the most productive in the country. In Delta County cotton is still king. The county has also been classified by USDA as "persistently poor" (Cook and Mizer 1994). And although the nation's nonmetropolitan population has been growing during the 1990s (Economic Research Service 1996), the population of Delta County has decreased during this decade.

Delta County is typical of other Mississippi Delta counties in its reliance on agriculture, its high ratio of black to white population, and its overall decline of black farmers.[3] However, according to Census of Agriculture data it is quite different from these counties in terms of recent structural trends among black farmers. In general, black farmers in Delta County have declined more slowly while their land in farms has increased more rapidly (see Table 7). For example, the nation lost approximately 43 percent of its black farmers between 1982 and 1992, yet Delta County lost only 17 percent. This compares to a 31 percent decline among all farms in the county.

[3] Fortunately (for statistical purposes), in Delta County, African-Americans are the only minorities included in the "Black and Other Races" category of the Census of Agriculture; hence we are able to use these data without adjustment.

As generally the case with the structure of U.S. agriculture—but contrary to trends for black farmers throughout the region—the concentration of production among black farmers in Delta County has been increasing. As one would expect, smaller farms declined faster than larger farms since 1982 (see Table 7). Furthermore, in Delta County all farms with sales under $10,000 declined slightly faster than similar sized black farms. Black farms with sales over $10,000 grew by 180 percent (this large percentage increase is, in part, a function of a small initial number). Additionally, the average size of black farms in Delta County increased from 68 acres in 1982 to 227 acres in 1992.[4] By comparison, the average farm size for the county as a whole increased from 824 acres in 1982 to 1,060 in 1992.

The dramatic increase in acres being operated and the relatively low rate of decline among black farmers in Delta County is remarkable. However, in 1992, black farmers operated only about 2.5 percent of farmland in the county (up from less than 1 percent in 1982). Moreover, even though the average sizes for white and black farms in Delta County are well above their national counterparts of 491 and 123 acres respectively, Blacks still farm substantially smaller operations than Whites there.

These somewhat optimistic Census figures do not fully capture the range of experiences among black farmers in Delta County. In short, farmers in this study experienced changes much more in line with the national figures. Table 8 shows that since 1986 black Delta County farmers participating in our study decreased the total acres they operate. While owned acres increased by 31.5 percent, acres rented in decreased by 88.1 percent, resulting in a 73.9 percent decline in the total acres operated. On average, these farmers operated 176.6 acres—somewhat lower than the 226.5 acre median reported in the 1992 Census of Agriculture. Also, according to the Census definition, almost half of the farmers in our sample were no longer farming, that is, they did not sell $1,000 worth of agricultural produce in 1996. This compares to the 17 percent decline among black farmers county wide between 1982 and 1992, according to the Census of Agriculture. Three of these five “exiters” considered themselves temporarily out of farming, with plans to re-enter as soon as possible.

[4] This atypical growth of black-operated land is attributable largely to the sale of a 2,700-acre tract to nine African-American farmers. In the late 1980s, an absentee timber company approached the county FmHA director with the offer to sell; the agency then approved loans for the black farmers to buy about 300 acres each. Moreover, another African-American bought 700 acres at this time, and now farms over 1,000 acres. These expansions, it seems, account for the dramatic increase of black-farmed land in Delta County between 1982 and 1992, as reflected in the Census. We owe this insight to a USDA official in Delta County.

Table 7

Structural Trends in Delta County: Black Farms and All Farms, 1982-1992

	All Farms	% Change	Black Farms	% Change
Farms				
1992	232	-30.5	29	-17.1
1982	334		35	
Land in Farms (acres)				
1992	245,986	-10.6	6,569	175.3
1982	275,288		2,386	
Average Farm Size (acres)				
1992	1,060.0	28.6	226.5	232.3
1982	824.0		68.2	
Farms with Sales < $10,000				
1992	35	-57.3	15	-50.0
1982	82		30	
Farms with Sales $10,000+				
1992	197	-21.5	14	180.0
1982	251		5	

Source: *1992 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM

Table 8
Delta County Black Farmers: Exiters, Farm Size, Sales, and Incomes, 1986-1996[a]

	1996 (n=12)	**1986** (n=12)	**% Change 1986-1996**
Exiters Since 1986 (Census Definition)	5[b]	--	-41.7
Exiters Since 1986 (Self Definition)	2[b]	--	-16.7
Acres Owned	81.2	55.6	31.5
Acres Rented In	125.4	235.9	-88.1
Total Acres Operated	176.6	307.1	-73.9

[a] For two farmers, acres owned, rented, and operated "in 1996" include values from the last year they farmed.
[b] Only two farmers claimed they were not farming anymore; however, by the Census definition five would not be considered farmers.

CIVIL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS OF THE FORMER FARMERS HOME ADMINISTRATION

In 1937, the interracial Southern Tenant Farmers' Union criticized the USDA's programs for poor, small, and black farmers. In particular the union did not trust the USDA to administer the programs of the much needed Farm Security Administration (Special Committee on Farm Tenancy 1937).[5] In 1946 the Farm Security Administration, in a very scaled-back form, became the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA).[6] In 1965, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights released its first account of civil rights violations on the part of the USDA (U.S.

[5] Several of these core programs previously had been housed outside the USDA within the Resettlement Administration and implemented by a separate "county agent" system. For a discussion of the Resettlement Administration, see (Gilbert and Howe 1991);; Wood 1991);; Baldwin 1968);; Larson 1947).

[6] In 1994, the FmHA was incorporated into the newly created Farm Services Agency.

Commission on Civil Rights 1965). Other investigations confirm these findings and concerns (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982; Civil Rights Action Team 1997).[7]

In February 1997, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman released yet another report documenting the continued existence of discrimination by the USDA (Civil Rights Action Team 1997). This is the most substantial such report that has come from any Secretary of Agriculture.[8] For his part, Secretary Glickman has pledged to restore the USDA as "the people's department"; he has promoted the issue of civil rights within the USDA to a top priority (Civil Rights Action Team 1997).

For their part, some black farmers have labeled the USDA "the last plantation" (Civil Rights Action Team 1997):2; (Boyd 1997). Echoing the concerns voiced by the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union sixty years earlier, hundreds of black farmers marched on Washington in April of 1997 and testified before the Black Congressional Caucus. They charged that racist administration of USDA lending agencies has materially harmed black farmers (Boyd 1997). They believed that the FmHA has intentionally tried to drive them out of business by not providing loans in a timely manner and eventually foreclosing on their operations. Numerous farmers provided similar testimonies. For these farmers, like many small and tenant farmers of the 1930s, the problem lies in the local administration of the federal program. They argued that by utilizing an implementation structure that relies upon local farmer committees, the USDA's programs are vulnerable to local and, in this case, racist politics.

Black farmers in Delta County expressed similar sentiments. Most of the farmers we interviewed claimed to have experienced racial discrimination by the FmHA. Several farmers spoke openly about their troubles in acquiring operating loans from the agency. Approval of a loan was not typically the problem. Rather, the farmers often did not receive their loans until very late in the growing season, sometimes not until July or even August. In order to continue farming, these farmers would usually approach a local input supplier and work out terms of credit based on their anticipated loan. Input supply dealers, in turn, needed to verify that a loan was approved and forthcoming before extending credit to individual farmers. One such farmer told us that when called by the dealer to verify a loan, a FmHA official answered positively but then added that he did not know when, if ever, the loan would arrive. In other words, the agency official introduced an element of risk into the credit situation by providing unsolicited information. The dealer denied credit to this farmer. Another farmer appealed a rejected loan application with the FmHA. He possessed a letter from the state agency director supporting his appeal and overturning his denied application. The letter was over one year old and he had still not received any loan. Other farmers told similar stories that reinforced a strong sense of injustice at the hands of the FmHA.

In support of these stories, most thought that the FmHA discriminated against blacks (see Table 9). The first two questions in Table 9 were designed to determine if farmers felt that the FmHA was racially biased. On average, farmers believed that the FmHA was biased against

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[7] See Civil Rights Action Team (1997, p. 2) for a listing of various earlier reports.

[8] In 1979, a citizen's committee appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture took interest in the USDA's interactions with black farmers (USDA, Citizen's Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunity 1980) cited in U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1982, p. 10).

blacks, with 75 percent feeling "strongly" so.[9] Finally, more than 50 percent of the farmers felt strongly that Extension did not give the same level of attention to black farmers that was given to white farmers.

Table 9

Delta County Black Farmers on Discrimination by Farmers Home Administration and Cooperative Extension, 1997

Question	**Average Response** (n=12)	**Modal Response (count)** (n=12)
For the most part, white farmers and black farmers are treated	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree (9)
Black Farmers are not treated as well as white farmers by the FmHA.	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree (9)
I believe that Farmers Home discriminates by race.	Neutral	Strongly Agree (4)/ Neutral (4)
In general, Extension workers give more attention to black	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree (7)

Scale Range: 1-5 with 1=Strongly Disagree, 3=Neutral, and 5=Strongly

CONCLUSION: RE-ENTERING BLACK FARMERS

Our study offers two possible amendments to the Census-documented pattern of rapid decline among black farmers. First, while nearly half of the farmers in our survey were not currently

[9] When asked if the FmHA is "discriminatory," fewer farmers agreed. This might be because the term carries legal connotations.

farming, all still retained ownership of their land. This significant land-ownership information is not gathered by the Census of Agriculture, unless the land owner is also a "farm operator" according to the Census definition (sells more than $1,000 worth of agricultural produce in the Census year). Second, of those land owners who did not farm in 1996, only two had truly quit farming; the remainder were temporarily "out of farming." Thus, during the last Census year (1992), some of these farmers/land owners were not counted. In other words, in Delta County, and elsewhere, there is a substantial group of *experienced* and *potential* black farmers who currently are not farming, but who would like to re-enter agriculture if conditions improve—in particular, if they can get their production loans from the USDA as they did until recently.[10]

Another related development is the release of the USDA's Civil Rights Action Team report (1997), admitting to widespread racial discrimination by the Farmers Home Administration in its loan programs. Since as many as two-thirds of all black farmers get loans from the FmHA, such racial discrimination had a serious negative impact on black farmers in general.[11] Most of the farmers in our study had worked with the Farmers Home Administration at some point. Most also expressed dissatisfaction with the operations of the FmHA, and several had negative experiences in their loan applications.

Our data are based on a small case-study, and more research is needed. Yet the findings have serious policy implications. There is evidence that the two current structural trends—retention of farmland ownership and readiness to re-enter agriculture—we identified in Delta County are also occurring throughout the Black Belt.[12] The Secretary of Agriculture has stated a strong desire to end racial discrimination in the USDA. The two structural trends mentioned above offer additional empirical evidence (not discernible with Census data) in support of implementing the corrective policies. Our findings suggest that this implementation would mean providing fair loans to many of the black landowners who farmed until recently and who seek to farm again.

Quick action is imperative to sustain African-American landownership and farming. A swift and positive response by the USDA could slow the drastic decline of black farmers. In this way, the USDA could address its long history of racial discrimination in a manner that promotes political equality and racial justice. Such action would build on the already-existing resource base of black landowners, their experience as farmers, and their evident desire to re-enter agriculture.

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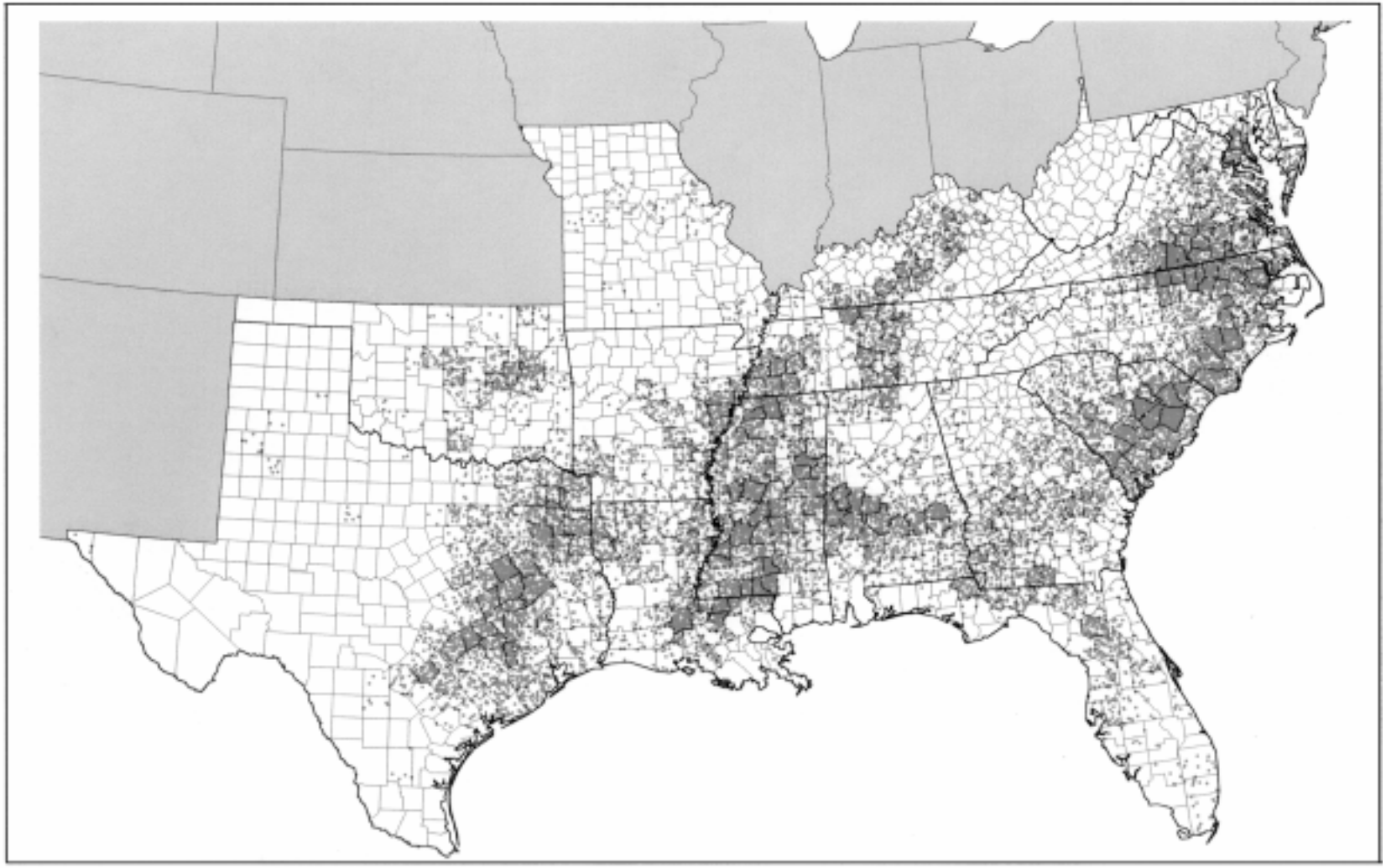
[10] We recognize that an additional problem affecting all small farmers is lack of USDA support for "non-traditional" agriculture. Small acreage farms are generally ill-suited for standard commercial agriculture. USDA lending programs need to support alternative agricultural production systems in addition to correcting racist lending policies.

[11] See *The Minority Farmer: A Disappearing American Resource; Has the Farmers Home Administration Been the Primary Catalyst?* (U.S. House of Representatives 1990), in which the FmHA is "identified as one of the key causes of the drastic decline in black farm ownership" (cited in Civil Rights Action Team 1997, p. 2).

[12] The Census of Agriculture, however, misses—indeed, cannot capture—these two tendencies. Therefore, the Census classifies those whom we call potential "re-entering farmers" as non-farmers, consequently ignoring them.

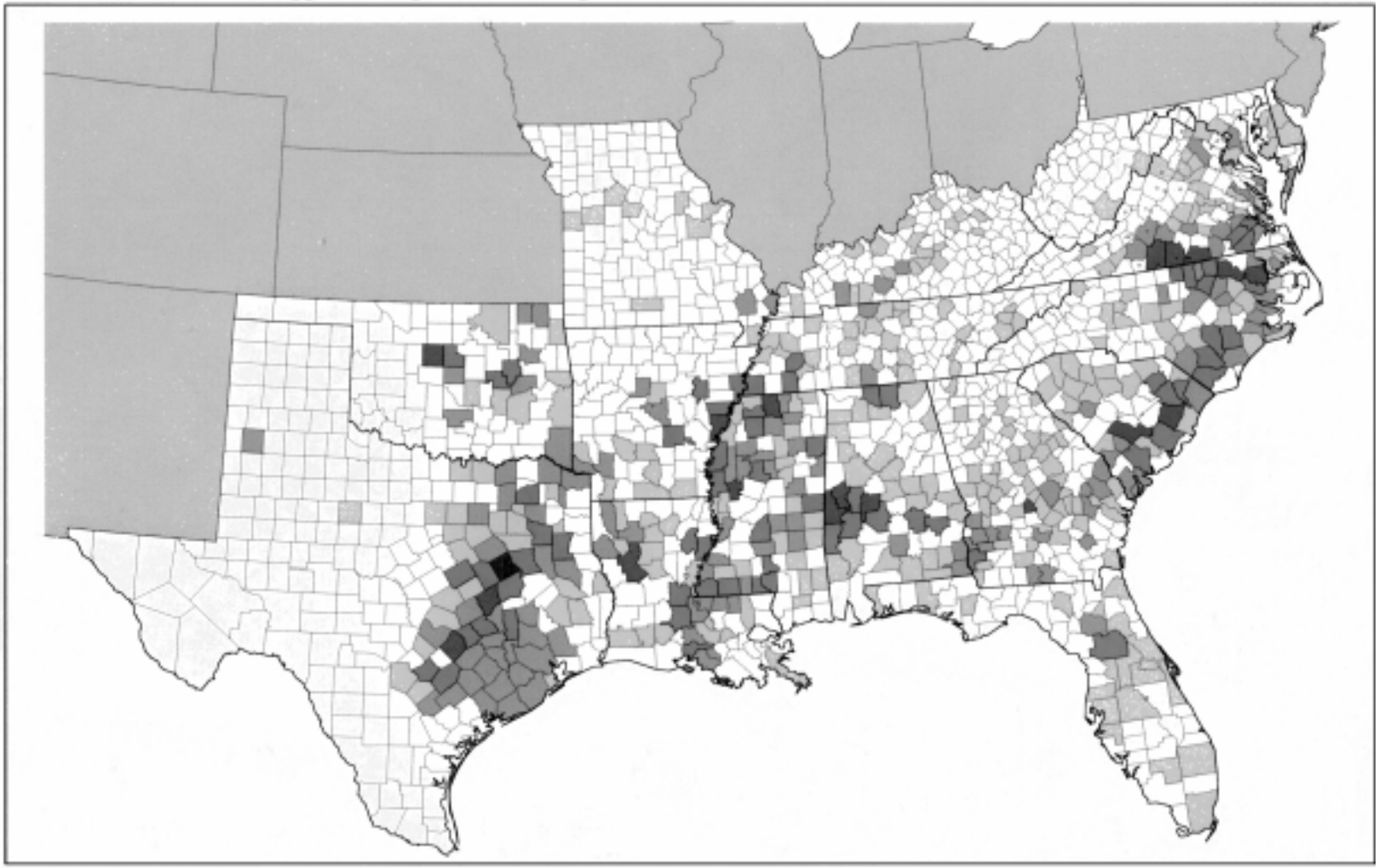
Appendix Figure 1: Black-Operated Farms in 17 Southern States, 1992



Source: 1992 U.S. Census of Agriculture, Series 1B, CD-ROM.

1 Dot = 1 Black-Operated Farm

Appendix Figure 2: Black-Operated Land in Farms, 17 Southern States, 1992



Black-Operated Land in Farms (acres)

- <= 2,000
- 2,001 - 4,500
- 4,501 - 10,000
- 10,001 - 20,000
- >= 20,001

Source: 1992 U.S. Census of Agriculture, Series 1B, CD-ROM.

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