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The Impact of the Extension Service on Minority-Owned Small Farm Operations

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Abstract: Reaching and serving minority populations will require greater consideration in the future. However, this mission can only be accomplished when Extension makes a commitment to provide better coordination and administration of internal and external outreach programs. There is a necessity for Extension professionals to facilitate interactions between limited resource minority farmers and USDA agencies. This will in turn promote opportunities for these farmers to participate in various programs sponsored by eligible USDA and other participating agencies. The creation of minority outreach programs by Extension clearly demonstrates a commitment to this mission. Yet there is so much more to be done.

Introduction

Small farms, which are diverse, represent an important segment of the agricultural sector and rural communities (Rossett, 1999; Steele, 1997). These farms are numerous, contributing to agricultural output and controlling a substantial share of assets. Small farms have been facing a number of problems over the years that continue to challenge their viability (Muhammad, Tegegne, & Ekanem, 2004). Even though minority small farm operators don't produce the same volume as many of the larger farmers, they are no less important to their states as producers of high-quality products.

A farm is currently defined as any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products are produced and sold, or would normally have been sold, during the year under consideration (USDA-NASS, 2004). Under this definition there were 2,204,792 farms in U.S. according to the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture. The farm definition has been changed many times since it was established in 1850. The current definition has been in place since August 1975 by a joint agreement among USDA, the Office of Management and Budget and the Bureau of the Census (USDA-ERS, 2007). The \$1,000 threshold makes the definition a very broad definition and assures that a very diverse group of establishments will be counted as farms. It includes farms operated by households that are retired or attracted to farming for reasons not primarily related to production, such as rural lifestyle or investment opportunities. But it also includes large industrialized farming operations that are small in number but account for a large share of

U.S. production.

Because of the use of farm number estimates in allocating funding for some programs, accuracy of these estimates is closely scrutinized by constituents. For example, some minority farmers and community-based organizations that represent minority farmers and laborer have questioned the accuracy of USDA's estimates of minority-operated farms. Some organizations have suggested that minority farm populations are undercounted and therefore, such undercounting has adversely affected some minority farmers' access to federal and state funds (USDA-ASCR, 2006).

What Are Some Concerns?

Among the various disciplines covered by agricultural programs at higher education institutions are the following:

- Agricultural economics;
- Agricultural education;
- Agricultural engineering;
- Animal science;
- Plant science;
- Forestry;
- Occupational education;
- Pre-veterinary medicine;
- Agronomy;
- Fisheries biology;
- Agribusiness;
- General resource management;
- Park management and recreation;
- Wildlife management;
- Fisheries management;
- Soil and waster management;
- Vegetation management;
- Environmental health; entomology;

- Ornamental horticulture;
- Urban agriculture;
- Agricultural technology;
- Food technology; and
- Poultry science.

Despite this vast amount of disciplines offered, agricultural colleges have seen an enrollment decline during the past decade. This is partly due to the fact that there is not a clear understanding of what all agriculture encompasses. The education and knowledge starts at the K-12 level. Extension, which has its roots in the interdependency models of education, could be at the forefront of the modern outreach and engagement movement (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007).

Small farm projects should start at the grassroots level. Each Extension project could provide services directly to minority farmers. This is an invaluable opportunity for knowledge to be gained by both constituents involved. This could be done through an aggressive outreach initiative that engages the Cooperative Extension Service, Land Grant Universities, and the National Government. The main service small farmers depend on is the information they receive from one-on-one contact with the Extension service and Extension professionals.

Most minority farmers are able to effectively produce different crops and raise livestock, but many do not have the necessary managerial skills to successfully operate a farming enterprise. Hargrove stated that African Americans are less able to utilize information on the latest technological developments and evaluate relevant market opportunities and make modifications for their farming operations. These factors (limited land, capital, and management) weakened African American farmers' competitive position and led many to leave agriculture (Hargrove, 2004).

Alternative Approaches

In an effort to slow down the rate at which minority farmers are leaving agriculture and to provide limited-resource small farmers with culturally relevant, farmer-specific, technical and outreach assistance, additional Extension programs could be implemented. By evaluating input from minority Extension clientele, Extension professionals could become more aware of what steps should be taken toward providing viable information and services.

The minority small farmers need one-on-one contact. Small farm operations are operated by individuals with different knowledge bases. Understanding the profile characteristics of the minority farmers who need and participate in our programs is important for those concerned with the process of planning Extension programs for our stakeholders. Extension programs would be more beneficial to the minority farmer if more program planning were approached primarily from the point of the small farmers we serve and secondarily from a subject matter point of view (Martin, 1988).

Due to the changing times, more up-to-date technology is becoming necessary. Because of this rapid change, various segments of the agricultural-based industry, including vocational agriculture teachers, Extension educators, and agribusiness persons, should work together to deliver agricultural programs. To make sure these programs are being delivered effectively, it is necessary to determine the extent to which farmers use the services of various agricultural agencies, particularly Extension.

Minority small farm operators should be surveyed and evaluated to discover their needs. Individual small farmers, depending on their operational structure, may need individualized assistance. Therefore evaluations are necessary. Also Extension could benefit from being assessed as to whether our delivery system is actually being tapped into, utilized, and ultimately is effective. By doing this, we could be of a better service to the clientele we serve.

Conclusions

The United States Department of Agriculture has made opportunities available to small farmers. The National Resource Conservation Service has a Small or Limited Resources Framers Initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to ensure that NRCS programs are administered in a way that enables small or limited resource farmers to maintain and develop economic viability in farm operations; to ensure NRCS technical assistance programs and activities reach small and limited resource farmers and ranchers; and that technical practices and information are relevant to the needs of these farmers and ranchers (USDA-NRCS, 1987). The Center for Minority Farmers is for farmers seeking to develop stronger and more successful farm and business operations. The center also provides information on forming cooperatives and partnerships so minority farmers can maximize opportunities to participate in new markets for agriculture products. The 2501 Program administered by the USDA's Cooperative Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), was implemented to allow those minority grant recipients to use the funds to establish small farm projects or to support their existing small farm projects.

The Extension is continually searching for ways in which to better serve Extension clientele. The assistance provided to minority farmers may have a greater impact because of Extension maintaining its initiative and staying actively engaged in (a) recruiting and retaining minority farmers, (b) providing one-on-one technical assistance, (c) disseminating information, (d) assisting farmers in completing loan applications, (e) establishing cooperatives and (f) exposing minority farmers to alternative enterprises.

Extension engages universities with ordinary people and real-world problems. The future of Extension and the university systems as a whole will depend, in part, on how well we listen and respond to the real issues facing our clientele (Fehlis, 2005; McDowell, 2004).

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