

AGRICULTURAL STABILIZATION AND CONSERVATION SERVICE

A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights 1965

The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) is one of the most important agencies of the Department of Agriculture for those farmers in the South who are concentrated in the allotted crops - cotton, tobacco, and peanuts. This service, with offices in 3,000 counties, administers the crop allotment and price support programs and grants funds to farmers on a cost-share basis for the adoption of agricultural conservation practices. The funds dispersed from these offices are so large that a distinguished commentator has noted "in many areas county government operations are dwarfed by ASC programs as measured in dollar expenditures or impact on residents or both.

Those who administer this program in Washington and in State and area offices, including the area-wide representatives called farmer fieldmen, are all employees of the Federal Government. At the county level, however, a locally elected committee is interposed, which makes delicate decisions affecting the size of a farmer's allotment, on adjustments of program benefits between landlords and tenants, and on the appeals of farmers objecting to cuts in allotments. The county committee also hires the county staff whose salaries along with the cost of operating the county office are financed entirely by Federal funds. The staff of the county ASC office has been in an anomalous position for some years. Although locally selected and not subject to the merit system or civil service, they have been given certain retirement and insurance benefits which Federal employees receive, and are covered by the nondiscriminatory employment requirements. In each State there is a State ASC committee, appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, responsible for supervising county committees and regulating elections of community and county committees. The State committee may determine whether community elections will be held by meeting, mail, or polling place.

The Commission's study has indicated that the most serious problems of equal protection of the laws in the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service programs are the exclusion of Negroes from the decision-making of State and county committees and from employment in county offices. This is particularly notable since the main crops of the South for which allotments are established - cotton, tobacco, peanuts - are much more important in the economic life of Negro farmers than of white farmers. It has been previously noted that 92 percent of Negro farmers are engaged in growing these crops and are, therefore, active participants in the programs ad-

ministered by ASCS. Yet, of the 266,000 Negro farmers in the South not one had even been appointed to a State committee by the Secretary of Agriculture.

In the past few years the Administrator of ASCS has appointed a number of Negroes to multicounty review panels from which committees are drawn to pass upon complaints arising from decisions of the county committees concerning acreage allotments, compliance, and other programs.

THE COUNTY COMMITTEES

The real power in the ASCS program, however, is in the hands of the county committees. These committees are usually elected indirectly by the vote of community committeemen who are directly elected in their communities. The ASC elections for community and county committeemen are entirely under the jurisdiction of the ASCS, are supervised by the State committee, and are conducted in accordance with detailed procedures. In 1962 a committee appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture to review the farmer committee system recommended that elections should be entirely by mail ballot as "this type of election encourages more people to vote, and makes it more difficult for political and other organizations to dominate or influence the elections." Responding to recommendations of the committee, the present administration has been encouraging increased participation in the elections. One of its most effective measures has been to require that tenants as well as landlords who have a share in the crop allotment receive notices of the elections and be eligible to participate.

One committee member, Professor Morton Grodzins, noted that not a single Negro had been elected to a county committee in the South. He stated that elections for such committees pose real difficulties because in a rural community powerful people "have a great opportunity to punish their local opponents with a wide range of economic, social, and political weapons." Professor Grodzins also maintained that "intimate acquaintanceship with and participation in the local community may lead not to even-handed justice but to subservience to the powerful and neglect of the weak." When a landlord-tenant relationship is added to the already powerful racial discrimination in Southern counties, the protection of the voting rights of Negro participants becomes of paramount importance if the ASCS committee system is to function properly.

Professor Grodzins' comments were given added emphasis in December 1964 when, out of 37,000 community committeemen and alternates elected to 7,400 community committees in the Deep

South States, only about 75 were Negroes. Some of the reasons for the overwhelming disproportion in representation may be gathered from the circumstances surrounding the 1964 committee elections in Mississippi. There for the first time Negroes were elected to community committees in six counties. The election of the small group of Mississippi Negroes was the first break in what had previously been a solid wall of exclusion. Prior to this time the only Negro community committeemen elected in Mississippi came from one all-Negro community. The nomination of Negroes in this State came as the result of intensive activity by the Mississippi Summer Project of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) which succeeded in having Negroes nominated in nine counties. COFO representatives visited ASCS State and national officials and requested assurances that Negro voters would be protected and Negro nominees encouraged. Prior to the elections charges of intimidation of Negroes who had announced their candidacy were filed with ASCS and promptly investigated; steps were also taken by Department of Agriculture officials to reassure Negro nominees. On the day elections were held, COFO workers who attempted to act as poll-watchers and to observe the counting of ballots were arrested in a few instances and some were assaulted. At the time this Commission report was written, charges of intimidation and interference with Negro voters were still being investigated by ASCS. Prior to the election COFO had asked the Department of Agriculture to send observers from Washington to the polling places. A representative of the State ASCS office was assigned to each county where Negroes were on the ballot and a Washington official was sent to the State office on election day.

In addition to the intimidation of some Negro nominees in Mississippi, the ASCS itself noted that some Negroes nominated in Alabama for community committeemen in the 1964 election had withdrawn their names.

Negro Personnel

When the Commission began its study of the ASCS, early in 1964, there were no Negroes employed in professional, clerical, or technical positions in the South, either in State or county positions. A few Negroes were employed on the custodial level. As of November 1964 the ASCS reported to the Commission that seven Negroes had been employed by county committees in temporary positions during the summer as compliance reporters, checking the acreage planted by farmers: two each in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi and one in Oklahoma. A GS-3 clerical worker had also been employed in the Kentucky State office. Thus, in over 1,350 offices in the Southern States, some of which had 10 or more employees, total permanent employment of Negroes by ASCS consisted of 1 full-time Grade 3 clerk and 7 part-time workers.

Service to Negroes

The Commission studied two basic programs of ASCS: the allocation of additional cotton allotments and the cost-sharing grants for agricultural conservation practices.

As a result of diversification to other enterprises, farmers in many counties do not raise all the cotton allotted to them and their acreage is released to the county committee in their own county or in other counties in the State which have requested it. The county committees which receive this released acreage then reapportion it

among applicants who already have cotton allotments. At the request of the Commission the ASCS, which keeps no records of service by race, undertook to secure data from county offices. For eight counties a list of white and Negro applicants and recipients of released cotton allotments was prepared, with information on the amount requested and received, the size of original allotments, and the amount of total cropland.

In three counties studied the percentage of Negro operators who applied for increased cotton acreage was smaller than that of whites. But in all counties the number of acres sought by Negro applicants was extremely small and in all counties the average Negro allotments, even after receipt of additional acreage, was less than 15 acres. The average total allotments of white farmers receiving additional cotton acreage was nowhere lower than 20 acres and ranged as high as 85 acres in a county where the Negro average was 9 acres. Thus, although Negroes received a proportionate share of their requests in these counties compared with whites, the actual amounts received did not contribute to a change in their economic position.

On January 8, 1965, ASCS instituted a new policy regarding the reapportionment of cotton acreage. Designed to enable a larger portion of released acreage to be made available to small farmers, it restricts the effective allotment for a farm to which released allotment is reapportioned to not more than 33 acres or 75 percent of the cropland for the farm, whichever is smaller.

AVERAGE ALLOTMENT OF COTTON ACREAGE AFTER REAPPORTIONMENT,
BY RACE OF RECIPIENT, IN SELECTED COUNTIES, 1964

	White (acres)	Negro (Acres)
Alabama:		
Hale	39.5	8.8
Sumter ¹	61.5	11.9
Georgia:		
Decatur	46.1	14.6
Lowndes	20.2	9.0
Mississippi:		
Holmes ¹	85.7	9.5
Leake	21.9	10.5
South Carolina:		
Berkeley	33.0	6.7
Williamsburg ¹	29.2	7.3

¹ Counties in which proportion of Negro operators applying for increased allotments was substantially lower than for whites.

In another program studied, the Commission found that in 1962 the ASCS encouraged its State directors to promote participation in the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) by farmers who had never before been participants. ACP is a cost-sharing grant program designed to assist farmers in adopting needed conservation practices. It is a cooperative effort with the Soil Conservation Service, which supervises the application of the practice. In 1962 the ASCS payments for ACP practices amounted to \$212 Million and was divided among 1.2 million participants. Of these, 200,000 were new participants. The program was promoted by community committeemen. In Alabama certificates were awarded to committeemen who brought in five or more new participants. In some

counties community committeemen were used to promote the ACP program for the first time. In one county the committeemen who secured the most new participants were awarded a trip to a convention at the Gulf Coast. In another county 10 percent of ACP funds were set aside for new participants.

In December 1962 the ASCS Washington office sought to determine to what extent Negroes had figured among the new participants in the ACP program. Six States were asked to secure this information. All reported participation by Negroes in varying degrees. With the exception of Georgia, the States concerned reported that the numbers of Negroes among farm owners. The manager of an Alabama ASCS county office estimated that in 1962 most of the new participants had been Negroes. A county extension agent in another county estimated that in 1962 over 75 percent of new participants in the ACP program were Negroes.

ASCS reported that in 1963 the number of new participants was only half that of the previous year. Field interviews with ASCS officials indicated that the 1962 promotion was not repeated. Furthermore, the evaluation by the administrator of the participation by Negroes, which was the first of its kind, was cursory and did not act as a basis for further improvements in the administration of the program.

The active and positive response of county committees to the 1962 program to promote participation in the ACP program by farmers who had not previously availed themselves of its benefits is an excellent example of what can be done to reach small farmers by fixing a program objective, backed by the highest officials. But Commission field investigation indicated how important continued support of such an objective is if the program is not to be regarded as a "one-shot deal" as it was characterized by one official.

Summary

The virtual exclusion of Negroes from the ASCS structure poses one of the most serious problems with which the Department of Agriculture should be concerned, particularly since this exclusion is compounded by the discriminatory operation of the county committee elections. The lost opportunity to develop Negro leadership, to further democratic procedures in Federal programs, and to accelerate the economic advancement of Negro farmers are the high costs of failure of ASCS to assume responsibility for the manner in which elections for its programs have been conducted in those areas of the country where Negroes have been denied the ballot.

Meanwhile, the persistence of an entirely white structure in county after county where the economic welfare of Negroes is being decided in their absence cannot help but raise questions as to the equity with which ASCS programs are being administered. Negroes have been further isolated by the fact that they have not been employed above the menial level in ASCS offices--one of the most important economic institutions in many rural towns.

The extension of economic benefits, through larger allotments and increased participation in cost-sharing grants, will require objective evaluation of the present situation and the establishment of increased participation by Negro farmers who are presently not part of the program as a continuing program goal.