Black farmers diminishing in number

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

A winter downpour thundering on the roof of the tin shed meant there would be no plowing today. The break gave the farmer — a black farmer — time to answer questions and make some observations about the differences between black farmers and white farmers.

Is there a difference? The government thinks so and is giving black farmers first chance to buy some of the better farms now owned by the Farmers Home Administration. A number of social help organizations agree. The black farmer is said to be endangered.

Census figures show truth in the claim. But a single reason is not easy to discover. Debt, lack of information, access to credit, loss of land, children not replacing their parents on the farm — all play a part in the diminishing number of Louisiana black farmers.

Does the black farmer see a difference between himself and his white neighbor? Malcolm Woods raises corn, sweet potatoes, soybeans and milo in St. Landry Parish. In the 26 years he has farmed, he says, he has been unable to pay off his crop loan only three times.

"If there is a black farmer who can get credit a hell of a lot quicker than a black farmer, " he says. "If there is a program, be will know about it quicker. A blind man can see that." Woods looks at two problems that plague black farmers — credit and information about federal farm programs. A third major problem, expressed by other black farmers, is the need for land.

Census figures confirm black farmers are disappearing in Louisiana. Two agricultural censuses in the 1980s, when farmers suffered Depression-era fines, show Louisiana had 1,688 black farmers in 1982, but 690 fewer in 1987 — a 36 percent decline. There were also fewer white farmers — 31,628 in 1982 versus 27,350 in 1987 — a 13 percent drop.

More telling, however, in numbers of blacks who are full-time farmers is the number who report $20,000 or more in farm sales. The numbers dropped from 196 in the 1982 census to 171 in the 1987 census.

Malcolm Woods, St. Landry Parish farmer, with his sweet potatoes in storage, waiting to be sold.

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Black farmers also tend to be older than their white counterparts. In the 1987 census, the average age of a white Louisiana farmer was 52. For the black farmer, it was almost 58.

In St. Landry Parish, many of the black farmers county agent Ron Nicholas works with farm on a small scale, and most are older people. He reports the parish has about 25 full-time black farmers.

Eldridge Auguste, an Opelousas farmer, spent 17 years with the postal service in California and then came back home to take over the family farm when his father died. His children are not farmers. "I'll be the end of it," he says.

Auguste keeps money coming in all year. He raises vegetable and flower plants for sale or for his own produce fields. He raises fresh vegetables for the farmer's market and stores — tomatoes, sweet peppers, hot farm to another black, thus the dramatic decline in black land ownership.

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In Louisiana black farmers tend to be small-scale farmers. As a group they are getting older and their number is dwindling.

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The program calls for black farmers — and other minorities — to get first chance at buying farms in possession of the Farmers Home Administration. The farms come out of the large inventory of farmland the FmHA accumulated in settlement of debts in the great agricultural bust of the 1980s.

The program is not a land giveaway, and buyers get no credit breaks.

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Both black farmers and white farmers lose in each agricultural crisis, but black farmers as a group suffer the greater loss, according to one writer discussing the decline in black-owned land.

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peppers, eggplant, cucumbers, purple hull peas and crowder peas. And he has cattle on his own land and cuts grass for hay at the local airport.

"It would be very difficult to make a living at one thing," he says.

There are fewer black farmers and fewer farmers generally in the parish," he says. The reason, he believes, is no "replacement" farmer for a younger person going along. And that, he says, is because it is so hard to start farming - especially for the black farmer, who often does not have the collateral to obtain loans.

"Black farmers have the least collateral. Therefore, they may not have what is necessary for a loan," Auguste says.

Auguste says federal money should be earmarked for "low income" farmers - he does not say "black farmer."

"That would give them an equal chance," he says.

Giving black farmers first chance to buy some of the FmHA's repossessed farms is all right, he says.

"That would be a plus, but he would still need the necessary collateral."

Will Anderson, with his son, has a store and washateria near Simmesport, in Avoyelles Parish. He figures a farmer needs about 1,000 acres to make a good living. He also believes there is no more land to be bought in Avoyelles Parish. He, like other Avoyelles farmers interviewed, had heard of the reserved farms for blacks, but none had heard of anyone who had been able to buy one.

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In fact, few have been bought by blacks in the parish. Michael Bordelon, FmHA supervisor in Avoyelles, says there are about 18 farms on the list. Three farms have been sold to blacks under the program, and his office is working with two more potential buyers.

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Howard Desselle, once a dairy and row crop farmer in Avoyelles and now trying to reclaim his land following bankruptcy, says few blacks are in the major crop programs, which qualify a farmer for price supports and target prices. Who gets the most from government programs, he asks. "White farmers," he answers.

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"I guarantee farm programs are a welfare program for the rich," Desselle says.

Ernest Freeman, a black Avoyelles county agent, says one reason many black farmers are not growing program crops is that they are small-scale and can't afford the acreage.

Douglas Harrell has been through bankruptcy and says he is having a hard time. Like other Avoyelles Parish black farmers, he went more land.

"Really, my basic problem is I can't get the land I need," Harrell says.

Harrell sees one difference between black farmers and white farmers: "They can buy a farm. They can get credit."

"James Hawkins," the average black farmer could use more land. A hundred acres to 200 acres is just enough to get you in debt," Hawkins goes to the FmHA for loans, but he complains about getting money too late for some crops and about the paperwork. He says he believes some farmers never understand what they are signing.

Perhaps Hawkins, in his talking about black farmers and the trouble they have hanging on, sums it up best.

"Really," he says, "the problem for black farmers is money."