

RETURNING AFRICAN AMERICAN FARMERS TO THE LAND: RECENT TRENDS AND A POLICY RATIONALE¹

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INTRODUCTION

Today, there are only about 18,000 black farmers in the United States. Declining by 98 percent since 1920, they have suffered losses due to public policy, economic pressures, and racial oppression. All of these factors must be addressed if African American farmers and their communities are to thrive. In this article, we use Census of Agriculture data and a follow-on survey in one Mississippi Delta county to review the current situation of black farmers.² We introduce the concept of “*returning 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.³ The first section of the article provides a brief overview of the historical and current trends in the U.S. The second section discusses Delta County, drawing upon our interviews 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 and the resulting class-action lawsuit. Finally, we conclude with a policy recommendation to slow the drastic decline of African-American farmers.⁴

OVERVIEW OF THE DECLINE OF BLACK FARMERS

Of all U.S. regions, 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 (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982; Daniel 1985; Wimberley et al. 1992; Brown et al. 1994).

White farmers outnumbered black farmers both in terms of leaving and staying in farming. However, black farm operators have endured much higher rates of decline than white farmers (see Table 1). The number of black farmers in the United States peaked at approximately 926,000 in 1920 (Beale 1966; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982; Banks 1986; Wimberley et al. 1992). Between 1920 and 1969 there was a 90 percent decrease and by 1997 a 98 percent decrease.⁵ This compares to an overall decline among white farmers of 66 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 southern farmers were getting along and many more wanted to remain on the land. Among these were black farmers who subsequently lost land they once owned and operated.

Almost all black-operated farms have always been in the South. In 1997 approximately 93 percent of all black farms were in 15 Southern states (see Table 2 and Figures 1 and 2). Concerning black farmers then, the regional figures for the South virtually equal the national figures. Eight states each claimed more than 1,000 black farmers, accounting for more than 72 percent of all black farmers in the country. Since 1982 the number of black farmers in the South has declined by 45 percent. Significantly, those states with the weakest tradition of slavery and plantation agriculture (Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas) experienced the smallest recent declines. Texas not only claims the largest number of black farmers but also alone boasts a counter-trend of increasing numbers between 1982 and 1997. If Texas is excluded from the national total, the decline in black farmers worsens from 44.5 percent to 50 percent over the 15 years and more accurately reflects the losses experienced in most of the 15 Southern states. With declines approaching 50 percent every 10 years since World War II, it is understandable that in 1982 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" (1982:2).

That there has been a drastic and disproportionate decline in the number of black farmers is obvious. But is the decline based only on race? At first glance it appears so (refer to Table 1). However, we know that black farms are typically quite small. We also know that between 1930 and 1970 small farms declined at a higher rate than large farms (Buttel 1983:91-93). Among black farmers, a disproportionate number of whom

TABLE 1
U.S. Farms Operated by Blacks and Whites, 1900–1997*

	Blacks	% Change	Whites	% Change
1997	18,451	-1.9	1,882,652	-0.9
1992	18,816	-18.0	1,900,629	-8.0
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, 1920-1997				-65.8

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

Sources for 1982–1997: 1992 *Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM and 1997 *Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*.

*Figures for 1997 correct for likely undercounts from previous Census years. See endnote 4.

TABLE 2
Black-Operated Farms: U.S. and Southern States, 1982-1997

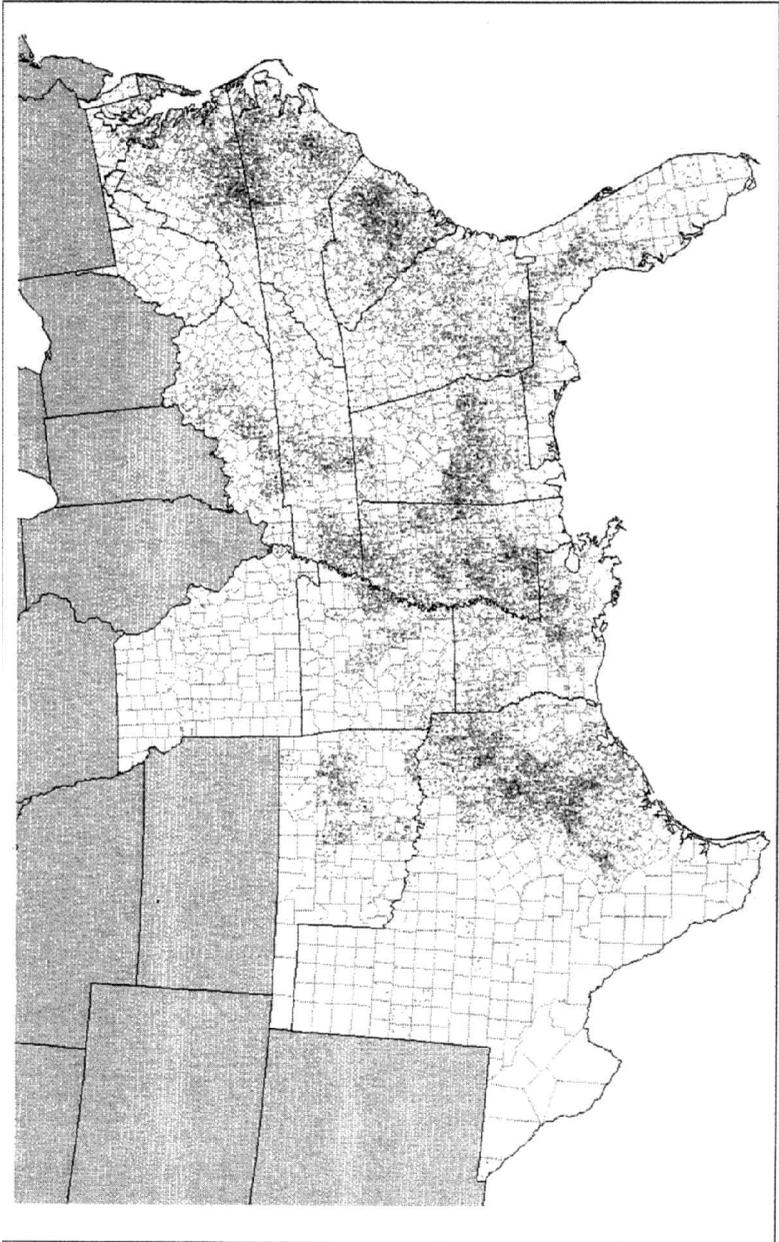
	1997	1992	1987	1982	% Change 1982-1997
United States	18,451	18,816	22,954	33,250	-44.5
Alabama	1,467	1,381	1,828	2,759	-46.8
Arkansas	679	658	784	1,249	-45.6
Florida	643	612	708	835	-23.0
Georgia	1,175	1,080	1,253	2,068	-43.2
Kentucky	523	590	673	935	-44.1
Louisiana	1,045	1,097	1,198	1,888	-44.7
Maryland	201	253	371	551	-63.5
Mississippi	2,145	2,480	3,016	4,802	-55.3
Missouri	155	160	193	238	-34.9
North Carolina	1,515	1,866	2,640	4,413	-65.7
Oklahoma	722	556	648	795	-9.2
South Carolina	1,412	1,765	2,015	3,147	-55.1
Tennessee	893	938	1,202	1,598	-44.1
Texas	3,462	2,861	3,211	3,292	5.2
Virginia	1,127	1,298	1,692	2,728	-58.7
Total -- 15 States	17,164	17,595	21,432	31,298	-45.2
Region Total as % of All U.S. Black Farms	93.0	93.5	93.4	94.1	--

Sources: 1992 *Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM
 1997 *Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM

were tenant farmers, the loss was particularly severe. It could be, then, that what appears to be a *race* factor is actually a scale or class factor. In other words, the tremendous decline of black farmers may be the result of their typically small size, not race.⁶ To determine if the decline has been partially a result of race, we need to control for scale of operation.

As it turns out, race matters even if we control for scale of operation (based on gross sales). Black-operated farms have decreased at a faster

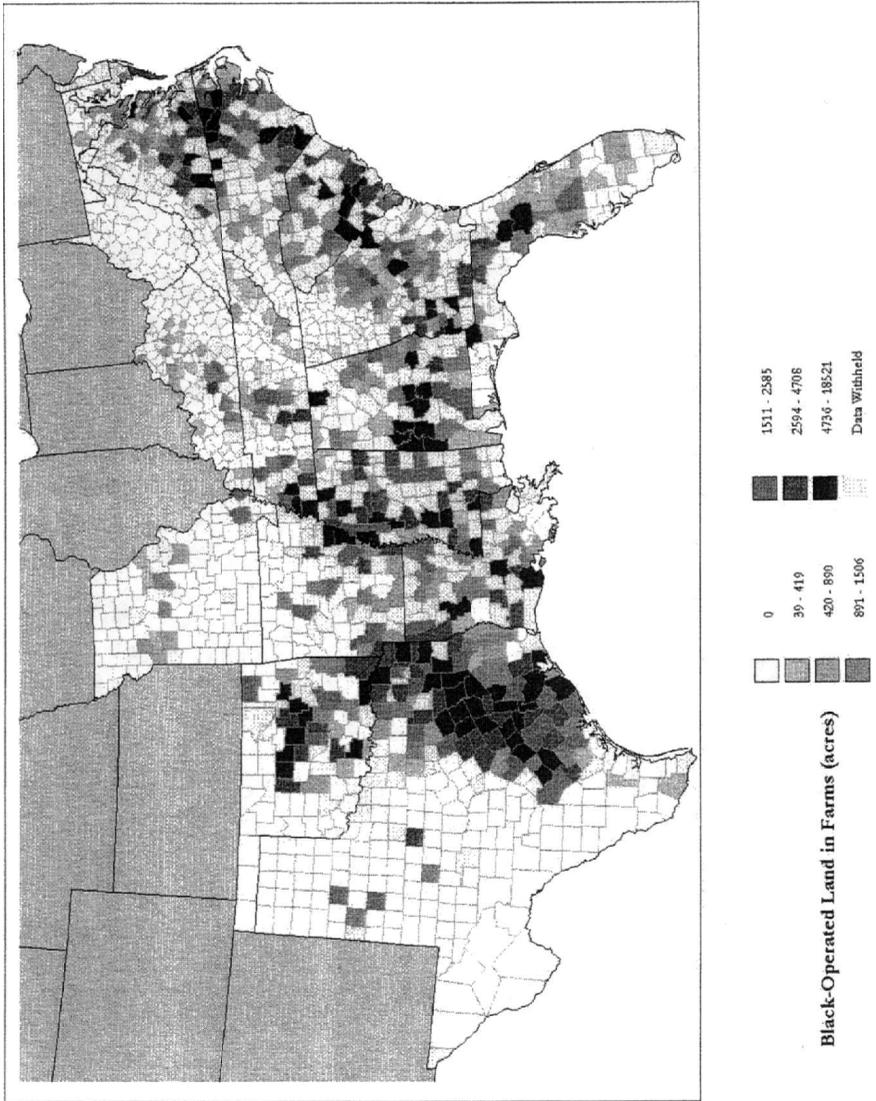
FIGURE 1
Black-Operated Farms in 17 Southern States, 1997



1 Dot = 1 Black-Operated Farm

Source: 1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture, Series 1B, CD-ROM

FIGURE 2
Black-Operated Land in Farms, 17 Southern States, 1997



Source: 1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture, Series 1B, CD-ROM

TABLE 3
All Farms and Black-Operated Farms
by Sales, Southern States and U.S., 1982-1997

	< \$10,000 Sales (% Change)		\$10,000+ Sales (% Change)	
	All Farms	Black Farms	All Farms	Black Farms
United States	-12.2	-46.1	-17.0	-38.4
Alabama	-14.3	-49.4	-15.0	-27.0
Arkansas	-17.0	-51.1	-1.6	-28.9
Florida	-7.0	-19.5	-0.1	-32.6
Georgia	-13.8	-43.9	-25.2	-41.5
Kentucky	-22.6	-50.6	-14.0	-22.8
Louisiana	-29.2	-47.4	-16.5	-32.5
Maryland	-25.4	-67.1	-25.1	-53.2
Mississippi	-27.4	-57.2	-23.3	-40.3
Missouri	-10.2	-29.9	-14.3	-44.4
North Carolina	-32.8	-68.8	-31.2	-59.7
Oklahoma	3.5	-14.2	0.8	26.8
South Carolina	-14.8	-57.2	-26.9	-46.1
Tennessee	-14.7	-45.7	-16.3	-37.2
Texas	6.7	1.3	1.9	49.4
Virginia	-26.4	-61.5	-9.9	-50.5

Sources: 1992 *Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM
 1997 *Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM

rate than have white-operated farms regardless of size (see Table 3). For farms with less than \$10,000 in sales, the number of black farms decreased at a much higher rate in every Southern state except Texas. The pattern is the same for farms with sales over \$10,000, except for the Southwest (Oklahoma and Texas).

A closer look at recent trends in the eight states that each had more than 1,000 black operators in 1997 is provided in Tables 4 through 6. Regionally, black-operated farmland declined by 33 percent between 1982 and 1997. Georgia and Louisiana are close to the regional average, while Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia experienced a higher rate of loss of black-operated farmland. In contrast, Texas was substantially below the regional average. Furthermore, in every case except Texas, the average size of black-operated farms increased between 1982 and 1997. As can be seen in Table 4, most black farms are

TABLE 4
Black-Operated Farms: Land in Farms, Farm Size, and Farm Sales for
States with 1,000+ Black Farms, 1997

	AL	GA	LA	MS	NC	SC	TX	VA
Regional Total or Average^a	Regional Percent^a							
Land in Farms (acres)								
1997	176,028	196,223	127,610	273,401	154,993	125,141	417,338	136,299
1982	296,589	279,944	180,949	476,089	319,348	237,454	446,278	257,722
Percent Change 1982-1997	-41%	-30%	-29%	-43%	-51%	-47%	-6%	-47%
Average Farm Size (acres)								
1997	120.0	167.0	122.1	127.5	102.3	88.6	120.5	120.9
1982	107.5	135.4	95.8	99.1	72.4	75.5	135.6	94.5
Percent Change 1982-1997	12%	23%	27%	29%	41%	17%	-11%	28%
Farms by Size (acres)								
Total	Percentages							
1-9	10.3	8.8	7.2	11.2	7.7	13.5	12.5	9.8
10-49	32.9	30.2	29.4	38.0	28.3	38.3	39.0	32.9
50-139	34.2	37.1	33.1	31.1	37.1	31.1	32.5	36.7
140-219	10.5	10.4	12.9	8.8	13.7	7.7	7.5	10.7
220-499	8.6	10.2	11.0	7.1	9.5	5.8	6.5	7.0
500 +	3.5	3.3	6.3	3.8	3.7	3.6	2.1	2.8
Farms by Value of Sales (\$)	Percentages							
Total								
<\$1,000	20.5	22.7	21.4	20.6	24.0	12.7	23.9	24.0
\$1,000-2,499	22.1	25.6	15.1	24.9	25.6	16.3	21.0	27.8
\$2,500-9,999	35.3	36.0	31.5	32.1	35.3	30.1	32.4	36.9
\$10,000-19,999	9.6	9.3	11.1	7.9	6.8	13.1	8.9	6.4
\$20,000-24,999	2.1	1.5	3.0	2.4	1.7	3.2	2.6	1.2
\$25,000+	10.4	4.9	17.8	12.2	6.6	24.6	11.2	3.8

Sources: 1992 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1C, CD-ROM and 1997 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1C, CD-ROM.

^a Regional totals, averages, and percentages are for the 15 Southern states.

TABLE 5
Black-Operated Farms by Commodities Sold, States
with 1,000+ Black Farms, 1997

NAIC ^b Codes	Regional Total ^a (No.)	Regional Percent ^a	Percentages									
			AL	GA	IA	MS	NC	SC	TX	VA		
Oilseed and Grain	2,419	15.9	8.5	19.4	10.1	16.1	20.3	30.7	1.5	17.9		
Vegetables and Melon	701	4.5	3.8	7.9	4.3	2.4	4.7	8.7	2.5	2.8		
Fruit and Tree Nut	197	2.1	1.6	3.3	1.4	0.5	0.4	1.0	0.6	0.4		
Crop Farming	1,323	7.7	0.0	2.9	0.0	0.0	31.0	8.2	0.0	21.7		
Tobacco	354	2.1	1.6	4.1	4.3	3.7	2.2	1.1	0.7	1.1		
Cotton	2,807	17.0	8.8	20.4	11.7	8.1	40.9	13.0	6.2	32.3		
Other Crops												
Sugarcane, Hay, and All Other Crops	1,130	7.2	7.2	13.4	7.4	4.4	7.6	3.8	5.5	9.6		
Greenhouse, Nursery, and Floriculture Production	129	1.0	0.4	1.0	0.6	0.4	0.6	1.1	0.6	1.0		
Animal Production	8,683	52.2	67.5	31.7	62.5	63.0	14.1	23.5	76.7	37.0		
Beef Cattle Ranching and Farming	247	1.7	1.6	1.0	1.3	1.3	0.8	1.3	2.1	1.4		
Cattle Feedlots	90	0.7	0.1	0.8	1.1	0.7	0.2	0.4	0.5	0.6		
Dairy Cattle and Milk Production	1,144	7.1	4.2	9.4	2.7	3.7	12.5	15.4	4.9	3.5		
Hog and Pig Farming	201	1.3	0.9	2.4	0.9	0.7	3.4	2.0	0.3	0.7		
Poultry and Egg Production	89	0.6	0.1	0.9	0.6	0.1	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.4		
Sheep and Goat Farming												
Animal Aquaculture and Other Animal Products	457	3.4	2.5	1.6	2.8	2.9	1.7	2.3	3.4	2.1		

Source: 1997 *Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1C*, CD-ROM

^a Regional totals and percentages are for the 15 Southern states.

^b North American Industrial Classification. Categories are not exclusive (respondents are told to mark all that apply) so column totals may exceed 100 percent.

smaller than 140 acres with gross sales less than \$10,000. These characteristics are consistent across the eight states.

Table 5 shows that most black-operated farms engage primarily in beef cattle production with some significant 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 Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi are even modest numbers of black farmers producing cotton. This decline in the relevance of cotton among African American farmers runs counter to what many might think. Actually, however, this is a trend long familiar to those who have studied Blacks in agriculture (U. S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982:40; Daniel 1985). In 1959 56.4 percent of commercial black farms produced cotton. By 1969 this number declined to 13 percent (U. S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982:41). As our data show, cotton production among black farmers was more likely in the Delta than other regions of the country. Georgia, too, has a comparable number of cotton farmers, due in part to a resurgence of cotton production in the late 1980s (Winters 1998:9). Nonetheless, very few black farmers still engage primarily in cotton production.

Table 6 reveals that only in North Carolina do most black farmers spend the majority of their worktime at farming. In the other seven states, most black farmers identify something other than farming as their principal occupation. This reliance on off-farm income is not unique to black farms. Studies in the structure of American agriculture have found an increasing role played by off-farm work for most farms (Carlin and Ghelfi 1979; U. S. Department of Agriculture 1981). Similarly common within U.S. agriculture is the aging of our farm population. The largest single age category of black farmers is "greater than 70 years," indicating a very top-heavy age distribution. While there is a substantial number of black farmers between 35 and 54 years old, the regional average and that for each of the eight states is close to 60. Finally, an overwhelming majority of black farmers are men, with only Texas dipping below 90 percent.⁷

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 little evidence of concentration in production as average farm sizes crept upward by only 22 acres in the last fifteen 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

TABLE 6
Black Farmers by Principal Occupation, Age, and Gender for States with
1,000+ Black Farms, 1997

Principal Occupation	Regional Total or Average ^a	Regional Percent ^a	Percentages									
			AL	GA	LA	MS	NC	SC	TX	VA		
Total	7,182	41.8	37.4	45.8	43.8	36.6	54.5	41.7	36.7	47.7		
Farming	9,982	58.2	62.6	54.2	56.2	63.4	45.5	58.3	63.3	52.3		
Other												
Age Groups (years)	Total											
<25	73	0.4	0.7	0.0	0.7	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4		
25-34	612	3.6	4.4	4.2	3.7	3.9	3.6	2.5	3.8	2.9		
35-44	2,257	13.1	13.6	12.2	13.6	15.6	10.6	11.8	13.0	11.3		
45-54	3,940	23.0	24.8	25.4	24.0	24.6	23.3	24.3	22.0	19.6		
55-59	1,994	11.6	11.2	11.1	11.0	11.2	12.3	11.2	12.0	11.1		
60-64	2,064	12.0	10.9	12.6	14.5	9.6	13.3	12.2	12.3	14.6		
65-69	2,018	11.8	11.0	9.7	12.2	10.6	12.9	12.8	11.9	12.2		
70+	4,206	24.5	23.4	24.9	20.2	24.1	23.7	24.8	24.7	27.9		
Average Age (years)	Average											
1997	59	--	58	59	58	58	59	59	59	60		
Gender	Total											
Male	15,611	91.0	91.7	91.1	92.5	90.1	94.1	90.7	88.9	93.5		
Female	1,553	9.0	8.3	8.9	7.5	9.9	5.9	9.3	11.1	6.5		

Source: 1997 Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1C, CD-ROM

^a Regional totals, averages, and percentages are for the 15 Southern states.

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 slave-based 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 (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1996), the population of Delta County has decreased during this decade.

Delta County is also 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. Black farmers in Delta County declined at about the same rate as throughout the nation. The nation lost approximately 45 percent of its black farmers between 1982 and 1997, and Delta County lost 40 percent. This is comparable to the decline among all farms in the county.

Despite these similarities, Delta County is somewhat different from many others in terms of recent structural trends. Most significantly, while the number of black-operated farms in Delta County has declined, the black-operated land in farms has increased substantially more than elsewhere in the nation (see Table 7). This difference concerns the concentration of production. As generally the case with the structure of U.S. agriculture—but contrary to trends for black farmers generally—concentration among black farmers in Delta County has been increasing. The average size of black farms in Delta County increased from 68 acres in 1982 to 227 acres in 1992. By comparison, the average farm size for the county as a whole increased from 824 acres in 1982 to 1,060 in 1992. Some 1997 data for black farms in Delta County was withheld by the Census to preserve respondent anonymity. As a result, we are unable to determine the land in farms and average farm size for black farm operators in 1997. As Table 7 shows, both the land in farms and average farm size for black farm operators increased dramatically between 1982 and 1992. Based on our local interviews, we doubt that this upward trend

TABLE 7

Structural Trends in Delta County: All Farms and Black Farms, 1982–1997

	All Farms	% Change	Black Farms	% Change
Farms				
1997	202	-39.5	21	-40.0
1992	232		29	
1982	334		35	
Land in Farms (acres)				
1997	240,892	-12.5	DW	DW
1992	245,986		6,569	
1982	275,288		2,386	
Average Farm Size (acres)				
1997	1,193.0	44.8	DW	DW
1992	1,060.0		226.5	
1982	824.0		68.2	
Farms with Sales < \$10,000				
1997	42	-48.8	7	-76.7
1992	35		15	
1982	82		30	
Farms with Sales \$10,000+				
1997	160	-36.3	14	180.0
1992	197		14	
1982	251		5	

Sources: 1992 *Census of Agriculture. Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM and 1997 *Census of Agriculture: Geographic Series 1B*, CD-ROM

DW—Data Withheld by Census to preserve anonymity

continued through 1997. Finally, 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 considerably slower than similar sized black farms. However, black farms with sales over \$10,000 grew by 180 percent (this large percentage increase is, in part, a function of the small initial number of 5).⁸

The dramatic increase in acres operated by black farmers in Delta County is remarkable. However, in 1992, black farmers operated only about two and one-half percent of farmland in the county (up from less than one 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 capture the range of experiences among black farmers in Delta County. In short, farmers in our study experienced changes much more in line with the national figures. Table 8 shows that, on average since 1986, black Delta County farmers decreased the total acres they operate. While owned acres increased by 87.3 percent, acres rented in decreased by 33.6 percent, resulting in a 15.3 percent decline in the total acres operated. On average, these farmers operated 260.2 acres—somewhat higher than the 226.5 acre median reported in the 1992 Census of Agriculture. Also, according to the Census definition, six (27 percent) of the farmers were no longer “farmers,” that is, they did not sell \$1,000 worth of agricultural produce in 1996. This loss compares to the 40 percent decline among black farmers county-wide between 1982 and 1997, according to the Census of Agriculture. Three of these six “exiters” considered themselves temporarily out of farming, with plans to re-enter as soon as possible.

THE U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE’S CIVIL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND BLACK FARMERS’ LAWSUIT

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. Commission on Civil Rights 1965). Other investigations confirm these findings and concerns (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982; Jones 1994; Civil Rights Action Team 1997).⁹ In February of 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. 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 60 years earlier (Grubbs 1971), hundreds of black farmers marched on Washington in April of 1997 and testified before the Black Congressional Caucus. They charged that the racist administration of USDA lending agencies has

TABLE 8
Delta County Black Farmers: Exiters, Farm Size, Sales,
and Incomes, 1986–1996^a

	1996 (n=22)	1986 (n=12)	% Change 1986-1996
Exiters Since 1986 (Census Definition)	6 ^b	--	--
Exiters Since 1986 (Self Definition)	3 ^b	--	--
Average Acres Owned	104.2	55.6	87.3
Average Acres Rented In	170.8	257.4	-33.6
Average Farm Size	260.2	307.1	-15.3

^a For two farmers, acres owned, rented, and operated “in 1996” include values from the last year they farmed.

^b Only three farmers claimed they were not farming anymore; however, by the Census definition, six would not be considered farmers.

materially harmed black farmers (Boyd 1997). They believed that the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) has intentionally tried to drive them out of business by not providing loans in a timely manner and by 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, racist politics.

Black farmers in Delta County expressed similar sentiments. Most of those 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 the sole problem. Rather, even if approved, 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 the 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 claims, 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 blacks, with 75 percent feeling "strongly" so. When asked if the FmHA is "discriminatory," fewer farmers agreed. This might be because the term carries legal connotations. Finally, nearly 70 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.

In December 1996, the National Association of Black Farmers, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, and other groups held marches and rallies at the USDA's Jamie Whitten Building in Washington, D. C. They were protesting racial discrimination by the department's Farm Services Agency, which had recently consolidated two earlier agencies (the FmHA and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service). The protests drew national attention, and Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman soon appointed a departmental Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) to hold hearings around the country to investigate allegations of racial, ethnic, and gender bias. Tension was high at the regional hearings. The official CRAT report, *Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture*, appeared in February 1997. It stated, in part:

Minority farmers have lost significant amounts of land and potential farm income as a result of discrimination by FSA programs and the

TABLE 9
Delta County Black Farmers on Discrimination by Farmers
Home Administration and Cooperative Extension, 1996

Statement:	Average Response (scale value) (n=22)	Modal Response (count) (n=22)
For the most part, white farmers and black farmers are treated alike by the FmHA.	1.5	Strongly Disagree (17)
Black Farmers are not treated as well as white farmers by the FmHA.	4.5	Strongly Agree (16)
I believe that Farmers Home discriminates by race.	3.64	Strongly Agree (9)
In general, Extension workers give more attention to black farmers than to white farmers.	1.82	Strongly Disagree (15)

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

programs of its predecessor agencies, ASCS and FmHA. Socially disadvantaged and minority farmers said USDA is part of a conspiracy to take their land and look to USDA for some kind of compensation for their losses. (Civil Rights Action Team: 30)

Secretary Glickman admitted the USDA’s long history of racial and other discrimination, and vowed to change the department.

In August 1997, several black farmers, led by Tim Pigford of North Carolina, filed a class-action lawsuit against the USDA. They charged

that the county offices of USDA agencies have systematically discriminated against black farmers for years. The offices, directed almost entirely by local whites, illegally denied operating and disaster loans, other credit, and benefit payments. When they did approve a loan, it often was extremely late so that the crop year was effectively lost, or the amount of the loan was too low. Moreover, complaints of such treatment by black farmers were not handled properly, but rather were allowed to pile up unanswered. Indeed, the Reagan Administration in 1983 disbanded the USDA's Civil Rights Office and stopped responding to claims. The farmers had a strong case, and the USDA knew it. After many rounds of legal maneuvering, the parties agreed to mediation. Amid much furor and dissension among black farmers, a final settlement was approved in April 1999 (Cannon 1998; *Pigford v. Glickman*, No. 97-1978).

As of mid-September, 1999, nearly 15,000 black farmers had joined the class-action settlement. (The deadline for filing claims was one month later.) This, obviously, is an incredibly high number of claimants since there are only about 18,000 black farmers in the entire country, according to the USDA's latest estimates. All claimants must be African-American farmers who were racially discriminated against by USDA between 1981 and 1996, and who also filed a discrimination complaint against the agency by July, 1997. Upon qualifying to be in the class, farmers must choose between two tracks. Both include debt-forgiveness for all money owed to USDA, which averages \$75,000 to \$100,000 per farmer. In addition, Track A awards \$50,000 tax-free. Track B (or "Arbitration") will pay an amount equal to actual cash damages, but its burden of proof is much higher. The large majority of claimants have chosen Track A. There is much debate inside the black community about this multi-billion dollar agreement, but it is nonetheless by far the largest civil rights settlement in U. S. history (New York Times 1999; Farmers' Legal Action Group 1999).

CONCLUSION: RETURNING AFRICAN AMERICAN FARMERS TO THE LAND

This article offers two amendments to the Census-documented pattern of rapid decline among black farmers. First, while six of the farmers in our county study were not currently farming, all still retained ownership of their land. This significant land-ownership information is not gathered by the Census of Agriculture, which queries land owners only if they are

also “farm operators” 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 three had truly quit farming; the remainder were temporarily “out of farming.” Thus, during the last Census year (1997), 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 has a serious negative impact on black farmers in general.¹¹ Most of the farmers in our study had worked with the FmHA at some point. Most also expressed dissatisfaction with its operations, 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 some evidence that the two current trends—retention of farmland ownership and readiness to re-enter agriculture—we identified in Delta County are also occurring elsewhere in the rural South (see U.S. Department of Agriculture 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; 1997d; and Pennick 1998).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 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 return to agriculture.

NOTES

1. A previous version of this article was presented at the 2nd National Black Land Loss Summit, Tillery, N.C., February 1998, and at the annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, Toronto, Canada, August 1997. An earlier version also appeared as Working Paper No. 12, North America Series, Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison. This research was funded by the North American Program of the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The opinions expressed in this paper are our own and not necessarily those of the Land Tenure Center. We appreciate the comments provided by the anonymous reviewers as well as those from Bill Thiesenhusen and Anne Effland. We especially thank Elvadás Fields and the farmers in "Delta County" who shared information with us.

2. Based on a complete enumeration of farmers in Delta County, the earlier study (in 1987) included interviews with 17 African Americans. In 1997 and 1998 we re-interviewed 12 of these plus an additional 10 black farmers. We believe that interviewed all but one African-American farmer in the County. See Pfeffer and Gilbert 1989.

3. Within the sociology of agriculture there is a subfield, known as "entry/exit" studies, that examines the processes of farmers' beginning and ending careers (Jackson-Smith 1999). Our term "returning farmers" draws from this field. The term also highlights the potential action role of public policy in "returning" them to agriculture.

4. The current era of research on the twin "loss" issues of black farmers and black land began with Robert S. Browne's *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black-Owned Land in the Rural South* (Browne 1973). Not coincidentally, Browne is also the founder of *The Review of Black Political Economy*. The other major early publication on the issue was Leo McGee and Robert Boone's edited volume, *The Black Rural Landowner—Endangered Species* (McGee and Boone 1979).

5. Establishing direct comparisons between the 1997 Census of Agriculture numbers and those from earlier years is problematic due to a change in the enumeration technique. In 1997, for the first time, the USDA conducted the count rather than the Census Bureau. The farm numbers appear to be more accurate than they have been previously. Thus, while the absolute numbers are more accurate, we cannot determine if the rate of decline has improved.

6. Of course, explaining why they aggregate on the small side of American agriculture would probably require a race-based explanation, but that is not our focus.

7. It is worth mentioning that statistics on the gender of farmers are largely reflections of the Census of Agriculture's questionnaire which identifies only one farmer per farm.

8. 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 eighties, 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.

9. See Civil Rights Action Team (1997:2) for a listing of various earlier reports.

10. We recognize that an additional problem affecting all small farmers is lack of USDA support for "non-traditional" agriculture. Small 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 (for additional policy suggestions see Brown et al. 1994).

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 1997:2).

12. The Census of Agriculture, however, misses—indeed, cannot capture—these two tendencies. Therefore, the Census classifies those whom we call potential “returning farmers” as non-farmers, consequently ignoring them. Identifying the exact number of such farmers is not possible with currently available data. However, we conclude that potential returning farmers are not unique to Delta County based on informal discussions held at both the First and Second National Black Land Loss Summits, our reviews of the transcripts of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Listening Sessions (see U.S. Department of Agriculture 1997a-d), and conversations with Black farm leaders and advocates (see Pennick 1998).

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