

# Minority Landholders and Working Forests in the South

Sarah Warren, Robert Williamson, and Erin Sills

**ABSTRACT:** What do we know about minority landholders and working forests in the South? Recent attention has focused on minority-owned farms, but minority participation in the South's forest economy is also of concern. Agencies, industry, academia, and non-governmental organizations have a mandate for proactive service among minority and limited-resource rural populations. To identify how these institutions can help put forests to work on minority landholdings, panel participants discussed the definition and identification of limited-resource and minority owners, constraints on their participation in the forestry sector, provision of public and private services, design of appropriate outreach materials, the role of intermediary organizations, and how to bring more people from diverse backgrounds into the forestry profession. We conclude that increasing productivity on minority-owned forest land in the South requires modification of existing outreach programs and materials; adjustments to landholder assistance programs; and trusted intermediaries to bridge the gap between forestry agencies and minority landholders. These intermediaries should include non-government organizations and foresters from diverse backgrounds working in both the public and private sectors.

**KEY WORDS:** NIPF, minority landholders, extension and outreach, diversity

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## INTRODUCTION

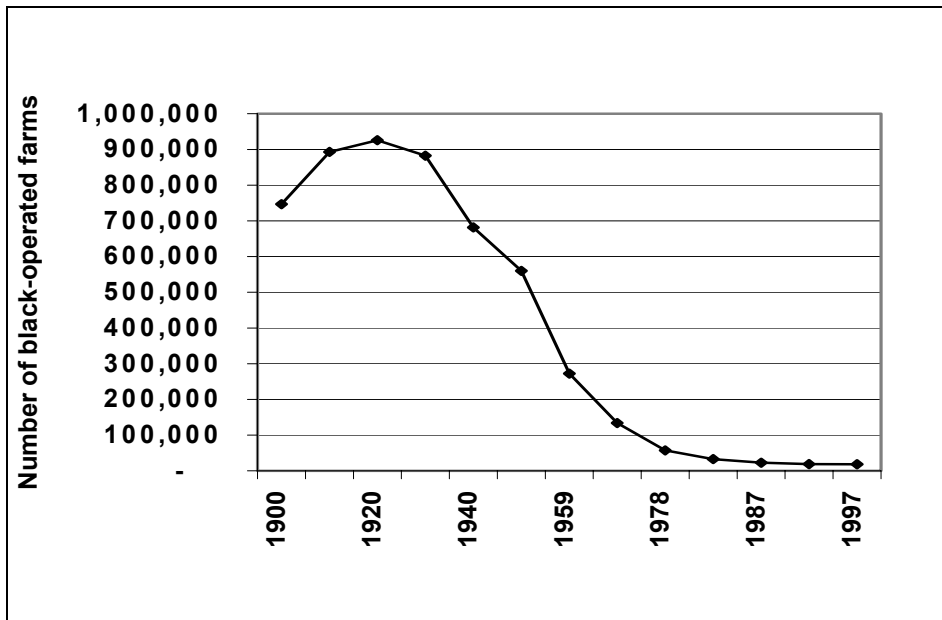
Representatives of forest industry (Malone Buchanan of International Paper), non-government organizations (Sandra Jones of the Penn Center), cooperative extension (Robert Williamson of NCA&T), and academia (Sarah Warren and Erin Sills of NC State) discussed the opportunities for and constraints on participation of minority forest landholders in the Southern forestry sector. Key questions for better understanding this issue include:

- where are minority forest landholders and how do we identify them?
- what are the constraints on their active participation in the southern forest economy?
- what outreach, extension, and assistance opportunities are available for expanding their participation?
- how can forestry professionals best work with minority individuals and communities?
- what roles do private voluntary and non-government organizations play?
- how can a steady stream of young people from diverse backgrounds be introduced to and retained in the forestry profession?

## LOCATING AND IDENTIFYING MINORITY FOREST LANDHOLDERS

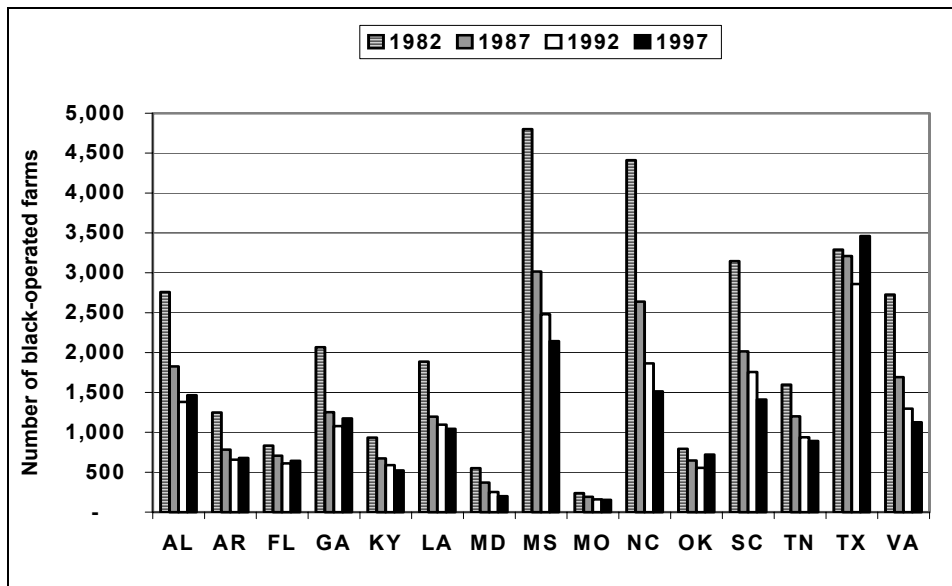
The panel focused on Black (African American) forest landholders, while recognizing that there are other groups who have also been “underserved” by the forestry sector. These include female and elderly forest landholders, as well as an increasing number of people who have recently inherited forestland. Many of the Black forest landholders are farmers.

About 93% of all Black-operated farms are found in the southern states. As is well known, the loss of family farms in the U.S. has been rapid, but farm losses among rural Black populations have been even more precipitous (Figure 1). Since a peak of ownership around 1920, the number of Black farmers owning or operating farms has declined by 98% (compared to a 66% drop among all other farm operators (USDA NASS 1997). In recent years, however, Black farm numbers have stabilized or marginally increased (Figure 2). This stabilization and renewed acquisition of farm lands can be attributed in part to reverse migration among retirees returning to the South.



**Figure 1: Decline of Black-operated farms in the United States, 1900-1997, USDA NASS**

Unfortunately there is little recent region-wide data on Black forest landholders. If we turn to a proxy of “woodland” on farms, in five sampled states Black farm operators classified 23-29% of their land as woodland. Although the 1994 National Woodland Owner Survey (USDA Forest Service 1994) provides little demographic information, the current owner survey does include questions on race, ethnicity, economic class, etc. (USDA Forest Service 2002).



**Figure 2: Black-operated farms 1982-1997, showing recent rises in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Texas, USDA NASS**

In an on-going USDA SARE research and education project at NC State and NC A&T universities<sup>1</sup>, identifying Black forest landholders in only seven counties in North Carolina and Virginia has been a complex process, involving the integration of census, agency, county tax, and organizational membership data with population mapping, non-traditional public service announcements and gatherings, and word-of-mouth (Warren et al. 2002).

### **CONSTRAINTS ON MINORITY PARTICIPATION IN THE WORKING FOREST ECONOMY**

Many Black forest landholders can also be categorized as “limited-resource.”<sup>2</sup> Minority and other limited-resource landholders often have farm and forest acreages that are small. They typically have limited access to capital and low annual incomes. These economically challenged people are “poor” not only in terms of financial and physical resources, but also in terms of motivation and self-confidence. Low educational and literacy levels limit their ability to seek forestry assistance and their comprehension of forest product markets and cost-share or incentive programs. Immediate concerns often supersede long-range planning, and they may be reluctant to pay for timber sale or reforestation advice. Without such professional advice or agency assistance, they are easily preyed upon by less-than-scrupulous timber buyers. Predatory procurement practices (such as undervaluing standing timber or poaching timber) are all too common.

<sup>1</sup> “Sustaining ecological and economic diversity among limited resource landholders by expanding opportunities for management of productive woodlands,” a joint project of NC State and NC A&T State Universities, SARE #LS01-126. For further information, see the Sustainable Woodlands Webpage at <http://www.ncsu.edu/woodlands>.

<sup>2</sup> The term “limited-resource, traditionally under-served landholders” includes those who have smaller-than-average holdings with no, or limited, access to substantial amounts of capital or off-farm income; beginning farmers; farmers producing for emerging or alternative markets; and individuals and groups, such as minority farmers, traditionally under-served by credit and other farm service institutions (SARE 2000).

Institutional and structural constraints continue to permeate both landholder and service provider decision making. Prior discrimination by federal and state agencies has created high levels of distrust and suspicion, leading to landholder reluctance to seek assistance. Agency and extension under-staffing encourages a focus on landholders most likely to succeed. The shared background of extension agents, assistance foresters and large successful forest landholders may preclude participation by less knowledgeable landholders. Consequently, technical communications are often pitched to those with sufficient training and exposure to understand them.

Cost-share and incentive programs require technical knowledge and capital. In addition, record-keeping is intensive, program requirements may shift, and the limits and guidelines may be inappropriate for small-scale forest landholders. Some owners, such as women who have inherited land but lack sufficient woodland management and financial skills or retirees from cities and towns, are not familiar with land management of any kind. Such institutional, educational, and financial constraints are compounded by land ownership patterns and processes that involve heir property and consequent absentee ownerships or part ownerships, land fragmentation, and management or disposal disagreements (see, e.g., Mitchell 2001).

In summary, minority forest landholders may receive low levels of or inappropriate services, lack educational and outreach materials targeted to their specific needs, have insufficient market knowledge, and face competition for the time and attention of service providers.

### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUTREACH, EXTENSION, AND EDUCATION**

Forestry extension and outreach programs planning to reach minority rural populations must analyze their opportunities in the context of five questions:

- (1) Does Cooperative Extension truly have a role in addressing the forest management needs of minorities?
- (2) Why is this group so hard to reach?
- (3) Are we currently doing enough to reach them?
- (4) If our current educational materials and information delivery methods are not achieving success, why?
- (5) Are we as outreach educators a part of the problem or part of the solution?

Experiences in Cooperative Extension in North Carolina and other states indicate that there is a clear role for addressing the forest management needs of rural Black populations, because the extension mandate is to meet the specific needs of *all* people. Extension outreach in the 1890 land-grant institutions is driven by a federal mandate to address the needs of limited-resource people regardless of background. However, this mandate has helped to categorize Southern “limited-resource clientele” as low-income Black people, which may often work against outreach efforts. 1890 land-grant outreach and extension programs may be perceived as “for Blacks only,” resulting in a further isolation from mainstream forestry outreach programs. Greater efforts to build mutual trust, respect, and reciprocity are required.

The Cooperative Extension network relies on agents and paraprofessionals (the majority of whom are white) for primary program delivery. Developing and nurturing effective client relationships takes time; added to shortages of personnel resulting from budget cuts, agents are required to use a cadre of compassionate volunteers to increase outreach efforts and bring greater diversity to the client base.

The successful reintegration of minority forest landholders into productive forestry activities will require the redesign and redevelopment of extension and outreach materials. The first task is to produce materials appropriate for a low-literacy audience. Many extant resources on timber management contain highly specialized terminology, and are written at reading levels far above those of many minority landholders. For example, nearly 22% of the adult population in North Carolina is at Level 1 on the literacy continuum (for which Level 5 reflects the highest literacy skills). Six of the study counties in the SARE sustainable woodlands project have Level 1 literacy percentages considerably higher than the state average; the majority of their population reads at Level 2 and below (Table 1).

**Table 1: Literacy levels in six study counties in North Carolina**

<b>North Carolina County</b>	<b>% Black</b>	<b>% American Indian</b>	<b>Literacy Level 1</b>	<b>Literacy Level 2 and below</b>
Robeson	25.1%	38%	27%	63%
Sampson	29.9%	1.8%	29%	64%
Duplin	28.9%	N/A	32%	68%
Halifax	52.6%	3.1%	38%	76%
Warren	54.5%	4.8%	41%	81%
Northampton	59.4%	N/A	42%	81%

Source: U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 1992 Data Files, <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/analysis/resources.asp>

Cooperative Extension at North Carolina A&T State University is placing greater priority on production of low-literacy level educational materials that also include interactive learning strategies. For example, two recent releases include “Money Does Grow on Trees”, an interactive business card CD, and “Water: Assessing the Everyday Risks – Just Use Good Sense (WATER JUGS)”, which adapts Forest\*A\*Syst materials at the fifth-grade reading level. These resources are short, easy-to-read, and active. (For advice on writing for a low-literacy audience, Consult Miller 2001 and Couchman et al. 1994.) Rewriting technical materials for a low-literacy audience is not “dumbing down.” Rather, it is redesign for the needs of a specific audience, and requires as much care and attention to learning pathways as for any other audience.

A second task is to emphasize measurable aspects of success. Outreach materials should include concrete and specific examples, clear illustrations and artwork, and references to appropriate lifestyles. Many people of lower educational backgrounds learn what they want to learn when they are ready for it, and may be distracted by seemingly extraneous information.

A third task is to adapt outreach and extension practices and materials to certain practical realities. Not all Black landholders live on their land or continue to farm it; land may be leased out, which presents another set of considerations and challenges. There can often be joint ownership within a family, and the interests of family members may not coincide. An absentee audience should become another target group for extension and outreach.

Perhaps the most basic requirement is to elevate our awareness – on the part of educators that there is an audience needing service, and on the part of that audience that there are extension agencies with something to offer. We can be effective only to the degree that we understand the specific needs of that audience. We must be willing to make real efforts to provide services to all who need them, regardless of resource limitations.

### **MAXIMIZING FORESTRY PROFESSIONALS' INTERACTIONS WITH MINORITY LANDHOLDERS**

The community-based forestry program at the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, SC, illustrates one of several innovative partnerships designed to encourage minority forest landholders to take control over their participation in forest management.<sup>3</sup> The goals of the Penn Center program are to “empower African-American families to research opportunities for collecting non-timber forest products, develop enterprises, and establish flexible manufacturing networks as long-term revitalization strategies” (Aspen Institute 2002). The resulting economic benefits are intended both to increase land retention rates by combating pressures to sell land to developers. Similarly, the Mandingo Legacy Forestry Program of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in Epes, Alabama, is designed to promote land retention through forestry activities, and to lead in the “development of forest-related industries and non-timber enterprises by African-American landowners in a ten-county area of Alabama and Mississippi” (Aspen Institute 2002).

About five years ago, when the Penn Center initiated its forestry program, its strategy was not to spend time analyzing the constraints but rather to “put the situation right with the service providers.” The Center could act effectively as a bridging organization between minority landholders and the State Forestry Commission (SFC) because the Center had already built up decades of trust with the community. Such a liaison role has been deemed crucial to success, because minority landholders and minority institutions have had little exposure or access to forestry services.

Within the last two years, initial community skepticism has changed so that the landholders are successfully working with the SFC; in turn, the SFC is exploring alternatives such as non-timber forest products. Management plans are being developed for individual forest lands, and service foresters are beginning to embrace the newly recognized minority non-industrial private forest landholders. Breaking down barriers is a long-term process that depends on the reputation of the institutions and individuals involved. Only then can the relationships be built that are necessary to match the needs of landholders with those of service providers.

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<sup>3</sup> Many of these community-based forestry programs are part of the Ford Foundation funded “Community-based Forestry Demonstration Programs” (<http://www.aspenecsg.org/cbf/index.html>) Another notable southern program is the Arkansas Farm and Land Development Corporation (<http://iisd1.iisd.ca/50comm/commdb/list/c11.htm>). In the SARE Sustainable Woodlands project, two non-governmental organizations (Concerned Citizens of Tillery and Land Loss Prevention Project) serve as bridges to local communities.

## BEST STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITING MINORITY SERVICE FORESTERS

Increasing the number of minority students/trainees who join the forestry profession has been difficult in the past, because of problems with retaining recruits in or attracting recruits to rural areas. The disjunct between urban and rural society makes it difficult to draw minorities into the “pipeline”; urban teenagers may be two to three generations away from the farm and forest, and their rural counterparts often desire to leave. Those minority foresters who do value rural life become objects of competition between industry and public agencies.

At present there are only a handful of 1890 land-grant and historically Black colleges and universities that award forestry-related degrees at the undergraduate level (Table 2). It is crucial that HBCU’s add more offerings in forestry and natural resources, and that 1860 land-grant forestry schools recruit more actively.

**Table 2: Selected higher education programs at 1890 land-grant and other historically Black colleges and universities**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Focal areas</b>
Alabama A&M University	Forest science, Forest management. SAF accredited.
Delaware State University	Environmental science, Wildlife management
North Carolina A&T State University	Natural resources, Environmental design
Southern University	Urban forestry
Tuskegee University	Forest resources (forestry, wildlife biology), 3:2 or 3:3 programs
University of Maryland Eastern Shore	Environmental science

Forest industries, like Cooperative Extension and state forestry agencies, need to bridge the gap between themselves and minority landholders. Often academic knowledge transferred to the private sector does not subsequently get communicated to non-expert landholders. Industry would be well advised to step into this gap.

### AUDIENCE QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

*Question:* Often the problems lie in people’s misperceptions of forestry. Also, how do you deal with large corporations that take land from Black families?

*Response (SJ):* Often the value of land rises drastically at the same time that the ability to earn an income is falling. So, when a corporation enters a community or when a city expands, people may sell their land to make ends meet, and thus lose their land. Such problems must be addressed by education both of the landholder and of the land-use planners. Additional resources must be generated for the landholders, so that all can gain back an appreciation of family property. Of course, heir property issues cause problems too.

*Comment:* As a new recruit, I think education about forestry should begin at an earlier age. I only heard about chemistry, and physics, etc. The Minnesota SAF chapter has a good classroom program. Also, working within the churches is very important.

*Comment:* At Alabama A&M there is a community outreach program; in its pilot stages, two communities have been adopted and two outdoor classrooms have been built. All it takes is some action. I encourage everyone to make contributions like those from the Penn Center.

*Question:* How do you make forestry come alive to people? People have a dark cloud over their heads about what foresters do. It's up to us as foresters to sell ourselves. And it's required that some of us change attitudes, such as "Earth Day is a joke to foresters".

*Response (RW):* Of course, many kids don't like the math, the science, and the technical courses. But we need to start them earlier on a forestry career path. One of the problems is that many teachers have weak science backgrounds. Actually, with more Black women coming up in the forestry profession, we'll be able to meet the needs of many elderly female forest landholders.

*Comment:* The key to reaching children in the inner city is to get to them at the K-12 grades. After all, we have to compete against dance, music, etc. It's important to get the children out into the woods to enjoy nature, which is not like being "stuck out in a fire tower". All children love nature, and so we should capitalize on that love.

*Comment:* Another idea would be to conduct Summer Forestry Institutes for teachers – take them out into the field and expose them to the variety of forestry careers and opportunities. Thus impact is maximized because teachers are engaged and the initial impact is multiplied. A Summer Forestry Institute was one of the best programs the discussion participant had observed.

*Response (RW):* I facilitated one with The North Carolina Forestry Association – a four-week camp program for teachers that was supported by industry. It would be a good idea to go back to the forest industries and corporations for support to continue to invite teachers.

*Comment:* State foresters also need kids in the pipeline. But again, it's difficult to recruit when you have to consider regional and rural/urban divides.

*Response (SJ):* What about developing exchange programs between rural and urban communities. A curriculum should include components of both places.

*Comment:* There is to be a symposium at Alabama A&M in March 2003. Here we need to document realities rather than just exchange anecdotes.

*Discussion conclusions:*

- The key is to focus on and direct our resources toward successes.
- Mentors are critically important to young people with forestry, wildlife, and natural resource interests.
- Youth are our best resources and it's all about them. We must provide the necessary information and education
- Overall, we must think in terms of preventing further land loss; we must support current landholders while at the same time bringing more minorities into the profession.

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