Addressing the Problem of Inequitable Participation of Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers in USDA Agricultural Programs

OASDFR PRO 10672693 (Award No. 59-2501-1-060-1)

FINAL REPORT

(Abridged Version)

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to

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Office of Outreach and Advocacy (OAO)
Washington, DC

Project Performance Period: 1/1/2011-12/31/2012
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Executive Summary

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Advocacy and Outreach (OAO) awarded a $79,983 grant to Virginia State University (VSU) in 2011. The grant was awarded to VSU to identify and address the root causes of inequitable participation of Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFR) in USDA agricultural programs. The project’s primary focus area covered twenty (20) selected counties in Virginia. The general objective of the project was to develop a set of strategies for reducing the extension service delivery gaps limiting the participation of Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers in Virginia.

The specific objectives of the project were:

1. To collect and analyze information on the actual and potential socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in selected counties in Virginia.
2. To conduct outreach activities with the specific purpose of identifying root causes of failure to achieve equitable participation in USDA agricultural programs by Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, as well as development of recommended solutions.
3. To develop and deploy improved approaches for outreach and technical assistance.
4. To collect and analyze information on the success of adopted approaches.

Over the course of the January 2011 to December 2012 project period, three (3) major conferences were conducted and over 400 surveys were administered to small-scale farmers, ranchers, extension service providers and USDA agencies in Virginia. The project personnel also conducted two follow up workshops for farmers and service providers, several one-on-one meetings, focus group meetings and participated in, and facilitated several other conferences, workshops and training sessions during the project period.

This report provides a compilation of the factors that were identified by farmers and extension service providers as limiting the participation of farmers and ranchers that are often referred to as “socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers,” in USDA Agricultural programs. The report also contains a list of forty-five (45) strategies that are proposed for addressing and enhancing participation of these target farmers and ranchers in USDA agricultural programs. Some of these strategies were evaluated during the project period and our findings on their effectiveness are also presented in the report. While these recommendations do not offer a one-time panacea for all the problems these small farmers face, the project offers some tested strategies that will potentially increase the participation of “socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers” in USDA agricultural programs in Virginia State, with potentially comparable level of effectiveness in other states in the country for farmers with similar characteristics. Our Hope is that, a project like this could be conducted in other states to build on the project findings and also develop a tool-kit of effective strategies for boosting small farm productivity across the nation.
Introduction

In 2011, Virginia State University was awarded a $79,983 grant by USDA-Office of Advocacy and Outreach to identify and address the root causes of inequitable participation in USDA agricultural programs by Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFR) in Virginia in 20 selected counties in the State (see table and map below). This report covers the project and highlights activities conducted and the corresponding results. The general objective of this project is to develop a set of strategies for reducing the service delivery gaps limiting the participation of Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers in Virginia in an informed data driven way. The specific objectives are:

1. To collect and analyze information on the actual and potential socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in selected counties in Virginia.
2. To conduct outreach activities with the specific purpose of identifying root causes of failure to achieve equitable participation in USDA agricultural programs by Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, as well as development of recommended solutions.
3. To develop and deploy improved approaches for outreach and technical assistance.
4. To collect and analyze information on the success of adopted approaches.

In this project, the definition of “Socially Disadvantaged Farmer and Rancher” listed on the website of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Advocacy and Outreach (http://www.outreach.usda.gov/grants/oasdfr/definitions.htm), was used. The relevant quotes are:

Socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher is a farmer or rancher who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group.

Socially disadvantaged group is a group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudices because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities. Socially disadvantaged groups include, but are not limited to, African Americans, Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, Hispanics, Asians, and Pacific Islanders. The Secretary will determine on a case-by-case basis whether additional groups qualify under this definition, either at the Secretary’s initiative or in response to a written request with supporting explanation.

The remaining sections of the report cover the project methodology, project objectives/outcomes, activities, lessons learned, follow-workshops and project recommendations. We follow these with a detailed summary of some of the key conferences and activities. The appendices present some of the conference materials, agendas and notes with minimal edits to retain the integrity of the information generated during the course of the project. It also offers readers opportunity into the insight and perspectives of surveyed farmers, ranchers and extension service providers on the issue at hand and the strategies for addressing them. While information presented in Appendix A contain the conference notes, Appendix B simply covers results of the surveys administered to samples of the target farmers and ranchers, the extension service providers covering the project areas and USDA agency staff that served these areas.
Methodology

For the purpose of logistics management of this project, the selected counties in the project area were zoned as follows:

Zone 1: Bedford, Campbell and Franklin (RED)
Zone 2: Halifax and Pittsylvania (GREEN)
Zone 3: Charlotte, Lunenburg and Mecklenburg (BLUE)
Zone 4: Amelia, Buckingham, Nottoway and Prince Edward (ORANGE)
Zone 5: Brunswick, Dinwiddie, Prince George and Greensville (PURPLE)
Zone 6: Southampton, Suffolk, Surry and Sussex (TURQUOIS)
## Number of Farms in Project Counties

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<th>Project Counties</th>
<th>Number of Farmers in Project Counties (2007)</th>
<th>Number of SDFR in Project Counties (2007)</th>
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<td>Total (All VA Counties)</td>
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Project objectives and Outcomes

**Objective 1:** Collect and analyze information on the actual and potential socially disadvantaged farmers in selected counties.

**Outcome:** Project collected Valuable information from 253 structured surveys completed by socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers all across Virginia, 23 surveys completed by extension service providers and through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, meetings and conferences.

**Objective 2:** To conduct outreach activities with the purpose of identifying root causes of failure to achieve equitable participation in USDA agricultural programs by Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, as well as development of recommended solutions

**Outcome:** Project conducted and participated in conferences, focus groups, one-on-one meetings, seminars and workshops through which root causes of inequitable participation of SDFR were identified. Three major conferences were specifically conducted by the project: The first conference was conducted for farmers/Ranchers (154 attended), the second was for extension service providers (26 attended) and the third was a joint, general open conference for both parties.

**Objective 3:** To develop and deploy improved approaches for outreach and technical assistance

**Outcome:** A list of recommended solutions and strategies for addressing the low level of participation of SDFR in USDA agricultural programs was developed. Some of the strategies were deployed and evaluated in two workshops conducted for extension service providers and farmers. Preliminary findings show that the strategies hold promising solutions for addressing the problem of low level of participation of socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers and landowners.

**Objective 4:** To collect, analyze and provide actionable information on the success of adopted approaches
Outcome: Analyses of conference and workshop evaluations show that:

1) Hands-on workshop is effective in providing technical assistance to SDFR.
2) Workshop and conference participants indicated willingness to apply for at least one USDA program.
3) 100% of participants reported improving their knowledge about USDA agricultural programs at the conference/workshop.
4) 100% of participants confirmed willingness to attend and participate in workshops in the future.
5) 96% of the participants in the March 5th, 2012 Minority Farmer Conference were willing to participate in USDA agricultural programs.
6) 100% of the extension service providers who attended the November 8th, 2012 workshop indicated willingness to participate in similar train-the-trainer workshop.
7) 87% of the farmers that participated in the post-workshop evaluation survey expressed willingness and likelihood that they will register for and participate in some of the USDA farm programs they learned about in the workshop.

Project Activities

Conferences: Conferences were organized to meet with and elicit information about the low level of participation of socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers and landowners. While several technical assistance conferences and workshops were held for farmers and ranchers during the project period, three were specifically held to disseminate information about this project and collect feedback.

Minority Farmers’ Conference: This was a whole day event held on March 5, 2012 and attended by 154 current and prospective farmers, ranchers and landowners. Participants were organized into two groups. Each group was asked to identify factors militating against the equitable participation of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in USDA agricultural programs and to suggest solutions for addressing the problems. An open discussion forum was held after the separate group meetings to share findings from the groups. Ninety-six percent (96%) of the participants indicated that the conference increased their willingness to participate in USDA agricultural programs. The conference findings are presented in the Appendix. Comments made by some of the participants include:

“We need more informative conferences”
“There’s need for more programs for individuals with mental and physical disability. They should be included in socially disadvantaged description”

“I’m highly interested in this program because my dream is always to become a farmer right from while I was in high school”

“I could see going to the next conference and hearing the same things”

“Waiting for results of your findings of questions”

“1) I feel socially disadvantaged or/and minority should include the physically and mentally disabled. 2) We have begun a gathering of individuals to co-op and the four areas labeled in this conference gave us more focus on areas to address. 3) Love to hear from other farmers. 4) Can’t wait to see website. 5) Great resources and company”

Extension Service Providers Conference: Participants in this conference included VCE Specialists, SFOTAP agents, VSU Staff and USDA agency staff. The conference was held on April 20th, 2012. While the format was quite different from the earlier conference, the goals were still the same. Here, all personnel that provide extension services to farmers openly identified and discussed factors militating against the equitable participation of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in USDA agricultural programs and suggested solutions for addressing the problems. USDA agencies that were represented include FSA, RD, NRCS and OAO. VA Forest Service was also represented. All the participants found the conference very useful in addressing the low participation of small socially disadvantaged farmers in USDA programs and indicated their willingness to attend similar workshops. Some of the participants’ comments include:

“More sessions like this could break down many mistrust and provide better understanding”

“subject of the conference is worthwhile and useful”

“Opportunity now exists to educate the educators. Small farmer agents need to be constantly informed about new programs and how they can be used”

General Open Conference: This conference gathered together participants from the two previous conferences (Minority Farmers’ Conference and Extension Service Providers Conference) and provided a forum within which information separately gathered from farmers/ranchers and extension service providers/USDA staff were shared and openly
discussed. It also offered an opportunity to clarify identified problems, issues, solutions and strategies with useful input from both parties on the reality of prevailing circumstances that each faces. One important outcome of this conference was the portfolio of actionable strategies agreed upon by both parties as being useful in addressing the problem of inequitable participation of SDFR in USDA agricultural programs.

**Surveys:** Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires. Two sets of instruments were designed and separately administered to a) Current and prospective farmers, ranchers and landowners; b) Virginia State University Small Farm Outreach and Technical Assistance program (SFOTAP) agents, extension service providers and USDA agency staff. Data were collected from farmers, ranchers and landowners during scheduled conferences, workshops, general meetings and focus group meetings. A total of useable 253 survey were administered to farmers/ranchers and landowners across the project area.

In the case of SFOTAP agents, extension service providers and USDA staff, the survey was administered to this group in a focus group meeting during the Service Providers conference. A total of 23 respondents filled out the surveys.

**Follow-Up Workshop:** This workshop was conducted to put to test some of the strategies identified in the General Open Conference. Farmers were selected for this workshop. The strategy was specifically focused on providing technical assistance to farmers and ranchers.

**Train-the-Trainer Workshop:** This workshop was hosted by Farm Service Agency (FSA), Richmond State Office on Oct 25th, 2012, and coordinated with the agency staff. During the whole-day workshop, SFOTAP agents and selected extension personnel, students and project PI from VSU participated in the train-the-trainer workshop on programs offered by USDA agencies like FSA and NRCS. Considerable time was spent on typical application process a new farmer would go through to participate in any USDA farm program. Also discussed were specific forms and documents that all new participants must complete or present, and the challenges farmers and agency staff go through, with a view to developing a more farmer friendly approach for promoting participation in all available USDA agricultural programs. A key outcome of this session was that a good train-the-trainer workshop like this is crucial for keeping extension personnel and service providers well informed about available USDA programs and how to more effectively promote these programs to the target farmers, ranchers and landowners.

**Farmers Workshop:** The event was held on the campus of Virginia State University on November 8, 2012, with 19 attendees. Eleven of the participants were current farmers and four were prospective farmers/ranchers. The objective of the workshop was to develop a model farmer-workshop through which small farmers/ranchers in general, and socially disadvantaged
farmers in particular are provided with appropriate technical assistance to enhance their participation in USDA program. Areas covered included overview of FSA, FSA programs, farm/producers record establishment, NAP, production records, and various loan programs that farmers can apply for. The facilitating FSA staff worked the farmers through filling USDA application process and discussed specific application processes for some of the key programs. All the farmers found the workshop to be useful and 66% of them indicated that it was excellent. All of the participants indicated that they would participate in similar workshops in future. 87% of the farmers indicated that they would sign up for and participate in some of the USDA programs discussed during the workshop.

**Key Lessons Learned**

- **Definition of Socially Disadvantaged**: Definition of “Socially Disadvantage farmers and ranchers” is inconsistent throughout USDA agencies. Most of the extension service providers were unclear about the definition. The expression is also generally misleading and confusing to farmers, ranchers and extension service providers. Many farmers who would have been eligible did not consider themselves “socially disadvantaged” and therefore did not believe that they were eligible to participate in any program designated as such. To them, “socially disadvantage” was synonymous with “physical disability”, “indigent” and they indicated that it was derogatory.

- **Farmers are willing to participate in USDA Agricultural programs**: Survey results and findings from the conferences and meetings reveal that 58% of the target farmers were willing to more actively participate in USDA programs and 22% need more information that increase the farm profitability as long as they are adequately advised and informed. However, existing programs are not presented in ways that the farmers understand.

- **Lack of information about the local USDA office**: Almost half (48%) of the surveyed farmers were unaware of the USDA office/service center in their localities.

- **Application Process**: Target farmers, ranchers and landowners find the USDA program application process too complex, confusing and overwhelming, with a lot of paperwork. According to the farmers who participated, the application process was often bureaucratic, inflexible and insensitive to the nature of agricultural production. Also, application information/forms were reported to contain acronyms and terminologies that were unknown to applicants and often undefined.

- **Past unpleasant experience at USDA program offices**: This appears to be a major issue. Skepticism about getting any benefit from USDA agricultural programs was rife among farmers because of previous unpleasant experiences or unsuccessful application processes.
- **Lack of trust/fear of government by farmers and ranchers:** Related to the unpleasant experience of the farmers and ranchers had in applying for USDA programs is the fear that participation in any government program will expose them to unnecessary scrutiny by government officials and agencies.

- **Program Eligibility:** Eligibility requirements were often unclear in some programs and at times not stated in simple terms for the applicants to understand.

- **Inadequate Outreach and technical assistance:** USDA agencies and extension agencies were understaffed and grossly inadequate to provide the needed, more effective hands-on assistance to the target farmers and ranchers. This has also forced agencies and extension programs to cut back on the number of outreach and technical assistance activities and events.

- **Low level of participation:** A third (66%) of the respondent farmers had never participated in any USDA program.

- **Aging farming population:** The survey revealed that 61% of the respondent farmers and ranchers ranged in age from 45 – 64 years, while 21% were 65 years or older.

- **Publicity and Program Promotion:** Communication tools were not always directed to targeted audience. There was also the difficulty of identifying target farmers and ranchers due to misunderstanding about the program target audience, focus and eligibility.

- **Budget:** Budget constraints have resulted in decreased staffing; more work with less staff; less time for one-on-one interactions

- **USDA Productivity Goals:** USDA productivity goals tend to make it easier and more attractive for employees to serve large farmers (goals based on number of acres served or total dollars value are easier to meet with large farmers): May be a disincentive to work with small farmers or new farmers.

- **Other identified limitations:**
  - Lack of education
  - Fear of rejection for assistance/feeling of being rejected
  - Long waiting lists
  - Disputes on inheritance limit program eligibility/Estate planning issues
  - Inequality of funding for some farmers: Money doesn’t seem to be appropriated right
  - Lack of awareness about programs/opportunities
  - Lack of knowledge about appropriate USDA agency and/or extension program contacts
  - Lack of timely information about programs that are available
  - Lack of guidance on land usage or management
Follow-up Workshops

*Train-the-Trainer: Farm Service Agency (FSA), Richmond State Office, Oct 25th, 2012*

A total of twenty-five Extension agents, VSU staff, FSA officials and the Project Director participated in this workshop. This was a whole day workshop and focused on several topics and issues considered to be of key interest to SDFR. Areas/topics covered were:

The workshop was primarily designed to train the extension agents on these key areas and build on the feedback from the activities and previous conference sessions with farmers, service providers and USDA agency staff, to tailor the next workshops to the specific needs of the farmers and ranchers.

A quick review/summary of the workshop evaluation survey shows that the participants found it very useful and would want to participate in future workshops. They all stated that it increased their knowledge on how producers/farmers can participate in USDA programs. Majority (“Excellent”–44%: “Above Average” – 44%; “Average” – 11%) reported that the workshop enhanced their ability to work with producers/farmers.

Below are some of the highlighted areas that agents found particularly most relevant (based on the evaluation):

1) Non-Insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP)
2) Beginning Farmers’ Loan
3) Applying for FSA loans/Application process
4) Discussion on “farmers’ first visit” to USDA/FSA office (What to expect)

* Farmers Workshop – Virginia State University (VSU) Randolph Farm on November 8, 2012

Organized on the campus of Virginia State University on November 8, 2012, with 19 attendees. Eleven of the participants were current farmers and four were prospective farmers/ranchers. The goal of conducting this workshop was to develop a model farmer-workshop through which small farmers/ranchers in general, and socially disadvantaged farmers in particular are provided with appropriate technical assistance to enhance their participation in USDA program. The areas covered included:
1) FSA Overview and Website Introduction
2) Getting Started (farm and producer record establishment)
3) Farm Maps and their importance in the registration process
4) NAP and Production Records
5) Farm Storage Facility Loan Program
6) Farm Loans Overview and application process

Workshop evaluation showed that 87% of the farmers that participated expressed willingness and likelihood that they will register for and participate in some of the USDA farm programs they learned about in the workshop. All the farmers that participated expressed interest in participating in similar workshops in future. Sixty percent of the farmers found information about farm loan programs as the most relevant to them.

Recommendations

- Revise the expression “socially disadvantaged” to what the target farmers and ranchers can relate to such as “Historically Disadvantaged”, “Underserved” etc.
- Solicit input from farmers and ranchers on preferred language/term to use for them instead on “Socially Disadvantaged”.
- Make the grant application process more user-friendly and easy to navigate.
- Reach these target farmers through faith-based organizations like churches and community leaders.
- Consider immigrant population and provide educational materials (translated) and interpreters to reach them in their local communities through focused outreach effort.
- Education of farmers and ranchers on the application process and promotion to increase awareness of the two phases of application process to reduce frustration and increase understanding about the process.
- Education and outreach to create awareness of requirements and what farmers need to do to become eligible for programs to reduce frustration.
- Provision of clear, easy to understand information regarding criteria for eligibility for USDA programs.
- There is need to increase/hire staff that can provide financial management assistance (region/county).
- Introductory inter-agency cross-training; distance learning to increase awareness of programs offered across USDA agencies rather than having agencies operating in silos.
• Share staff directories/contact lists among USDA agencies and with extension service providers.
• Create/share matrix of programs and contact for each program. Also, plan to share matrix/program information on-line across agency and extension programs or units.
• USDA staff to provide outreach (on farm/ranch) service during initial contact with farmers: Use the customer service principle.
• Provide technology education to farmers/ranchers and agents so that information can be shared/disseminated more promptly, widely, efficiently and effectively.
• Provide outreach agents with laptops so they can access and input information on-site (farm/ranch). With proper IT security in place, this may greatly reduce travel times and increase efficiency.
• Provide outreach agents with official telephone (should not have to use personal phones) for more effective contact with reach farmers/ranchers who may not have internet access.
• Consider creating a detailed application package/checklist to be made available to applicants during their meetings/visit to USDA or extension service provider.
• Outreach - have first meeting at the farm/ranch site and not in the office to strengthen relationship.
• Provide good experiences (testimonials) of other farmers to new or prospective farmers and program participants.
• Share farmers success stories with other current or prospective farmers to encourage participation in programs.
• Encourage farmer/rancher to talk with other farmers and link farmers with other farmers with good experience (local volunteer concept).
• Encourage farmers to come into office and speak with staff.
• Encourage mentoring between farmers and provide necessary support to mentors as incentive for their service. This could be as simple as an annual recognition or award.
• Creation of a transparent application system/process so that people understand why one farmer is funded and another is not.
• Revise USDA productivity goals to motivate staff to work with the target farmers/ranchers and not only large commercial farmers who may not often need the level of critical assistance needed by the “socially disadvantaged farmers/ranchers”.
• Establish partnerships across USDA agencies to optimize use of resources.
• Diversity in staff across all USDA agencies whose programs target the SDFR.
• Recognize and address cultural concerns in government offices.
• Promote more outreach efforts towards “socially disadvantaged” farmers and ranchers (Target group)
- Provide details/information about available service/programs where they are available to farmers
- Reduce red tape
- Conduct periodic meetings to provide updates on what USDA has to offer. Local extension service providers like Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) can be supported to lead or facilitate this effort.
- Help with paperwork process through one-on-one interaction with this target farmers
- Review/revise regulatory constraints that are burdensome/discourage participants
- Develop a user friendly package for Cooperative Extension agents to provide to beginner farmers to provide information on potential opportunities and services available
- Connect beginning farmers to informal leadership structure in the community
- Develop farm programs in school systems
- Develop/promote the establishment of farmer cooperatives
- Farmers network with local neighbors, invite them to events/programs.
- Aggressive promotion and outreach including the use of social media like Facebook to reach upcoming Socially Disadvantage Farmers and ranchers and their families.
  - Provide details about available service/programs
  - Specific information and ongoing/updated info
  - Programs and information for beginner farmers
- Funding for small outreach program to recruit more agents
- Establish a networking website for farmers
- Encourage farmers to join “Beginning Farmer Coalition” recently established by Virginia Tech and the VCE.
- Use technology resources available to enhance efficiency
- Educate farmers/ranchers on farm transition arrangements and establish programs to enlighten farmers and farming families on the importance of estate planning.