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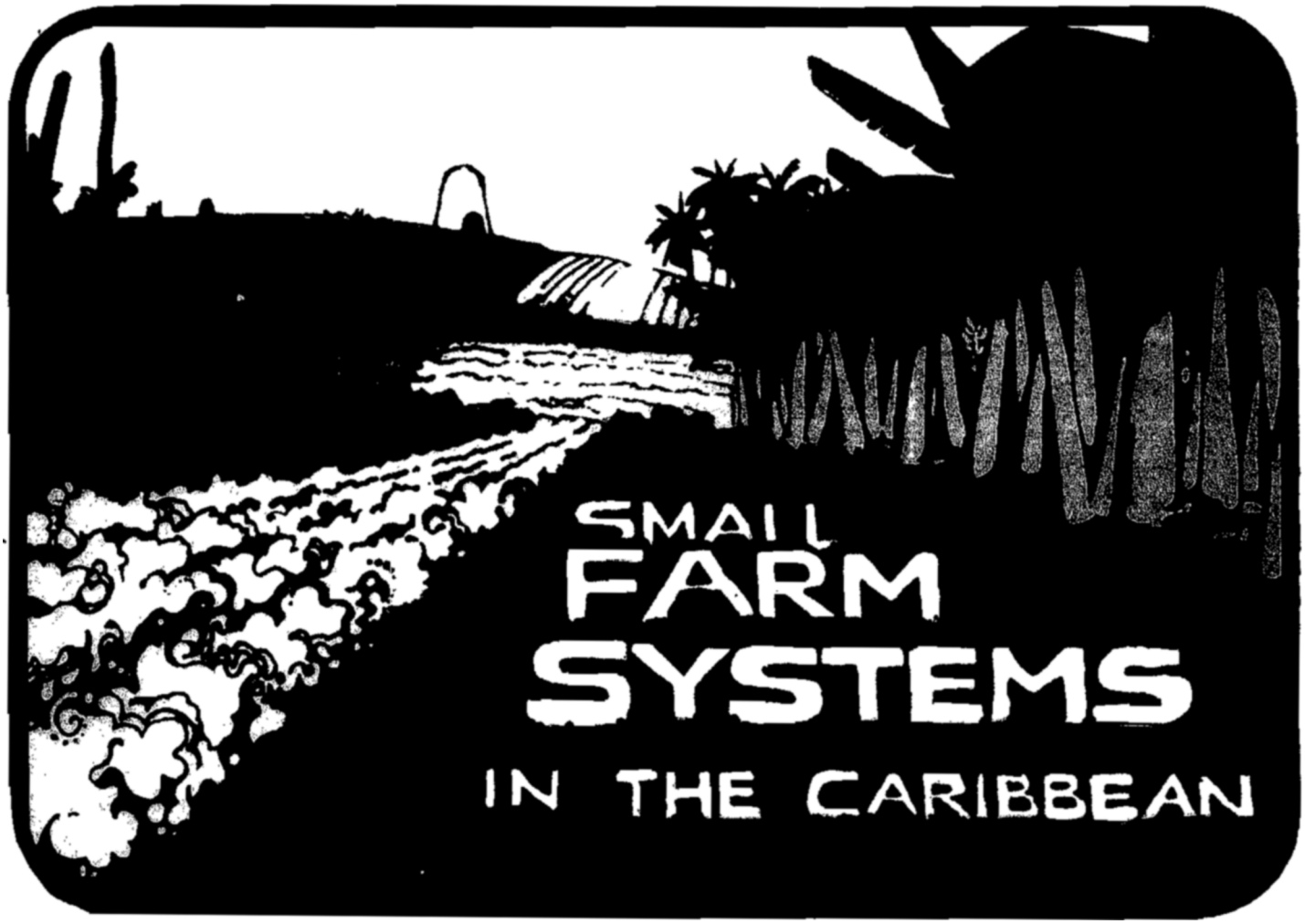

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USDA Initiatives to Assist Small Scale Agriculture

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Dr. Orville G. Bentley, Assistant Secretary, Science and Education Department, recently announced the creation of a USDA Working Group on Small Farm Resource Development. The Working Group is responsible for 1) providing program and policy leadership and facilitating communications for USDA on Small Farm Resource Development; 2) identifying existing programs and activities in order to determine what steps should be taken to strengthen support for small farm operators; 3) establishing an orderly method to provide technical assistance and information to small farm operators; 4) recommending steps USDA should take to further address this national concern; and 5) reviewing, and as feasible, implementing the pertinent recommendations filed by the various Departmental Task Forces bearing upon small-scale agriculture. The effort is relatively new; however, the gains are already significant. Discussed were achievements and how the Working Group may impact or benefit "Small Farm Systems in the Caribbean."

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the 20th Annual Meeting of the Caribbean Food Crops Society (CFCS). Indeed, this year's CFCS theme, "Small Farm Systems in the Caribbean," is a timely one. The majority of the world's farms are small and even in the United States they are increasing.

My presentation is perhaps different from that of my colleagues on the program. While this meeting will focus on small farm systems for the Caribbean, my remarks generally are directed to and about the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Northeastern Region (NER) Small Farms Research program that I coordinated from 1979 to 1984, and my new assignment, since March 1984, as the Executive Director for the Department's Small Farm Resources Development Work Group (SFRDWG). Hopefully, you will be able to draw upon my experience and findings in your efforts to improve small farm systems in the Caribbean.

Programs over the years at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) have yielded benefits that are of considerable value to operators of farms of all sizes. However, in recent times more concern has arisen relative to the USDA programs that specifically focus on the needs of small-scale agricultural entrepreneurs. At presnt, this is a very important issue because the recently released tabulations of the 1982 U.S. Census of Agriculture indicates that the number of small farms in the United States jumped sharply in the four years between 1978 and 1982. Farms of less than 50 acres totalled 637,000 in 1982, up 17 percent from 1978, when they numbered slightly more than 542,000. These small farms constitute about 28% of America's farm population today and the number is expected to continue to increase in the future. This gain does not mean an increase necessarily in family farms or a reversal away from the concentration of commercial farms among a few large business concerns; however, the statistics convey a clear message that a large and increasing segment of the domestic farm population needs and expects specific assistance from their government.

Historically, the small farm family has played an integral part in both the development of America's food supply and agricultural programs. In the early years of America, Thomas Jefferson said, ". . . small land holders are the most precious part of a State." Today there are people who echo his words, and I suspect their numbers grow daily. Even after several decades of a general increase in the size of farms, the American small farm is still the most common agricultural enterprise.

What is a small farm? Over the years it has been defined in many ways. It seems that statisticians and government officials come up with all kinds of definitions about size of farms, gross annual receipts and other economic measures. It perhaps is impossible to establish or even agree on a definition because any answer varies by type of farm, location, and even by individuals. Definitions aside, small farms, both full and part-time operations, regardless of the size of their contribution to the nation's agricultural production, represent a large part of the rural population and are an important part of the agricultural structure.

In fiscal year 1979, as the coordinator of NER small farms research, my task was to make the appropriation of more than 1.5 million dollars, specifically for small farm research covering a wide variety of agricultural subjects, yield a maximum return.

A survey was designed and implemented to determine the specific research needs of small farmers in the 12 state region. The State Extension Service directors were asked to select approximately 25% of their state's county agents for the study. In May 1979, a questionnaire was sent to the 70 selected county extension agents with an explanation of the study and its purpose, USDA's definition of a small farmer, and a list of various agricultural enterprises. The agents were asked to rank the top three enterprises of small farms and other than small farms in their counties and to specify commodities involved. Also, the respondents listed the research needed to provide immediate and long range benefits to their county's small farms. Information obtained from the survey is reported in ARR-NE-9, *A Survey of Current and Expected Research Needs of Small Farms in the Northeastern Region*, June 1980.

Some high points from the survey identified:

1. The immediate research priorities for small scale farmers as production, marketing and management;
2. That small farm agriculture needed specific research on methods and systems enabling them to realize greater returns on controlled assets;
3. That small farm operators in 1984 would require machinery and other mechanical devices to operate their farms more intensively;
4. That ES and ARS needed to become more involved and utilize each others' contacts and unique attributes; and
5. The Department's need to expect a 17% increase in the number of NER small farms by the year 1984.

The survey was updated two yeats later by another survey, rhe results of which were presented at the Novembet 1981 Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) special symposium, "Research for Small Farms," and was published as part of the *Proceedings of the Special Symposium: Research for Small Farms*, ARS, Miscellaneous Publication Number 1422, July 1982.

The new survey identified the following points:

1. The numbets of small farms in the NER will continue to increase by 8-10% by 1990.
2. In 1981, approximately two of three NER small farms engaged in fotage/livestock and one of three in horticultural entetprises. Expected by 1990 is an approximate 10% shift ftom forage/livestock to horticulture; 56% of small farms engaged in fotage/livestock, 39% in horticulture and 5% in specialty crops.
3. Thete is a continuing need for the close wotking relationship of ES county agents and tesearchers.

The following observations are a combination of my five years experience as the NER small farm research coordinator.

1. Assets of the Department that are now in place, *i.e.*, Cooperative Extension Service county agents and other Departmental personnel stationed at the state and county levels are the best sources of information for identifying the needs, the composition and the trends of small-scale farm operarors.
2. There is great need for a closer working relationship between Departmental personnel at the national level and between the county, state and Federal levels.
3. The success of the NER extramural small farms research program is indicative of a potential need for a nationwide program.
4. Identifying, coordinating, and utilizing communications among all involved entities—Fedetal, state, public and private sectors—is the key to the success of systems.

The Small Fatm Resources Development Wotk Group (SFRDWG) was established on March 25, 1984 by Dr. Orville G. Bentley, Assistant Secretary, Science and Education, USDA. The creation of the SFRDWG is a new USDA initiative to assist small scale agriculture; it is a new approach and it presents the opportunity for agricultural systems to be devised and implemenred. Responsibilities of the Work Group are the following:

1. Provide program and policy leadership and facilitate communications for USDA on Small Farm Resources Development;
2. Identify existing programs and activities currently supportting small farm operators and determine actions needed to strengthen support to small farm operators and their communities;
3. Establish an orderly method to provide technical assistance and information to small farm operators;
4. Recommend actions USDA should take to further address this national need; and
5. Review and implement, wherever feasible, the perrinenr recommendations filed by the Task Force on Black Farm Ownership, the Task Force on Handicapped Farmers, the New Full-Time Family Farmer and Rancher Development Project, and other relevant studies.

The Wotk Group membership is comprised of representatives from the five agencies of Science and Education and all other agencies of the Department who have an interest in this Departmental thrust. Meetings have been held on a monthly basis since June 1984. While this effort is relatively young, new ideas and approaches are emerging from the meetings and enthusiasm is very evident.

The following accomplishments are indicative of some of the Work Group's efforts.

1. The exploration of new approaches for communicating information.
2. A memorandum was circulated through the Food and Agriculture Councils (FAC) FACTS, Issue Number 47, September 15, 1984, ro state and local FAC's announcing the establishment of SFRDWG.
3. At the most recent SFRDWG, information and discussion focused on the current status of the Department relative to recommendations by the Task Force on Black Farm Ownership.
4. Ways were identified in which the Deparrmenr could function more effectively to assist operators of small farms.

Whar does this all mean? It means challenges and opportunities for all who are involved.

In Washington, the Department is attempting to aid small farmers across rhe face of the country. It is hoped that this effort will touch the lives of the small farmers in rhe Caribbean. There are potential avenues of opportunity yet to be idenrified and rhis is our mutual task today—to find workable agricultural sysrems.