

Progress Report and Preliminary Key Findings

Rapid Appraisal Baseline Research for Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program

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Introduction

The U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, in partnership with the Natural Resource Conservation Service and the USDA Forest Service, launched a 6-year program in 2012 to test the potential of sustainable forestry practices to help stabilize African American land ownership, increase forest health, and build economic assets in the southern Black Belt. The program begins with 30-month pilot projects initiated with partner organizations working in three multi-county regions: (1) Roanoke Rural Electric Cooperative and partners in northeastern North Carolina, (2) Center for Heirs' Property Preservation and partners in five coastal counties of South Carolina, and (3) Limited Resource Landowner Education and Assistance Network (LRLEAN) and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) in the Black Belt of west central Alabama.

The goals of the 30-month pilot program are to:

1. Move at least 20 African American forestland owners per pilot project to a position of secure ownership and high probability of profitable long-term forest management;
2. Model effective and flexible systems of support for African American forestland owners using a mix of private and governmental service providers to help landowners gain clear title and estate plans, access high quality forestry services, and gain entry into traditional and emerging markets for forest products; and
3. Document in detail: (a) the attitudes of African American landowners about the use and management of their forests, (b) the conditions of those forests, and (c) the potential of sustainable forest management to generate added income and increase land asset value.

The pilot projects will build and coordinate systems of support for African American landowners involving non-profits, academic institutions, for-profit service companies, and government agencies. The goal is to increase the economic value of land through increased use of sustainable forest management. This initiative is intended to help stem land loss among African Americans in the identified regions. This will be accomplished by addressing issues with heirs' property and estate planning, assisting with loan and grant applications, providing financial management and business education, helping to identify markets for timber and non-timber forest products, and improving access to forestry services and forestry education.

The program also includes a research component to: (1) establish baseline conditions for the pilot regions in order to understand current issues and measure progress, (2) provide pilot sites with information to strengthen project planning and management, (3) provide data to guide future expansion of the program, and (4) add to scholarship and general knowledge of the relationships among African Americans, land, and forests. While family forest owners in general have been extensively studied, there have been very few systematic studies of African American forest owners. To meet these research objectives, a semi-structured interview guide was developed

covering a range of topics about landowners and land and forest management, including: (1) land and forest ownership characteristics (e.g., acreage held, uses, forest conditions), (2) land and forest owner characteristics (e.g., demographics), (3) present and past land and forest management practices and forest conditions, (4) values and attitudes related to land and forests, (5) forms of ownership and heirs' property, (6) social relationships and forms of organization, (7) future plans related to land and forests, and (8) potential for increased income and asset value.

This report presents a progress report and preliminary key findings from the rapid appraisal field research. Full data analysis and reporting will be completed by January 2015. A report detailing methods and comprising a detailed summary of the results, including quotes from interviews, is being prepared for each state. The South Carolina draft report has been completed, and the North Carolina and Alabama draft reports are expected to be completed in November. These draft reports will be used to develop several peer-reviewed journal articles, with a summary publication targeted for the journal *Forest Science* will be submitted in late 2014 or early 2015.

Methods

Data were collected using a modified rapid appraisal technique. Rapid appraisals are valuable for understanding different points of view and quickly learning about patterns and variability; they are often used to inform baseline or other formal surveys and to begin project planning. At the same time, care must be taken in using rapid appraisal data because sampling methods are designed to capture major themes and issues and not to make generalizations about populations.

Our rapid appraisal approach was designed to enable a broad, purposive sampling¹ of landowners in the study area to: (1) collect baseline conditions for a diverse set of selected landowners; (2) enhance our knowledge of landowner outlooks, practices, and resources and limitations for project development and further research; and (3) provide a focal point for discussions among project personnel and outside advisors for development and improvement of the program. Interview data were collected by a team of social scientists, and forest condition data were collected by a forester. Fieldwork was carried out in South Carolina in July, in North Carolina in August, and in Alabama in September of 2014.

In each state, the project forester(s) for the program, in collaboration with the research team, selected a purposive sample designed to include a diversity of forest landowners in the study area and provided introductions to the research team. Each sample included 20 landowners, 10 that were involved as primary participants in the pilot project and 10 that were not involved or had only recently been in touch with partner organizations about the program and therefore had limited experience with it. To be included, landowners needed to have at least 10 acres of land. The sample was selected to represent the diversity that is present among landowners, including

¹ In a purposive sample, interviewees are selected based on specific characteristics, in this case to represent the diversity among a known population of landowners. This type of purposive sample helps illuminate the range present in the populations and ensures that results do not only reflect a subset of the population, for example male forest owners or those most interested in forestry. A purposive sample is also useful when, as in this case, we do not have a list of the entire population (e.g., all African American forest owners in a particular geographic area), from which to draw a random sample, or, even if we did, they would be unlikely to participate in the study. Unlike a random sample, results cannot be used to infer characteristics of the larger population. For example, if 10% of our sample has a certain attribute, we cannot use this statistic to infer that 10% of the larger population of African American forest owners has that characteristic.

diversity in landownership sizes and forest conditions and landowner gender, income or class, employment and occupations (e.g., retired and working, farming and off-farm employment, job and profession diversity, etc.), management objectives (e.g., timber, wildlife, aesthetics), and experience with forestry (e.g., none, some, extensive).

Landowners were encouraged to have other family members (from multiple generations, including future heirs) at the interview, and when possible the visit included a ride or walk around the property to see forest conditions. In some cases, family members living outside the locality were brought into the interview via telephone. Several interviews with absentee landowners were conducted exclusively by telephone. Landowner visits ranged in length from one to three hours. Most of the interviews were audio recorded, with permission. Foresters made a separate visit to access forest conditions. Data are being analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. A summary of the interview notes and the forest conditions assessment were, or are in the process of being, given to the landowners by the program foresters.

Preliminary Key Findings

Below we highlight several key preliminary findings. We emphasize the preliminary nature of the results; full results must await completion of qualitative data analysis. We have, however, completed analysis for one state, discussed impressions of the data among the research team, and gathered and presented preliminary key findings in at the Sustainable Forestry and Land Retention Second Annual Working Retreat, October 7-8, 2014, Greenville, SC and at the Society of American Foresters National Convention, October 8-11, 2014, Salt Lake City, UT. The results below are based on this preliminary work.

Preliminary Key Finding #1. Who are the landowners?

We interviewed a wide range of landowners, both individuals and family groups. Interviewees tended to be older, and many were retired. Education levels were quite high, with most interviewees having bachelor's degrees and many having advanced degrees. Income levels were modest, which likely reflects both the high number of retirees and the high proportion of interviewees who worked (or had worked) in the education profession. Many interviewees had spent significant parts of their life in other parts of the country (e.g., New York, Washington, DC, Detroit), but retained connections to family land. We interviewed both people who lived on the land and absentee landowners, and the sample had a roughly even gender split. Landholdings ranged from 10 to several hundred acres. Most interviewees had just one or two tracts of land, but several had numerous tracts (e.g., 5 – 9 tracts). While there were many similarities across states, South Carolina had the highest proportion of interviewees with heirs' property and the lowest levels of previous involvement with forestry, and Alabama had the highest proportion of landowners involved in forestry and assistance programs (in part because Alabama NRCS requested priority for landowners already engaged with NRCS programs through past outreach partnerships with LRLEAN, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and Alabama Forestry Commission). This variation across states will ensure that our baseline research covers the full range of project activities, from securing tenure to actively engaging in forestry.

Preliminary Key Finding #2. The importance of family land.

The people we interviewed were all very aware of the problem of land loss among African Americans, and everyone with family land expressed a strong desire to keep it in the family and pass it on to future generations. Many interviewees noted that previous generations worked hard

to obtain the land, and they felt that it was their responsibility to honor their memory by continuing to care for the land. They also described how the hard work of farming the land as children taught them a strong work ethic that they value today and would like to instill in their own children. They also spoke consistently about the sense of community resulting from living on and being surrounded by black-owned land, and about the sense of autonomy, as well as physical and financial security, that land ownership provides. For most of the older (age 50+) interviewees, selling family land is not considered to be an option, though most expressed concern that the next generation does not feel the same sense of connection to the land and may sell the land. However, when talking with younger interviewees, it appears that they are more aware than their elders may appreciate, are engaged in or paying close attention to decision-making processes, and often share the goal of keeping the land in the family. Younger respondents are also more likely to be comfortable with technologies that make finding information easier. They also have been less likely to experience the discrimination that excluded previous generations from government programs and other land management opportunities and have higher expectations of service, less trepidation about approaching agencies or interacting with technical personnel, and greater confidence in their ability to take advantage of opportunities.

Preliminary Key Finding #3. Heirs’ property and its implications.

The interviews indicated that most people defined “heirs’ property” as land passed down from one generation to the next, regardless of whether clear title has been legally obtained. Though a few respondents felt that lack of clear title had not been a problem for them, many others told stories that demonstrate the legal and personal ramifications of not having clear title, such as limitations on economic activities such as harvesting timber, the inability to apply for government assistance programs, or the possibility of losing the land through forced partition sales as a result of one or more heirs selling their shares to an outside party. Interviewees, regardless of level of project involvement, were in various stages of obtaining title to land, from those who have completed the process, to those who were in the process of tracking down and communicating with all the heirs, to those who were completely overwhelmed by the prospect of attempting to deal with their heirs’ property situation. All those who had received legal advice and family mediation services from the partner organizations seemed empowered by and grateful for the experience and felt that the process was manageable, although also time-consuming and expensive. Most interviewees were aware of the potential benefits of obtaining clear title, and they discussed different strategies for managing their heirs’ property. In some cases, informal arrangements existed where one person or several people were responsible for paying the taxes and managing income from the land (from timber sales or from rental of crop fields, hunting leases, or housing tenants), while in other cases, decisions were made more casually and less collaboratively, with responsibility falling to the person or people living closest to the land. There were also more formal arrangements such as legal co-ownership with title in the names of the generation currently managing the land, legal division of the land among heirs, or the creation of an LLC or a trust to jointly manage the land.

Preliminary Key Finding #4. Limited forestry experience.

Most landowners interviewed had very limited histories of involvement with forestry. The only forestry activity that most had engaged in was selling timber, and this was frequently done either in response to an offer by a timber buyer or to meet a financial need. Interviewees knew very little about timber markets and prices, most did not get more than one bid when selling timber, and

many felt that they had been underpaid in the past. Most landowners identified primarily with an agricultural past, and there was some lingering reluctance, particularly expressed by a few older interviewees, to convert agricultural fields back to forests. Only a handful of interviewees had completed forest management plans, planted trees, or done prescribed burning prior to contact with the pilot projects. Nearly all forests had regenerated naturally, and the low quality of naturally regenerated timber stands often combined with the small size of many forest holdings to make it challenging for them to find a logger willing to harvest timber. Many interviewees were open to working with other landowners to market timber in a general sense, if it led to better prices and if fairness among participants was assured. Prior to the pilot projects, most landowners had limited awareness of information or assistance, or they did not know how to access or use them. While a few had had trusted sources, such as extension agents, loggers, or relatives, these networks were often very fragile or did not always lead to reliable and desirable outcomes.

Preliminary Key Finding #5. Managing land.

The program has generated considerable interest among landowners in becoming engaged in forestry. A number of interviewees felt that they lagged behind other landowners and that African Americans in particular have not had access to forestry information in the past. Many were delighted to begin managing their land after years of neglect and hoped to improve forest conditions for the next generation. At the same time, the process of becoming involved in forestry clearly takes time. Landowners are dealing with long-term decisions about important assets, learning forestry for the first time, and engaging in discussions and planning with family members. Many landowners were also on limited or fixed incomes, and hoped to be able to enroll in government financial assistance programs. Low levels of technical knowledge and awareness of suitably qualified/skilled personnel to implement some of the activities were also a limitation. Even those landowners who had begun to implement forest management were challenged by information gaps, weather delays, and program deadlines. Notably, many landowners were at a life stage where they now had time to address these challenges, and many were already investing in the land or forests. Knowledge of more advanced forestry topics such as types of forest product markets, sustainability certification programs, bioenergy, and watershed management was very limited, and mostly only recently obtained through the programs. Although forestry was of interest to nearly all landowners, many had other interests as well. These included continuing to farm or lease farm land, gardening, hunting and hunting leases, wildlife conservation and observation, and development of family retreats or community facilities and programs. Sustainable land management was a central concern to most respondents.

Preliminary Key Finding #6. The role of the Program and Pilot Projects

Interviewing took place during the first year of pilot project activities. Both the individual pilot projects and the overall U.S. Endowment/Forest Service/NRCS effort were observed to be making a difference. The pilot project and their foresters were the most important source of forestry information for most landowners, providing educational opportunities, introductions and links to professional services, reminders of scheduling and deadlines, and reassurances and technical consultations. We also observed evidence of the development of peer-to-peer connections among landowners as a result of pilot project programs. Interviewees talked about other landowners they had met and mentioned sharing information with them. Landowners were also developing new connections with forestry professionals. It was clearly evident that the larger program, with its integrated approach, has brought new attention and energy to serving African American forest owners. NRCS employees at local, state, and national levels were trying to

improve service and ensure the availability of targeted funds for assistance programs and services. Efforts were also underway to increase the availability of Technical Service Providers, professionals authorized to carry out forestry practices for landowners funded by NRCS programs. State and private foresters were collaborating with the project to meet landowners' needs for professional assistance. There is some evidence of multi-tiered interactions: for NRCS, at the federal, state, and county levels; for the State Forestry Commission, at the state and county levels; and for NGOs at the multi-state, state, county, and community levels. The limited engagement of land grant universities, law schools, and state extension systems was noted.

Conclusions

Rapid appraisal data indicate that African Americans highly value family land for both economic and non-economic reasons and have a strong desire to keep it in their families in order to honor the sacrifices that previous generations made to obtain and keep the land. Resolving ownership and title issues, working with other family members, and bringing the land under active and sustainable forest management are key elements for achieving secure family ownership and involvement in the land in the future. These processes take time, often due to heirs' property issues and histories of limited knowledge and engagement with forestry. But the pilot projects and overall program are generating enthusiasm and engaging landowners and natural resource professionals around this challenge. Many landowners interviewed had already taken one or more actions since becoming involved with a pilot project; for example, many had started to work with a professional from the program to deal with heirs' property, begun or completed a management plan, sold timber, applied for NRCS assistance programs, or contracted forestry professionals for site preparation or tree planting.

We expect that the results from the baseline research, representing over 60 in-depth interviews of African American landowner in three states, will make a useful contribution to the literature and our understanding of the current situation of African American forest owners in the South. Prior research was largely limited to several smaller county-level studies and a few multi-county studies in Alabama using purposive samples. We have known that African American forest owners shared some characteristics with the larger population of family forest owners, such tending to be older and having diverse land and forest values. We also knew that they tended to have smaller landholdings and faced unique issues like heirs' property, and we had indications that they were much less likely to have engaged with forestry professionals or to have received information on forestry or assistance programs. As we complete data analysis for the rapid appraisal research, we expect to confirm these patterns and, more importantly, to be able to focus attention on circumstances and needs across the full spectrum of land ownership and forest management processes. Heirs' property issues and roots in agriculture have combined with overall lack of access to and discrimination in financial and technical assistance to result in very limited engagement of African Americans in forestry. Our research, along with observed examples of early program success, reveals that a new generation, often highly educated and experienced professionals in fields not related to land management, is taking over the land and is hungry for new ideas for and assistance in improving land management for the benefit of future generations. Forestry fits well with the urban connections or retirement status of both the current managers and the upcoming generations, and the comprehensive nature of program activities meets the needs of African Americans as they seek to maintain their family's cultural and economic legacy of land ownership.