Black farms have it tough, but seed of change may sprout

By TOM GUARISCO
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Decades of systematic discrimination against African-American farmers now coming to light may trigger changes that will help all small farmers.

A U.S. Department of Agriculture audit in 1997 cited case after case of African-American farmers being passed over for loans, ignored when they asked for assistance, and in some cases being stripped of their land.

USDA officials heard from black farmers around the country who complained that USDA officials all around the country were rude, indifferent and unfair to them, while nearby white farmers got courteous help.

In particular, farmers complained that the nation’s Farm Service Agency and Farmers Home Administration offices around the country were the prime culprits.

“USDA research and extension efforts are not adequately addressing the unique needs of small, limited-resource, and minority farmers and ranchers,” the audit said.

In August, the USDA disciplined a dozen of its employees after complaints by black farmers nationally. A group of 100 black farmers filed a $2.5 billion discrimination suit against the USDA in federal court in Georgia, and the sanctions resulted from that suit, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported.

The USDA first acknowledged it had a discrimination problem when it released its audit in 1997, said Chris Campany, director of the Red Stick Farmers’ Market. Since then, the NAACP and others have taken the issue up in political debate.

Although small farms have been disappearing at an alarming rate, African-American farms are disappearing 7.5 times faster, Campany said.

This observation prompted the USDA to take a look at small farming in general and to try to figure out why black farms were dying so fast.

The audit did not link discrimination and the number of black farm failures, but it did acknowledge that many black farmers either felt or became detained by the USDA that they just stopped asking for help.

Then earlier this year the USDA issued its study entitled “A Time To Act.”

The study confirmed the findings that small farms are disappearing, especially African-American farms.

The study suggests a host of policy changes designed to help small farmers come back and become a vital part of the agricultural economy.

In 1920, the United States had 25,000 black-operated farms, the USDA audit says, which was 14 percent of all farms.

As of the latest census in 1992, that number is 18,000, which is just 1 percent of all farms.

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In Louisiana, a white farm operators outnumbered black farm operators 2 to 1 in 1992, the latest statistics available from the state Department of Agriculture.

Small farmers can turn to County Extension agents for assistance. But the agents specialize in particular crops, and tend to be more geared to help larger farm operators, Campany said.

Southern University maintains a program to assist small and minority farmers.

Owusu Bandele, an associate professor at Southern University and himself an organic vegetable farmer, said the university helps them with finding financial assistance, as well as with technical farming questions.

Bandele said he focuses on teaching farmers about opportunities through growing organically.

As well as cutting farmers’ dependence on nonrenewable resources, the specialty crops these farms yield usually bring higher prices from the consumers that buy them, he said.

Such niche markets represent the best chances for small and minority farmers to prosper, Bandele said.

“It will take universities and the USDA to bring about change, but there is hope,” Bandele said. “But it’s a tough row to hoe.”