

STATEMENT ON DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES AFFECTING
PROGRAMS OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

TO: Orville L. Freeman, Secretary of Agriculture

FROM: National Sharecroppers Fund - August 29, 1963

This statement is intended not as a full-scale review of USDA agencies, policies, and practices in relation to Negro farmers, but as a brief report of how certain USDA programs have been unequally administered, with the result that thousands have been forced off the land.

We are concerned with the slowness of progress in ending traditional exclusion from local USDA committees of those who most need many of the Department of Agriculture's assistance and remedial services; with the apparent lack of dynamic and imaginative planning in assisting to remain on the land those whose present farm operation is not now considered economically viable; with the continuing disparity in the ratio between the number of Negro rural people in the South and the number of Negro field employees of the Department at all levels; and with the lag between the announcement of the Rural Areas Development program and the implementation of that program in the poorest sections of the rural South, particularly in predominantly Negro areas.

The slowness in modifying old practices and the delay in implementing new policies is unnecessarily dooming two generations of the rural poor -- the older farmer and the just maturing young -- to being thrust off the land and into an unreceptive urban labor market for which they are totally unprepared. We recognize that new legislation and new appropriations are needed, but much can be done now within the existing facilities of the Department of Agriculture. We submit these concerns to you today because we know of your own deep concern with them.

We believe that the techniques now being employed to reach the 1.2 million family farms which gross between \$2,500 and \$9,999 a year will, in fact, help many to reach the \$10,000 level defined as necessary for minimum adequacy. For most, however -- particularly those in the South -- we fear these techniques will not make available in time those additional opportunities needed to have a decent standard of living on the land.

These techniques are not even beginning to cope with the problems of those whose gross farm income is less than \$2,500. Our concern is primarily with this lowest income group. These are the people who suffer the most neglect and are least prepared for alternative employment. Existing USDA programs have very little effect on these families, who make up the large majority of U.S. farmers.

As you stated to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Farm Families on July 11, 1963, "There is a clear need for an action program to provide alternative economic opportunities for the farm family with less than adequate resources." We hope that the following observations and suggestions will help expedite that program.

Farmers Home Administration

Farm credit is the life-blood of the small farmer. Its availability at reasonable terms usually determines whether or not the small farmer can stay in business.

Last December, several representatives of the National Sharecroppers Fund met with you and presented a summary of a study that Mr. Ira Kaye, Sumter, South Carolina, attorney, had made of the operation of federal agricultural assistance programs over a three-year period in nine predominantly Negro South Carolina counties. This study, later published by the Southern Regional Council, showed that Negro farm families were receiving only 5% of the funds lent for farm purchase and less than one-third of those lent for farm operation under the Farmers Home Administration. The report suggested a causal relationship between these percentages and the facts that no Negroes were members of the local FHA committees which certify eligibility for loans, and that, generally, Negroes were not employed on the local FHA staffs.

As a result of this presentation, Mr. Howard Bertsch, FHA Administrator, sent a representative to investigate. We are happy to note that steps toward correcting this specific situation are being taken. Negro committeemen have been appointed in a number of these counties. Negro applicants are receiving more careful consideration and a somewhat larger number of loans to Negroes is being made. We are advised that the pattern of "minor" indignities and discourtesies practiced in the local FHA offices which discouraged Negroes from even filing applications will be ended. While we doubt that full equality of treatment has been achieved here, we believe that progress in this direction will continue to be made.

It is unlikely that these nine South Carolina counties are unique. Our experience shows that comparable discriminatory conditions exist in most FHA county committees and FHA offices throughout the South. This example of positive action by the Department is a hopeful beginning of needed corrective action.

However, far more is needed to give help to farmers not now considered to have viable operations, because it is clearly the long years of neglect and discriminatory practices which have rendered them presently ineligible for FHA aid. Here are some of the actions we urge upon you to undo some of the injustices of the past and to prevent further erosion of the rights of small Negro farmers:

1. Instruct State Administrators to select qualified Negroes to serve on the committees in every county where there is a substantial number of Negro-operated farms.
2. Give special attention and special efforts to the needs of small farmers whose present operations are not considered viable, and who may be ineligible now for FHA credit. FHA should consider a moratorium on many small loans (as was done in the 1930's) to enable farmers to qualify for the assistance they urgently need.
3. Initiate a stepped-up program of recruitment through colleges and employment offices of qualified Negroes for employment at all local levels -- blue-collar, secretarial-clerical, and supervisory; qualified Negro Assistant County Supervisors should be given a genuine opportunity to become County Supervisors.
4. Have the FHA Administrator issue a directive setting forth standards of local office conduct and procedure to assure that common courtesy is accorded to all.
5. Issue a directive that no one be discouraged from filing a loan application merely because the local staff doubts his eligibility; this step is important not only to eliminate pre-application discrimination, but also to supply the

Department with information necessary to develop new programs of assistance for those not presently qualified under FHA.

6. Revise FHA informational materials and gear them for comprehension by those of limited education, and institute a positive program for their dissemination to everyone who could possibly benefit by any of the FHA facilities. Local newspapers, radio stations, and Extension Service agents cannot now be relied upon to accomplish this.

Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service

The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service's responsibility for production adjustment, conservation assistance, and price and market stabilization is the key to the economic health for most of the farms of the country. Its local committees, through their control over acreage allotments, and its local staffs, through their actual land measurements and enforcement powers, literally control the survival on the land of many farm families.

Mr. Robert Moses and Mr. Timothy Jenkins, Mississippi field workers for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, have received numerous complaints of discrimination against Negro operators in such allotments and measurements. Here is one example:

A Negro farmer, Thomas C. Johnson, owns a 979-acre farm near Lexington, Mississippi, of which 315 acres are cleared for farming. His initial 1962 cotton allotment was 45 acres, and he was granted another 10 acres when he applied for 15 more. In 1963, he was allotted $41\frac{1}{2}$ acres, and received an additional 3 acres when he sought 15 more.

On the three-year remeasurement of the land, one of Mr. Johnson's fields, which had always been 3 acres, was determined to be 4.3 acres, and he was ordered to plough up 1.3 acres of it. When he complained, the ASC office made a new measurement and decided it was 4.1 acres. Johnson was charged \$9.00 for the remeasuring.

A white farmer in the vicinity, H. U. Brock, has a farm of approximately 800 acres, 75 to 100 of which are cleared; he was given a cotton allotment of 65 acres.

We realize that crop history and other factors can affect the allotment, but it seems unlikely that these could account for this gross discrepancy. Even though the ASC review committee can only correct technical violation of the rules by the local committee in its initial determinations, the fact that it generally has no Negro members tends to increase the Negro farmers' fear that they will be unfairly treated. As the allotment approaches the legal minimum, the essential cash crop nears extinction; therefore, federal court appeal becomes economically unavailable.

The Southern Regional Council's nine-county South Carolina study revealed that no member of the review committee in South Carolina is a Negro, that no member of the county or local committees in the survey is a Negro, that no Negroes

have ever been employed as land surveyors, office clerks, or supervisors, and that, by custom, Negro farmers do not participate in local committee elections. It is our belief that this situation is widespread throughout the South. In reply to our inquiry, Mr. Ray Fitzgerald, Deputy Administrator, State and County Operations, disclaims any responsibility for the failure of local offices to employ Negroes, and suggests that it is natural for the office manager to select employees of his own choice as long as they meet the minimum standards. He states his belief,

"...that the negroes [sic] failure to secure county office employment could stem in part from this failure of the negro [sic] to participate in these [local ASC] elections."

Surely this begs the question and avoids a solution. Negroes do not participate in the local elections because they are positively and effectively discouraged from such participation by the local white community. The ASCS, which pays all the local wages and salaries, has some responsibility under Executive Order No. 10925.

The ultimate responsibility, of course, lies with the Secretary of Agriculture. Section 8-B of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act as amended, provides:

"The Secretary shall make such regulations as are necessary relating to the selection and exercise of the functions of the respective committees, and to the administration, through such committees, of such programs."

This power, in practice, has long since been abdicated. As stated in the current Yearbook of Agriculture, After One Hundred Years:

"In some regions, ..notably in the South, leadership in local administration was shared at the outset with county agents and other officials of the Federal-State Agricultural Extension Service. This variation in administrative pattern developed out of the widespread assistance given by the Extension Service on the educational phases of the programs and the development of administrative machinery."

We believe that the time is ripe for a review of this policy.

Pending such overall review of ASCS policy in the South, some steps can be taken now:

1. The ASCS should use all of the resources of the Department to educate the Negro farmers to their right to participate in local committee elections, to encourage such participation, and to invalidate elections where such participation is not freely granted.
2. The Secretary should promulgate new regulations controlling the administration, through the local committees, of the employment policies of the county ASC offices, to encourage the recruitment and employment of applicants regardless of color.
3. The Secretary should appoint to the State committees only such farmers who are dynamically committed to preventing discrimination in administering the ASC programs.

The Agricultural Extension Service

As the educational and organizational arm of the USDA, the Agricultural Extension Service wields enormous power as it provides or withholds its information and services to small farmers. We are aware that many of the problems arise from the fact that the Agricultural Extension Service is a joint federal-state venture with the various states maintaining primary control over employment policies and the actual operation of the program at the local level. This fact, however, has been too long used by the Department of Agriculture to excuse its involvement in the gross discrimination in the quantity and quality of services rendered the rural Negro and in the notorious discrimination in employment practiced by the Extension Service.

As just one example: The Southern Regional Council's report, referred to above, points out that there were only five Negro extension agents and six women home demonstration agents in the nine counties studied, while there were full staffs of white extension service personnel in each of the counties. Three of the counties had no Negro 4-H Club members whatsoever. Also, as a result of the shortage of trained Negro Extension personnel, these agents had to cover more territory and deal with far more people than their white counterparts, with the consequence that their work could not begin to compare with the quality of work done in the white communities. This situation is typical in the South.

At a conference of Negro Extension agents at South Carolina A. & M. College on January 30, 1963, the National Sharecroppers Fund's field representative learned that these agents had been completely excluded from usable knowledge and planning for Rural Areas Development programs and that none of them knew that 22 South Carolina counties were eligible for ARA assistance. He further learned that the State Extension Service Director, Mr. G. B. Nutt, had discouraged the Negro Extension agents from attending a privately sponsored conference called for February 13-15, 1963, to inform rural families and state and local officials of these and other federal programs to aid rural people. (The conference was attended by South Carolina officials from the Department of Education and the Employment Service, and by Agriculture and ARA officials from Washington.)

Certainly, the Department can develop procedures to see to it that local Extension agents have full knowledge of all rural aid programs and are encouraged to assist those who need them most to make use of them. A full review and reappraisal of the administration of the Extension Service on the national level is called for. If new legislation is needed, it should be proposed by the Secretary. How much longer must the federal government subsidize the largest segregated educational system in the world?

Rural Areas Development

We share your enthusiasm for the potentials of the program for Rural Areas Development, and we have confidence in the RAD director, Mr. John A. Baker. Your July 11th statement to the House Subcommittee outlined how it could "bring new life and opportunity to rural America...to town and country alike." The obstacles delaying the RAD program are so great, however, that we fear its exciting hope will not be fulfilled. The time has come for you to intervene directly to remove some of these obstacles.

At the March 7-8, 1963, meeting of the National Advisory Committee on Rural Areas Development, the Subcommittee on Broader Opportunities for the Disadvantaged submitted a report on some of the problems facing the RAD in assisting this group in the rural population. The Subcommittee made a series of recommendations which it modestly entitled "Approaches to Solutions." While all of these recommendations should be carried out, we consider the implementation of the first one to be particularly urgent. The Subcommittee's recommendations are:

1. Provide a specialist for each state RAD Committee to give full time and attention to the promulgation of the RAD and other USDA programs with disadvantaged groups.
2. Accelerate special RAD projects to deal with the most difficult problems through employing personnel to inventory human resources and stimulate action by persons in a position to develop remedial action.
3. Gear programs to different categories of need, e.g., farmers over 45, young people, etc.
4. Develop procedures that would insure equitable treatment for all in lending, SCS, technical assistance, ACP cost sharing, and Extension Service programs.
5. Sponsor FHA Act amendments to authorize loans to assist the disadvantaged in their education.
6. Encourage and assist in developing CMAT education and demonstration training projects for farm youth and older farm workers, and develop such programs through USDA's own agencies.
7. Plan and propose strong basic education programs, in addition to the work experience, under the Youth Conservation Corps plan.
8. Encourage and assist in developing ARA feasibility studies in disadvantaged rural areas.
9. Explore means of tying resources of community, college, and other educational institutions into the RAD program.
10. Take bold and positive action to get state and local USDA agency personnel to give special attention to the needs and problems of disadvantaged groups.

While these Subcommittee proposals must be initiated on the Departmental level, they cannot be successful in promoting the interests of the most disadvantaged unless they are under constant review in the field. That is why we consider the appointment of the recommended specialist to state RAD committees so important. He cannot function effectively, however, isolated from daily cooperative contact with other agency personnel. We recommend, therefore, that he have his base in the Technical Action Panels. The mobilization of technical skills needs the leaven of his full time attention if the programs developed are going to truly serve those who need them most.

Conclusion

In the limited scope of this statement we have not attempted to discuss all the agencies of the Department that play a critical role in the lives of small farmers and other low-income rural people. Nor have we attempted to catalogue all the reforms that we would like to see come to pass in the agencies that we have discussed. What we have pointed out are a few of those more glaring inequities which we believe you can take prompt and positive action to correct.

We present these matters to you now because of our confidence in your determination to imaginatively use the resources of government to help build a more fruitful life for all rural Americans.