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Rural and Community Socioeconomic Development

At the farm level, research has focused on those factors that impact the small-scale and minority farmer. In the area of access to and the impact of USDA programs, it was discovered that the accurate definition of the small farm as full-time, part-time, retirement or limited resource can play a major role in the effectiveness of outreach efforts (Zabawa 1989).

Family status, and specifically planning for the intergenerational transfer of land also impacts the farm. Research found that farmers who either inherited and/or purchased family land were better off in terms of land size than farmers who had to go outside the family for land (Zabawa 1991; Zabawa et al. 1990, 1994). In addressing this critical issue of estate planning for land transfer, African American farmers have differing reasons for not writing wills. This information is critical if the problem of their property is to be addressed successfully. Another critical issue affecting the small-scale farmer is marketing (Tackie et al., 1996, 1998). Research has found that farmers' markets can provide an important venue for the sale of their produce (Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, 2004).

There has also been research directed at agricultural systems as the nucleus for community building based on the resettlement program of the 1930s New Deal. Specifically, the question of whether landless farm workers can benefit from government programs aimed at supporting land, buildings and financing to establish an independent farm working class is addressed. Results indicate that there are a host of factors that create socially and economically viable farming communities beyond the necessary access to resources including technical assistance, family farm and off-farm networks, and off-farm work (Warren and Zabawa 1998; Zabawa and Warren 1998; Hargrove and Zabawa nd.).

At the regional level, research focused on the lack of a federal commission and commitment of resources directed specifically at the Black Belt as a unique region as compared to the Mississippi Delta Region or Appalachia. Recent efforts by the Southern Food Systems Consortium (SOFSEC) headed by Tuskegee University examined the needs of the region and what the residents thought about how best to address the issues of their region via a "Black Belt Initiative." One result of this effort was that development efforts directed at the Black Belt would best serve the communities involved if locally-driven efforts were taken into account with an effort on human capital development. This is in contrast to the more state capital driven efforts with an emphasis on infrastructure found in the Appalachia Regional Commission and the Mississippi Delta Authority. As a result of the regional study published by Tuskegee University (2003), a bill was introduced into the U.S. Congress in 2002 to more directly focus on issues of the Black Belt. At the State level the Black Belt has been studied by several Governor-appointed commissions but with no resulting actions or policies that have addressed the issues confronting African-American farmers.

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Tuskegee University

1200 W. Montgomery

Tuskegee, AL 36088

Phone: 334-727-8011

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