Center to nurture small-scale farms

By DICK WRIGHT
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Item: Center for Small Farm Research.
Price: $20 million.
Southern University Dean of Agriculture Leroy Davis believes the center can be operational in two years.

He believes there is a need to assist small-scale farming in Louisiana.

Southern's proposal for the center makes a number of points to justify attention to small farming:

- About 60 percent of Louisiana's 40,000 farms are small by U.S. Department of Agriculture definition; small-scale farmers are an important part of rural Louisiana; the 1977 federal farm bill stated a need for small farm research; the USDA has established a National Center for Small Farms.

- Furthermore, Davis believes that Louisiana can be in the forefront of research that will boost the small-scale farm movement.

- Davis does not believe the Center for Small Farm Research at Southern University will duplicate services already performed by the Cooperative Extension Service, the system of county agents and the agricultural experiment stations run by LSU.

- Davis is acting as director of the center until William Johnson, now at Langston University in Oklahoma, takes over Jan. 1.

The Board of Regents, Louisiana's

Leroy Davis

overseeing authority for higher education, gave formal approval for the center at Southern University Sept. 22.

That Southern would get such a center was already decided in the 1981 consent decree between the state of Louisiana and the U.S. Justice Department for ending what the federal government said was the dual system of higher education for blacks and whites.

Southern's estimated cost of the center may have caught the Board of Regents by surprise. While the board approved establishment of the center, the board did not immediately OK the expenditures and scope.

It ordered a review of the projected costs and activities.

Regents want an intense look at the ramifications in funding and the center's relation to LSU programs, said Kerry Davidson, associate commissioner for academic affairs for the Board of Regents.

But the board's Sept. 22 vote was the go signal:

"They are authorized to do whatever they must do to get it underway," Davidson said.

The center now has funding of $429,659, mostly for salaries. Officials of the center are asking $3,900,541 next fiscal year, much of it for capital outlay — buildings, equipment, land improvement.

Southern projects $20,919,680 as the cost of starting and operating the center for the first four years. Southern would spend $15.1 million of the amount for facilities and equipment.

Citing efforts to boost small-scale farming in California and the U.S. government's small farm center in Arkansas, Davis said, "This is something that is catching on around the country."

Southern was chosen for the center because of its past efforts in assisting small-scale farmers, Davis said.

Some years ago, Southern had a pilot project grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to assist small farmers on their farms, he said. The thrust was to demonstrate how technological advances could be implemented on the farms, he said.

"We found in some of our surveys there were a number of farmers who want research and technical information that we could not provide," Davis said.

A research center would produce new information and help spread this information among small farmers, he said.

The center, as proposed, would employ 29 persons in research; overall, the staff would have 54 persons, plus 20 students as "junior research assistants."

The proposal calls for building a research complex on the Baton Rouge campus; and research facilities for beef cattle, dairy farming, poultry, swine, rabbits, fishing, horticulture, agronomy, and a laboratory farm.

Two experiment sites outside of Baton Rouge would be started.

Davis said likely regions for the sites would be in the St. Landry-Evangeline parish area and the Tensas-Concordia parish area.

"LSU has experiment stations but each of those stations is designed to assist farmers in a particular commodity area," Davis said.

"Our stations would be organized on the basis of farm structure, rather than on commodity," he said.

The center would, for example, demonstrate enterprises that small-scale farmers could get into, and develop management techniques for efficient use of a small farm's resources.

Southern and LSU already cooperate and decide which institution will take the lead in different kinds of agricultural research, he said.

"I don't see us duplicating effort. I see us expanding into other areas," Davis said.

The center will be cost effective and the costs won't be exorbitant, he said.

Davis expects intensive reviews by the Board of Regents each year, and the university will have to justify every expenditure.

"When we set up the center we asked for what we thought we needed," he said.

"Everything we asked for can be justified on the basis of need," he said.

Most of the cost will be spread over years, and after the initial outlays annual costs will drop, Davis said.

"I think this would be comparable to costs involved in the development of other research stations," he said.

Davis is optimistic about state funding.
"I think the state has shown good faith initially," he said.

"I think the state will be making a contribution to the citizens by funding this center. Louisiana has an opportunity to be in the forefront of this research," Davis said.