ACCESSING USDA-NRCS FUNDING FOR SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED FARMERS IN MISSISSIPPI

Funded by:
ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY - SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED FARMERS AND RANCHERS POLICY RESEARCH CENTER

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Acknowledgement

The research team at Mississippi State University- Department of Sociology and Social Science Research Center is proud to present this report, here we show the results of an in-depth analysis of policies and perceptions about accessing federal funding for agricultural conservation in Mississippi. Specifically, this study aimed at understanding the structure of policies for agricultural promotion available for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers at the United States Department of Agriculture-Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), and the perspectives and experiences regarding access to funding among different groups of socially disadvantaged producers in Mississippi.

This work would not have been possible without the financial support of the Alcorn State University - Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center. The project was funded under the 2017 Request for Research Proposals.

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Executive Summary

Introduction
The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the chief entity responsible for ensuring an ample and affordable supply of food for the country by promoting agricultural production, innovating rural development, and preserving natural resources (USDA, 2013). Through farm bill programs, the U.S. government seeks to accomplish these goals in the context of growing demands for agricultural goods. However, USDA has been the source of several claims of discrimination. Recently, the agency has been trying to repair past situations of discrimination increasing diversity in its workforce, and expanding the scope of their programs to reach out participants that were systematically excluded in the past (Leonard, 2011). Yet data show that agricultural production remains a non-diverse industry. While there are now funding streams available for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (SDFR), there is little understanding of why this group of farmers is still underrepresented in agriculture. This research focuses on understanding minority groups and women’s experiences in accessing funds and programs for agricultural promotion available for SDFR at the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) in Mississippi.

Objective(s)
While there are now funding streams available for SDFRs, there is little or no research on minority groups and women’s experiences on accessing these funds and programs through the preexisting (and historically problematic) USDA programmatic and funding processes. Through an in-depth analysis of accessing funding experiences, this research aims to understand the structure of policies for agricultural promotion for available for SDFR at the NRCS, and the perspectives and experiences regarding access to NRCS funding among different groups of socially disadvantaged producers in Mississippi. The main goal of this project is to examine SDFRs’ perspectives and experiences when negotiating the process of applying for USDA-NRCS; the findings of this research provide valuable information on what variables can explain success in securing government funding for agriculture from the SDFRs’ viewpoint.

Methods
This is a qualitative study that uses two types of research strategies: focus groups and policy analysis. The policy analysis investigates NRCS conservation funding policies and programs available for SDFR and starts by understanding the policy formation at the federal level, and its
implementation at the state and county levels in Mississippi where funding decisions take place. The second critical piece of this research is the focus group work with SDFR in Mississippi (eleven focus groups, with eighty-four participants); this research strategy aims to investigate the perspectives and experiences among different groups of SDFR producers in Mississippi regarding access to NRCS funding.

Discussion
We know that disparities exist in accessing government funding for agriculture (USDA, 2014a). For the purposes of this study we are investigating these disparities in the case of the USDA-NRCS. The discussion section presents results from the policy analysis of how NRCS organizational structure, types and scope of programs, and guidelines and rules for program application affect SDFR. Results from focus groups provide rich discussion on barriers to accessing government agricultural funding for socially disadvantaged farmers.

Conclusion
NRCS has recently implemented strategies to increase participation of SDFRs in the agricultural industry. Despite of their efforts, the increasing participation of these groups has been rather slow. Therefore, the significance of the current work. The research began by asking what are the SDFR perspectives and experiences regarding access to USDA-NRCS in Mississippi. As follow-up questions we asked whether the regulations constitute a barrier to accessing NRCS funding or, although programs exist, are there problems at the implementation level than can be addressed in order to enhance the participation of SDFR in conservation programs? Derived from the policy analysis and focus groups, three areas of concern emerged as relevant in the NRCS work with SDFR: 1) sustainability; 2) organizational culture; and 3) communication.

Recommendations
Recommendations for action are in organized in three areas: 1) Sustainability: build upon “pride and accomplishment” that comes from farming, to reinforce conservation efforts among minority and limited resource producers; 2) Organizational Culture: increase transparency of funding allocation criteria; increase awareness about the need to augment diversity in funding allocation committees; strengthen current outreach efforts in consortium with agricultural organizations; 3) Communication: improve communication strategies from NRCS towards SDFR; implement strategies of outreach that includes technical and administrative training to leaders and communities.
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Introduction

Agricultural production in the United States plays a unique role as the continual flow of affordable, safe, and dependable food supply is a security and social imperative for the United States (USDHS, 2010). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the chief entity responsible for ensuring an ample and affordable supply of food for the country, and it is in charge of promoting agricultural production, innovating rural development, and preserving natural resources (USDA, 2013). Agricultural production in the United States is subsidized through support and safety net programs in the farm bill (Johnson & Monke, 2017). Through farm bill programs, the U.S. government seeks to boost agricultural production, improve rural development, enhance nutrition, and balance the stock of natural resources in the context of growing demands for agricultural goods. The USDA organizational structure consist of twenty-nine agencies with federal and state presence, responsible for specific functions within the major goals of USDA. Among these agencies and functional work, this research project focuses on the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the implementation of conservation programs among Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (SDFR) in Mississippi.

In this context however, USDA has been the source of several claims of discrimination. Recently, the agency has attempted to repair past situations of discrimination by making its workforce more diverse and transforming the scope of their programs in order to reach out participants in the agricultural industry that were systematically excluded in the past (Leonard, 2011). Despite these efforts, data show that agricultural production remains an industry populated and dominated by white men. In this context, only comprising a minor sector in the industry, non-white and women operators have, on average, smaller farms, smaller farm incomes, and smaller amounts of government payments and loans than white males (USDA, 2014a) (Tables 1 & 2).

There is evidence about the history of discrimination at USDA. As means to address this issue, Congress authorized the creation of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights and the position of the Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights (USGAO, 2012). While the creation of the office alleviated some issues immediately, USDA has had slow progress at times on remedying minority underrepresentation in program enrollment since the creation of the Outreach and Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (OASDVFR)
in 1990 (USGAO, 2008; USGAO, 2012; Rural Coalition, 2015). Aware of this situation, the U.S. Congress and USDA have hypothesized that the reason that there are not more minority, female, and young farmers is a lack of financial resources (USDA, 2014a). Hence, in the Agricultural Act of 2014 there were numerous funding streams and programmatic opportunities specifically earmarked for socially disadvantaged producers.

While there are now funding streams available for socially disadvantaged farmers, there is little or no research on minority groups and women’s experiences on accessing these funds and programs through the preexisting (and historically problematic) USDA programmatic and funding processes. In order to deeply inquire into accessing experiences, this research project has focused on understanding the policies for agricultural promotion available for SDFR at the NRCS and the perspectives and experiences regarding access to funding among different groups of socially disadvantaged producers in Mississippi. This report aims to present the results of the research project “Accessing Government Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers” funded by the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center at Alcorn State University and conducted by researchers from Mississippi State University. The main goal of the project is to examine socially disadvantaged farmers’ perspectives and experiences when negotiating the process of applying for USDA-NRCS; through this research this project will provide valuable information on what variables can explain success in securing government funding for agriculture from the socially disadvantaged farmers’ viewpoint. The report is structured as follows: the first section details the methods and data; the second presents the discussion of the results of the policy analysis and focus groups; the third is a conclusion section; and the fourth presents recommendations based on the research findings.
### Table 1. United States. Farms with Women Principal Operators Compared with All Farms 2007 and 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Farms</th>
<th>Land in Farms</th>
<th>Average Size of Farm</th>
<th>Government Payments (Average Per Farm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women Principal Operators</td>
<td>All Farms</td>
<td>Women Principal Operators</td>
<td>All Farms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 Census</td>
<td>288,264</td>
<td>2,109,303</td>
<td>62,672,816 acres</td>
<td>914,527,657 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 Census</td>
<td>306,209</td>
<td>2,204,792</td>
<td>64,264,566 acres</td>
<td>922,095,840 acres</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 2. United States. Farms with Black or African American Operators Compared with All Farms 2007 and 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Farms</th>
<th>Land in Farms</th>
<th>Average Size of Farm</th>
<th>Government Payments (Average Per Farm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black or African American Operators</td>
<td>All Farms</td>
<td>Black or African American Operators</td>
<td>All Farms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 Census</td>
<td>36,382</td>
<td>2,109,303</td>
<td>4,563,805 acres</td>
<td>914,527,657 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 Census</td>
<td>32,938</td>
<td>2,204,792</td>
<td>3,826,403 acres</td>
<td>922,095,840 acres</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methods
This is a qualitative study that uses two types of research strategies: focus group and policy analysis. The policy analysis investigates NRCS conservation funding policies and programs available for socially disadvantaged and limited resource farmers (SDFR); this analysis starts by understanding the policy formation at the federal level, and its implementation at the state and county levels in Mississippi, where funding decisions take place. The second critical piece of this research is the focus group work with SDFR; this research strategy aims to investigate the perspectives and experiences among different groups of socially disadvantaged producers in Mississippi regarding access to USDA-NRCS funding.

Policy Analysis
The policy analysis aims to explain policies from their formation to the implementation, seeking to understand the nature of the relationship between actors and resources, levels of influence and avenues for implementation (Nagel, 1999). The nature of policy analysis is both descriptive and analytical, consisting of the content analysis of the policy document (regulations, legislations), the stakeholders involved in the implementation, their levels of influence in the implementation, and understanding the policy outcomes. Specifically, the policy analysis component of this research project seeks to understand what elements in the process policy may yield success or failure in accessing NRCS funding. The policy analysis seeks to respond to these questions: 1) Are there pieces of the regulation that in and of itself constitute a barrier to access NRCS funding? and, 2) Although the programs exist, are there problems at the implementation level than can be addressed in order to enhance the participation of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in conservation programs? The policy analysis is the result of an in-depth study of USDA and USDA-NRCS policies and regulations, its organizational structure and how the interconnection of these elements impact access to funding by socially disadvantaged producers in Mississippi.

Focus Groups
Under this project, the research team conducted eleven focus groups with three sets of socially disadvantaged producers who are actively farming: minority, women, and limited resource (these categories overlap within the groups). The participants can be placed in three different groups: members of a preexisting regional food hub, a loosely connected preexisting agriculture group,
and individuals with no formal group ties. A total of 95 socially disadvantaged producers have participated in the focus groups (N=95). For this study, we recruited “active producers”, those were defined as anyone who at the time of recruitment annually sells at least $100 of agricultural products. Focus groups were conducted in six out of the eight Mississippi economic regions\(^1\) and with members of a preexisting regional food hub, loosely connected preexisting agriculture groups, formal agricultural organizations, and individuals with no formal group ties. Through stakeholder organizations and other outreach efforts, a broad group of individuals were invited to participate.

In addition to the focus groups, we have also conducted five formative interviews. Interviewees are part of a farming organizations and NRCS. We will use these interviews as a context piece to supplement our understanding of barriers for socially disadvantaged farmers accessing NRCS funding, however, we did not code these interviews. We considered those formative interviews.

Participants were briefed on the purpose of the research project and responded to a series of questions about why they farm, what resources they use, their knowledge of USDA programs, and their experiences applying for USDA-NRCS programs. Each focus group session was audio recorded and later transcribed. All quotes used within this report denote the group name and transcription line in MAXQDA that corresponds with the comment. To better protect the participants’ privacy, any identifying information was removed from the quotes. All comments were left in their entirety when possible in respect of our participants; however, extremely lengthy comments were shortened for readability and clarity. Abbreviated comments are denoted with ellipses. Additionally, participants’ statements may contain repeated words or grammatical errors as participants’ comments were transcribed without any editing of grammatical changes.

All data was coded in MAXQDA Plus 12.3.1. The coder read each document multiple times and then coded each transcript on three levels. At the completion of the coding, analysis, and interpretation process, all emergent observations and themes were recorded in this report in the results and discussion.

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\(^1\) As designated by the Mississippi Regional Economic Analysis Project, the eight Mississippi economic regions are: Northwest, Northeast, Delta, East Central, Capital, Southwest, Pine Belt and Coast (Momentum Mississippi Map, 2017).
Results and Discussion

1. Policy Analysis

There is evidence that indicate the existence of disparities in access to government funding for agriculture (USDA, 2014a), for the purposes of this study we are investigating these disparities in the case of socially disadvantaged producers in Mississippi accessing USDA-NRCS funding. This section presents the results of the policy analysis highlighting NRCS organizational structure, types and scope of programs, and guidelines and rules for program application would potentially affect socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

1. Federal Policies

The Farm Bill

Agricultural production in the United States is subsidized through support and safety net programs in the farm bill. The farm bill is the most important and comprehensive instrument of agriculture and food policy. It is passed by Congress every five years and it is implemented by USDA and its agencies. The current farm bill or Agricultural Act of 2014 and will stay in place until 2018. The total outlays are $489 billion distributed as follows: nutrition, 80 percent; conservation, 6 percent; crop insurance, 8 percent; commodities, 5 percent; and others, 1 percent (USDA & ERS, 2017). However, the process of creating food and agricultural policy through an omnibus bill every five years involves tension between commonly held societal objectives concerning the economy, the environment, individual and collective nutritional health, poverty alleviation, and governance (Johnson & Monke, 2017; Wilde, 2013). For the Agriculture Act of 2014, representatives and senators voraciously debated numerous issues in the eleven titles (plus title XII - Miscellaneous) of the bill, and altered various major provisions from the previous 2008 farm bill.

Title XII of the Agricultural Act of 2014 includes different provisions for socially disadvantaged and limited resource producers. Some of the provisions include: Beginning Farmer or Rancher Access to Crop Insurance, Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, Microloans to Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, Expanded Opportunities for Value-Added Agricultural Producers, the Conservation Loan and Loan Guarantee Program, Facilitate Land Transfers
through the Conservation Reserve Program Transition Incentives Program (USDA & ERS, 2016).

Also, Title II of the farm bill focuses on conservation programs. First included in the Food Security Act of 1985 (the 1985 farm bill), conservation programs now comprise an important part of the farm bill spending (Stubbs, 2016). The USDA’s original conservation programs focused on soil erosion and water quality/quantity issues whereas the current farm bill includes conservation provisions for air quality, wetlands restoration and protection, energy efficiency, wildlife habitat, and sustainable agriculture (Stubbs, 2016). Today, the NRCS administers the vast majority of USDA’s conservation programs.

**USDA Strategic Plan 2014 – 2018**

The provisions of the current farm bill are effective between 2014 and 2018. Accordingly, USDA developed a strategic plan for the same period of time. It consists of five strategic goals that focus on: 1) assisting rural communities to create prosperity and self-sustainability; 2) conservation of national forest and private working lands and improvement of water resources; 3) promoting agricultural production and biotechnology while increasing food security; 4) guaranteeing children’s access to safe and healthy foods; and 5) improving performance, efficiency and adaptability of the agency (USDA, 2013). Within these, the strategic goal 1, “Assist rural communities to create prosperity so they are self-sustaining, repopulating, and economically thriving” (figure 1) addresses some issues pertaining to the inclusion of socially disadvantaged farmers and limited resource producers into the agricultural production. One of USDA goals regarding this group of producers is to increase the number of beginning, racial and ethnic minority and women farmers financed by USDA, as limited funding has been considered one of the major concerns when it comes to participation in farming from this sector of the
Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS provides farmers and ranchers with financial and technical assistance to voluntarily implement on the ground conservation practices. Like other USDA agencies, NRCS is decentralized. Program priorities are decided at a national level and fashioned into a strategic plan; however, the majority of administrative and programmatic funding decisions are made at the regional or state level (Stubbs, 2010). At USDA’s headquarters in Washington, D.C., the Chief Conservationist acts as the director of NRCS and oversees four Regional Conservationists (USDA, 2013) (figure 2). Each state, in turn, has their own State Conservationist who reports directly to their Regional Conservationists. The State Conservationist serves as the chief administrative officer within each state and supervises each county’s Area Conservationist and the sub-state regional District Conservationists (Jackson Lewis LLP, 2011).
Civil Rights at the NRCS

The USDA established a contract with the Jackson Lewis LLP Corporate Diversity Counseling Group (2011) to conduct a comprehensive review of the USDA’s Delivery of Technical and Financial Assistance to all Americans and its handling of civil rights matters. The assessment focused on the USDA’s effectiveness at ensuring its policies reached a diverse population and made recommendations on how to improve problem areas. The group interviewed USDA employees, conducted a number of focus groups, and attended various meetings and conferences held by USDA agencies to collect data for the civil rights assessment. In their final report, the group listed ten areas for departmental change with recommendations on how best to increase diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (DIA). One of the most striking items noted in the report is USDA employees’ lack of awareness of both the existence of discriminatory practices and the severity of inequitable treatment of SDFR. In fact, the research found that many of the discriminatory practices can often be identified as unintentional. Therefore, the report suggests...
that perhaps this is why civil rights violations had gone unchecked for so long and can be corrected in part by emphasizing a focus on diversity and inclusion outreach rather than giving outreach titles such as civil rights, which can carry a negative connotation. Thus, USDA’s efforts to address the recommendations must be substantial and must occur at the organizational and program implementation levels.

Specifically, the Jackson Lewis assessment found that some of the key barriers to achieve equity is the disconnect between SDFRs and the county committee system, members who are often regarded by SDFRs as untrained, discriminatory, and in some cases hostile towards SDFR outreach. Lack of diversity in these committees contributes to this disconnect and inadequate visibility. The application process to obtain funding by this group of producers is considered complex which can be crippling for the goal of achieving equity when members of the committee are not making an effort to assist with the complex process. To address these various problems, the report identifies a number of recommended practices for the Farm Service Agency to implement including aggressive marketing outreach aimed at SDFR communities, periodic analyses of diversity in Farm Loan Guaranteed Loan program, modification of county committee system and internal offices, and ultimately to simplify loans and farm program applications to be SDFR user-friendly.

According to the aforementioned report, at NRCS the application process tends to favor larger producers which leaves out SDFR who make up the majority of smaller producers. SDFRs lack sufficient information about the application process and the guidelines are often inconsistent with Native American customers. Minorities and females are under-represented in field offices ranging from the local to state level offices which can create bias because these committees determine what applicants qualify for in terms of assistance (Jackson Lewis LLP, 2011). To avoid discrimination, the report recommended that a separate conservation program exist to meet the needs of SDFR and that this program funds applications continuously, providing guidance and reasoning when an application is rejected. Diversity and inclusion should also remain at the top of the NRCS’s priority by creating the position of Chief Diversity Officer, implementing programs specifically aimed for Native American producers, and adopting substantial measures for reviewing internal diversity.
According to the report, NRCS programs showed consistent obstacles that must be addressed if equitable delivery of services is to be achieved. Lack of outreach to SDFRs and SDFR’s lack of access to information on how to navigate the complex application processes appeared consistently throughout the assessment. Additionally, bias within the organization due to lack of diversity and previously held bias dominated each program. The report concluded that although many of the policies and practices found in farm bills and USDA regulations are not discriminatory on their face, when applied by local and state committees it permits discretion that results in unfair treatment towards SDFR. Minorities and females are also disproportionately underrepresented in the USDA workforce which contributes to inequitable decision making. Finally, the report identified a number of problems associated with the discrimination complaint system in cases of program discrimination and workplace discrimination. The complaint process was found to be overly complicated and rarely ever found evidence of discrimination. To fix this, the report recommended a wholesale simplification of the process and more resources allocated to reviewing these complaints.

**NRCS Strategic Plan FY 2016-2018**

As mentioned above, NRCS program priorities are decided at a national level and fashioned into a strategic plan. NRCS strategic plan for FY 2016-2018 contains four strategic goals (related to the organization’s mission) and two management initiatives. The management initiative 2: “Create a Climate of Inclusion and Foster Diversity So Private Lands Conservation Will Thrive” includes two critical objectives related to civil rights: “Expand opportunities to deliver conservation products and services to new and underserved customers” (Title VI), and “Employ, develop, and retain a highly skilled and diverse workforce” (Title VII) (NRCS, 2015b).

Strategic initiatives are detailed in Figure 3. The fact that civil rights related initiatives are depicted in the management initiatives indicates the need of a structural transformation within the organization as means to address issues of potential discrimination. In some fashion, the organizational NRCS strategies are addressing the recommendations of the Jackson Lewis report in the sense that discriminatory practices can often be identified as unintentional and occur as part of the organizational practices and culture.
2. **State-Level Programs**

NRCS has field offices in most counties across the United States. Briefly, this is how the application process occurs: to apply for a NRCS program (other than Conservation Reserve Program, which is managed by the Farm Service Agency), landowners contact their *area conservationist* and inform her or him about their interest in implementing conservation practices on their land (USDA, 2015a). The landowner then meets with the area conservationist, files the respective paperwork, and the area conservationist then informs the landowner of her or his options regarding funding, programs, and a timeline (USDA, 2015a). Applications are accepted at any time during the year; however, funding decisions are made according to local deadlines (USDA, 2016). Local area conservationists then score and rank applications before submitting them to the state conservationist for approval.

Despite the agency efforts to increase participation of minorities in farming and conservation practices on average, African American and women participation in the agricultural industry is still small (USDA, 2014). In Mississippi, participation of African Americans in farming does not
exceed 43 percent, even if those counties have a higher population of African Americans. As for representation of women in agriculture in Mississippi, the counties with larger participation of women do not have more than 37 percent of women farmers. Appendix 1 illustrates county participation of African Americans and women in farming comparing the years 2002, 2007 and 2012.

**NRCS Programs available in MS**

NRCS offers two types of programs, financial assistance and easement programs. Through its financial assistance programs, NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to voluntarily engage eligible landowners and agricultural producers into sustainable natural resources management practices. The mechanism to implement these programs is through contracts that provide financial assistance to support planning and implementation of conservation practices on agricultural lands and non-industrial private forest land. Financial assistance programs are Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Innovation Grant Program (CIG), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) (NRCS, 2014a). On the other hand, easement programs aim at maintaining or enhancing private lands in a manner that is favorable to agriculture and/or the environment. NRCS provides technical and financial support, but ultimately, landowners are responsible program’s success. Current easement programs include Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP). The next section will briefly describe these programs.

**Financial Assistance Programs**

*Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)*

Through voluntary participation, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides agricultural producers with financial and technical assistance to address natural resource concerns due to agricultural activity with the ultimate goal of improving water and air quality, preserve ground and surface water, reduce soil erosion and sedimentation and improve or create wildlife habitat (NRCS, 2014). In the 2014 farm bill, EQIP was authorized $8 billion over the 5-year the FY2014-2018 period (table 2) (Commodity Credit Corporation, 2016). EQIP functions as a cost-share program for farmers to invest in conservation practices by paying a portion of the cost of constructing and/or installing conservation practices on their land (USDA, 2014b).
Applications are grouped into funding categories by crop type, livestock, or forestry; 60 percent of all EQIP funds are designated for livestock producers (Stubbs, 2016). Normally, USDA pays 75 percent of the projected cost; however, the percentage is higher for limited resource, beginning, or socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (Stubbs 2016; USDA, 2014).

### Table 3. Annual Budget Allocation for EQIP, FY 2014-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>$1.35 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>$1.60 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>$1.65 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>$1.65 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>$1.75 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Commodity Credit Corporation, 2016, p. 29481

Like other NRCS programs, EQIP has a list of nationally designated priorities and programs are funded according to application rank correspondent to the national and/or state priorities.

Historically, EQIP applicants are routinely denied due to a backlog in application processing (Stubbs, 2010). Mississippi regularly ranks in the top ten states with unfunded applications; in fiscal year 2014 (the most recent available), 37,207 contracts were awarded and Mississippi ranked third in unfunded applications (4,113) behind Arkansas (5,533) and Oklahoma (4,255) (Stubbs, 2016). USDA does not provide backlog numbers—only unfunded application data.

EQIP budget for the state of Mississippi between 2009 and 2016 is detailed in table 4:

### Table 4. EQIP Mississippi and Total Obligations, by Fiscal Year
(In thousands of dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>$15,723.3</td>
<td>$23,438.8</td>
<td>$33,707.1</td>
<td>$32,975.5</td>
<td>$42,674.1</td>
<td>$35,969.0</td>
<td>$43,766.4</td>
<td>$49,580.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$1,054,581.6</td>
<td>$1,184,252.2</td>
<td>$1,244,659.4</td>
<td>$1,382,561.5</td>
<td>$1,391,162.0</td>
<td>$1,313,933.5</td>
<td>$1,248,419.0</td>
<td>$1,454,100.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NRCS, 2017b

To be eligible for EQIP, agricultural producers and owners of industrial private forestland and tribes must control or own eligible land\(^2\), comply with adjusted gross income imitation (AGI) provisions, be in compliance with the highly erodible land and wetland conservation

\(^2\) Eligible land includes cropland, rangeland, pastureland, non-industrial private forestland and other farm or ranch lands
requirements, and develop a NRCS EQIP plan of operations. When it comes to rank applications those are ranked based on how well applications meet county conservation and environmental goals when compared with other applicants (Miller, 2017). It seems to be a process that can be perceived by farmers as one that lacks of transparency due to the very few pieces of information available to determine funding allocation. However, some information that can provide some insight about conservation priorities is the county resource concerns by water quality, water quantity, forestry, wildlife and grazing. Maps in Appendix 2 show the resource concerns priorities per county (NCRS, 2017a).

**Conservation Innovation Grant Program (CIG)**

The goal of Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) is to steer public and private sector innovation in resource conservation. This competitive grant program was first authorized by the 2002 farm bill, and it uses EQIP funds to award competitive grants to non-Federal governmental or nongovernmental organizations, American Indian Tribes, or individuals. “Through the NRCS CIG program, public and private grantees develop the tools, technologies, and strategies to support next-generation conservation efforts on working lands and develop market-based solutions to resource challenges.” (NRCS, 2017b) Considering the importance of including socially disadvantaged groups into the farming industry, NRCS dedicates 10 percent of CIG funding to support historically underserved, new and beginning, and military veteran producers in farming and ranching.

Under the 2017 CIG Historically Underserved Awards, Mississippi received two awards: “Smart Microbiology Agricultural Innovations Research Project” and “Educating Small and Disadvantaged Farmers on the Importance of Soil Health for Sustainable Crop Production”. Smart Microbiology Agricultural Innovations Research Project submitted by New South Development and Training, LLC, was awarded $800,000 to “evaluate the beneficial use of municipal solids for crop farming by historically underserved producers. Sharply escalating production costs have producers looking for alternatives to commercial fertilizers, a demand that could potentially be met by municipal solids” (NRCS, 2017c). The Winston County Self Help Cooperative (WCSHC) was awarded $474,000 to implement the project Educating Small and Disadvantaged Farmers on the Importance of Soil Health for Sustainable Crop Production; the project goal is to “educate small, limited-resource and disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in six
Mississippi counties on how to obtain access to information, hands-on training exercises, mentoring and other outreach activities that will enhance their agricultural enterprises” (NRCS, 2017b).

**Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)**

The purpose of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is to provide financial and technical assistance to promote conservation and improvement practices of soil, water, air, energy and plant and animal life on tribal and private working lands. The program is implemented through contracts that are based on meeting or exceeding a *stewardship threshold*. “Payments are based on the actual costs of installing conservation measures, any foregone income, and the value of the expected environmental outcomes” (Stubbs, 2016, p. 12).

Enrollment is offered through a continuous sign-up and applications are accepted year-round, participation is voluntary. Previous experience implementing conservation and improvement practices can help in the application process because funding from CSP would be building up those practices (NRCS, 2017d).

For Mississippi, the CSP has established four geographical regions determined around resource concerns (table 4). Applications are ranked and approved based on the regional priorities and available funding.

Table 5. Mississippi, Geographical Regions and Priority Resource Concerns for CSP Application, 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographical Region</th>
<th>Air Quality Impacts</th>
<th>Fish and Wildlife Inadequate Habitat</th>
<th>Soil Quality Degradation</th>
<th>Insufficient Water</th>
<th>Water Quality Degradation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delta Region</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast Hills Region</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Hills Region</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Hills Region</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta Region</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast Hills Region</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NRCS, 2017

CSP budget obligations for the state of Mississippi between 2009 and 2016 are detailed in Table 6.
Table 6. CSP Mississippi and Total Obligations, by Fiscal Year
(In thousands of dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>$179.2</td>
<td>$9,941.5</td>
<td>$15,260.5</td>
<td>$18,842.1</td>
<td>$22,526.9</td>
<td>$28,642.6</td>
<td>$33,276.4</td>
<td>$36,605.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$9,378.2</td>
<td>$389,813.0</td>
<td>$577,803.7</td>
<td>$741,619.9</td>
<td>$882,547.8</td>
<td>$1,030,870.7</td>
<td>$1,095,878.8</td>
<td>$1,129,295.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NRCS, 2017

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)

The 2014 farm bill repealed the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). However, NRCS still supports existing active WHIP contracts signed before passage of the Agricultural Act of 2014. Portions of the WHIP Statute were rolled into the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Anyone still interested in applying for wildlife activities in their programs, should inquire EQIP available funding for this purpose (NRCS, 2014b)

CSP budget obligations for the state of Mississippi between 2009 and 2016 are detailed in Table 7.

Table 7. WHIP Mississippi and Total Obligations, by Fiscal Year
(In thousands of dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>$1,425.3</td>
<td>$3,730.6</td>
<td>$2,000.7</td>
<td>$1,592.8</td>
<td>$1,904.3</td>
<td>$266.0</td>
<td>$310.5</td>
<td>$111.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$72,742.9</td>
<td>$83,405.9</td>
<td>$83,872.0</td>
<td>$47,360.4</td>
<td>$63,679.3</td>
<td>$9,641.0</td>
<td>$14,393.0</td>
<td>$8,943.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NRCS, 2017

Easement Programs

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Under the Agricultural Land Easements component, NRCS helps Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses of the land. Under the Wetland Reserve Easements component, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands” (NCRS, 2017f).
Table 8. ACEP Mississippi and Total Obligations, by Fiscal Year  
(In thousands of dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>$6,857.7</td>
<td>$3,875.6</td>
<td>$6,649.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$316,900.3</td>
<td>$297,347.8</td>
<td>$345,677.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NRCS, 2017

II. Analysis of Focus Groups with Farmers

1. Description of Participants

We conducted eleven focus groups, with the participation of ninety-five limited resource and minority farmers (N=95). The participants are 72.6 percent male, and 27.4 percent female. 92.6 percent of the participants are black, 6.3 percent are white, and 1.1 percent are Native American.

We collected additional information about the participants through a post focus group self-administered survey. We obtained results from eighty-four participants (survey N=84), results are detailed in appendix 3. According to the survey results, age of the participants ranges from 21 to 80 years old, the majority of the participants fall into the 57-68 age range (39.3%), followed by the 69-80 range (25.0%). 62.1 percent of the participants attended to college. In addition to the demographic data, we obtained information about the role of agriculture in their lives. Out of the total of survey participants, 79.8 percent own their agricultural land, 76.2 percent of their parents farmed. To the question, what is the main agricultural crop that you produce, 37.6 percent responded vegetables, 16.5 percent cattle, 9.4 percent hay and trees, another 9.4 percent corn and/or soybean, 7 percent small ruminants, 3 percent poultry and 8.2 reported mixed production. Only 8 percent of the participants reported that farming as their primary occupation, however 33 percent do not report any information about their occupation.

2. Coding Summary

As mentioned earlier, the focus group transcripts are rich with discussion on barriers to access of government agricultural funding for socially disadvantaged farmers. As The completion of the coding, analysis, and interpretation process, all emergent observations and themes were recorded in this report. In sharing the farmers and producers’ voices, the aim is to detail their ideas on, suggestions regarding, and opinions of barriers to USDA programs using their own words. Direct quotes and summary themes are detailed below.
Theme 1. “...To Get to That Point”: Sustainability

At all of the focus groups, producers began by sharing the reasons why they farmed. In their responses, they detailed a range of different reasons as diverse as the crops produced in Mississippi. The most common responses were producers’ enjoyment of being a part of a family tradition, appreciation of the independence and income farming offered as a full-time or part-time effort, and the community and personal health benefits of farming. The answers given all conveyed a general sense of pride and accomplishment. Unlike other careers or income producing hobbies, these individuals shared that they were farmers not because they had to be, but because they wanted to be.

When asked about their general experiences as farmers and producers, they frequently shared how they felt somewhat misunderstood by the general non-farming population. One producer summed it best: “Americans have plenty of food and it’s available to them whenever they want and need, but they fail to appreciate, um, what it took to get it to that point.” (Group 10:41) For their portion of the work within the process “to get to that point” on the table, the farmers shared twin foci: being environmentally and financially sustainable.

They stressed that farming is replete with risks, namely those that are financial and natural. Nature dictates the weather and the seasons, limiting and assisting producers at different times. Producers shared that navigating the natural risks as well as pursuing environmentally sustainable practices takes effort. In an exchange about farmers and non-farmers, one man exclaimed, “Well, I agree with him, saying basically, that the uh, non-farmer don’t really respect the environment and the earth. I mean some of them do now but a big number do not. And, I think all farmers really respect the environment and the earth ….” (Group 11:58). Their dialogue summed up what many producers often never verbally stated, but their testimonials on other issues revealed what they collectively accepted as fact--that farmers love the land, they live off the land, and they take care of the land—however, even with that relationship, nature is often also volatile.

Navigating the unpredictability of nature for most producers meant first seeking to be financially successful in their farming operations at all times since there is no guarantee that they will be
profitable in the future due to the changing seasons and weather patterns. Secondly, navigating the irregularity of nature also meant that producers need to take the very best care of their land because they have little to no control over major agricultural inputs (rain, temperature, etc.). Pursuing opportunities for betterment of their land to accommodate for drought or flooding, cold or heat stress, etc., places producers in better positions to overcome “bad crop[s]” (Group 2:129). Equally important, this makes farmers better caretakers of natural resources.

Because financial stability was a chief concern, farmers shared that to continue farming and pursuing environmentally sustainable improvements, they turned to USDA for assistance. Discussing NRCS programs and conservation efforts, one farmed stated: “Well, the U.S. Government helps us [with conservation efforts now], a lot of people don’t realize that that is a very valuable asset to a farmers” (Group 7:25). At each focus group, farmers discussed this “valuable asset” and how to minimize risks from nature while improving the environmental and financial sustainability of their farming operations.

Theme 2. “So many things”: Chief Barriers

When specifically discussing the use of USDA-NRCS programs, producers shared mixed experiences. A male producer shared that when farming and pursuing NRCS programs: “You know, you are up against elements, you know, there are so many things that you are up against.” (Group 9:48). While “the elements” he referenced is nature, the “so many things” comment deserves more attention and exploration. The following sections detail the farmers’ discussion on the key items—communication, transparency, and uniformity—that farmers considered barriers to their access and use of USDA-NRCS programs.

“It’s just a lot of unawareness”: Lack of Communication

While USDA has a vast list of available programs for producers, almost all producers shared that a chief barrier to using these programs was their lack of knowledge about them. One producer summed:

“Um hmm, NRCS, yeah, I think it’s just a lot of unawareness of what is out there to these rural minority communities probably because the population is just not aware that these offices do these type programs or have these type cost share type programs, and I’ve mentioned that to people about cost share assistance through NRCS, forestry commission and reservation and they’re like oh they do that, they just don’t understand. I guess it’s
just a lack of marketing of what these agencies do out in the rural and minority communities.” (Group 8:242).

Another producer echoed this thought, stating that he felt the lack of marketing was a problem for both USDA and producers:

“….there’s a group of people that do not know about these programs, and so what is the responsibility of USDA in terms of getting the information out um for people to know? Our names are there we um could be on a mailing list if there such a newsletter or mailing list or something going out but then there’s hundreds of other people out there that’s not on any list and they don’t get to knowing unless we share by word of mouth too so it seems that there is some responsibility for USDA in order to communicate because these programs are for those people in agriculture production.” (Group 5:163)

While a few producers did appreciate USDA’s limited electronic or mail communication efforts, their appreciation was minimal. In a discussion about USDA’s communication methods, a producer shared the following exchange:

Producer: “But you know that, another thing, there are programs we don’t know about. Interviewer: Okay-
Producer: USDA has other program out there, but they make, but when you read the newsletter they tell them to read, but you read them and don’t see nothing pertaining to what we need. So, most of it, just [go] and throw them in the garbage.” (Group 1:317)

Like others, this producer stressed that it’s hard to find “what we need” in USDA’s paper communications, implying that they are very generic. Some participants also strongly lamented the lack of paper communications within their county because they only receive electronic communications. A producer shared:

“Well, see even that kind of information should be put out there because everybody don’t have a computer, and everybody don’t use computers, and uh there are people out there who just like myself. I would rather pick up a pamphlet and read it” (Group 11:183).

Additional farmers at other focus groups repeated him:

“…of course you know some of your more traditional older farmers, they’re probably not as accustom to the technology, you know, probably become a little frustrated with everything because it’s all technology based now, you know, because if you don’t have some lever of computer technological training then it can be extremely frustrating….” (Group 7:47)

Paper or electronic, producers collectively argued that without better communications, USDA is not able to serve farmers well or equitably. Unless people are knowledgeable of the availability of the programs, the current well-intended policies are useless for producers. For the focus
group participants, USDA’s inability to reach farmers with the information of the programs was an initial hurdle.

“Everything here is hidden”: Lack of Transparency

Throughout each focus groups, producers recurrently expressed a concern with the lack of transparency at USDA regarding the availability of programs, applying to programs, and the approval of programs. Numerous producers specifically used the word “hidden” referring to their experiences trying to learn about programs or applying to programs.

Availability of Programs

When discussing the difficulty of learning about programs when visiting a county office, one producer exclaimed: “…it’s like it’s hidden unless you push the right button” (Group 10:112). Similar to paper and electronic communications, producers shared that in-office intrapersonal communications lacked clarity and transparency.

One focus group participant elaborated on how the availability of programs lacks transparency, stating:

“I just don’t think the information is there, necessarily, unless you know what you’re looking for that little, there’s a missing link there. It’s not that you go in, and they say ‘Well, we have a lot of programs available! What are you interested in?’ or ‘Let me see what type of farm you have.’ Or, um, ‘Let me have the opportunity to go out to your farm and see what we can help you with!’ I don’t necessarily see that.” (Group 3:266)

A female producer further shared that she believed you needed to be extremely direct to overcome the lack of transparency:

“Some of the offices that I have been in like he was saying you have to have a direct question. If you just going in there, and uh, and you wanting general information they don’t really voluntarily give you anything. So unless you can be specific, you get the run around. If you go in there almost with a list, and say ‘look I have already written this down what can you help me with on this list?’ you stand a little bit better of a chance. But if you go in there saying, you know, ‘I am new. I interested, you know, I was wondering what all programs you have available?’ they may tell you one, knowing all along there is a list over here this long. Now I have sort of a problem with that and their customer service skills.” (Group 11:94)

Likewise, one farmer recalled how he went into his local office and asked specific questions about the availability of funding for certain programs. He wanted county specific information;
information only readily available in the county office. The producer shared his questions with the focus group:

“I want to know how much our county gets for money for things for farms any kind of subsidy anything. I want to know what they’re getting. I want to know where the money’s going. I want to know why the farmers who need it are not getting it…. because everything here is hidden.” (Group 4:237)

Answering him, another producer said:

“Yes, you don’t know what you get. You might go in there, for look, I need to plant 10 acres of rye grass. He says, ‘oh we out of money.’ But, how much money did you have? (Group 4:240)

Correspondingly, other farmers across the focus groups repeatedly shared their recurrent disappointment in trying to work within the local office to learn about the availability of programs, program deadlines, and program funding, only to feel more frustrated when they finished than before they began. Hence, producers shared that now they often “don’t bother” (Group 1:274) or have “given up” (Group 4:233) when trying to learn about programs in-office because the information is just plain “hidden.”

Application Process

While numerous producers wanted information on how the funding process worked and what programs were available, others mentioned transparency problems during the application process. Describing the application process, one producer said:

“It was awful, it was intrusive, it was absolutely awful and to be treated as if, you know, I don’t know. It’s just funny when you’re trying to get services from somebody and somebody’s sitting behind a table who’s a farmer who knows the deal, right? These people who sit behind the desks, they’re farmers—they own acreage, they own livestock and they do this stuff—so when you come in not knowing exactly what it is that you need, well, they could easily bridge that for you, be like ‘this is what you’re talking about, so then let me give you a picture of how this really works’ and then explain it to you.” (Group 10:140)

This producer stressed that the individual in the office “knows the deal,” yet unfortunately failed to help the producer make sense of it. Transparency in the process--the “picture of how it really works” as the producer stated—is what the producers and farmers need. While some producers shared that there was little to no transparency in the application process, others stated that things were clear only to a point. One farmer explains this:
“Well, I’m currently in the process of um trying to work through the process, and I know in the end it’s probably rewarding, but you do run into some barriers sometimes, um, some difficulties. Um, I guess you might say meeting their requirements, um, it’s, you can run into some barriers, and I guess you would like to see the um programs be more user friendly for the limited resource farmers. Often times those barriers that you meet in those requirements, you either don’t have enough or you got too much or you don’t have this or you don’t have that or you need to be at .5 and we’re at .1, and you can’t get to .5 until you complete .1, .2, .3, and .4. So, there’s a gap there, but you know some of them are not as user friendly for limited resource farmers as they need to be (Group 10:71)

As he explains, the process of completing 1, 2, 3, and 4 to get to 5 is often arduous. And completing those steps is sometimes difficult because the process of how to navigate and complete steps 1 through 4 to get to 5 is often unclear. Even when asking specific questions, farmers shared that they felt they were given unintelligible or non-answers about navigating the application steps. This lack of transparency about the process serves to discourage producers over time. A female producer described her frustrations:

“Um, we went in for one service and it was like we were dragged through the mud for 3 months, but we don’t have that kind of time to go in and out of an office. Um, we have crops we have harvesting, planting. There’s so much to do, and to waste 3 months of your time when that person knows from the beginning what you need to accomplish and fulfill that application to get your request. Um, we felt like we were dragged through the mud for 3 months.” (Group 10:137)

The focus group participants frequently stressed that they were not sure exactly how the process worked. They often wanted more information on how the funding and application process functioned, but when they asked questions, they still felt everything was “hidden.” Similar to producers who became discouraged when trying to gain answers about available programs, producers shared that they sometimes quit during the application process because hiddenness made it not worth “fooling with it” (Group 4:142).

Approval Process
Sharing his frustration with the approval process and the lack of transparency in the ranking process, one man stated that the employees specifically do “hidden type things” (Group 1:217) when they fail to share with producers how the ranking process works and how to increase their rankings. The majority of other producers at the focus groups agreed. The approval process was murky at best and infuriating at its worst.
At one focus group, when the interviewer asked for the participants to share about the process of working toward an application approval with the local office, a farmer laughed and replied, “Can you help us understand why?” The producers largely were unaware of why their applications were not approved or how they were ranked within their county. One farmer described the frustration: “And they got a point system. If you a vet, you get so many points. Or, if you a first time farmer, so I don’t know exactly how, I don’t know who else apply, but when I apply--why I didn’t get it, I don’t know” (Group 7:206).

Others also disclosed that they did not understand the points system. For example, one man shared, “I have got practice for NRCS. And, I have been turned down. I have been turned down for more practices than I got. Mostly because I didn’t have enough points, they say, but, overall, I guess its all right, but I could be better” (Group 9:89). Though he phrased it politely—“enough points, they say”—this producers comments, like others’, highlights that he is unfamiliar with why his application was denied. He also, consequently, has no knowledge of how to better his application for future rounds of programs.

“Every office is different”: Lack of Uniformity – Lack of clear processes

In addition to communication and transparency being central barriers, producers also articulated that the lack of uniformity amongst USDA offices and program offerings across counties was frustrating. Because the communications from USDA are limited and the program information, program application, and program approval process is not transparent, local offices operate with a great deal of autonomy—for better or for worse when it comes to the experiences of socially disadvantaged farmers and producers. The focus group participants spent a lengthy amount of time discussing the variances between county offices and offerings. One farmer shared:

“I would clone the process and the people in the office [laughs] so it would be the same. Every office is different, um, you know. I’ve been blessed….and [in] other offices, people have told horror stories… [so I’d make changes] so that every office would be the same and they know how to treat people, the procedure, all procedures are the same information, if that were possible.” (Group 5:217)

Uniformity across offices and program offerings, they stressed, would help with communication and transparency issues. Nevertheless, several producers did not have high hopes that it would change the longevity of what they perceived as the dysfunction between federal policy and local dissemination of resources:
“Well, for all federal program—that’s the way it is. It’s great at the federal level, and I’m sure even at the state level, but when it gets out in the field—it never gets carried out. You know, it worked its ways back in the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and in a way it’s still happening today to a large degree.” (Group 10:170)

Numerous focus group participants tactfully acknowledged that when considering the vast differences in experiences between county offices, they were often unsure if their office was staffed with “lazy workers” who “just purely don’t know” (Group 7:254) or individuals discriminating against them due to their gender and/or race. Racial discrimination is what the farmer initially quoted at the beginning of this section implied when he stated that he had heard “horror stories” and the latter quote about “it’s still happening.”

Some farmers firmly argued that the variance in socially disadvantaged farmers and producers’ experiences in the local offices was due to the personnel makeup of the office and their autonomy. The producer stated: “Well, obviously, that’s why minority and women are underserved because the people behind the desk would rather not give us the services. (Group 10:116). Others, were less overt in their arguments, but just as firm. When asked about the differences between offices and if he thought discrimination occurred or occurs in some of them, one older producer shared:

“…I that, um, just can’t answer it. I tell you what—if I could change back the hand of time, I’ll let you be black for a year. And then I’ll be white, and see where I get and where you get. Because, okay, you lived the white life. I live the black life for a long time. Just let me be white for about a year, and you be black for a year, and you walk in my shoes and then you will see the true picture. Like who you work for NRCS you walk in there and you, a black woman, says ‘Yes ma’am, I would like apply for this.’ Well, they are going to say, “Well, uh, sorry I can’t help you.” Now knowing that I come in there—a white male—’uh, yes I would like to apply for a well, uh, I have been registered.’ [They would reply.] ‘Oh yeah, we see you registered. Uh, here is a list of the wells you call us, and I’ll get on this list.’ And they will say ‘Yeah, sir, uh, you have been approved for a well.’ Come out, and they drill you a well. Now, you, you were white, but you black now. You are doing the same thing I am doing! Come in there and [you] say, ‘Yes, I would like to get a well.’ [They’d reply], ‘Are you registered?’ [You’d reply.] ‘Yes I am.’ [They’d then say,] ‘Well we don’t have no money for a well right now, uh, we can put you on the list.’ You don’t hear from nothing! But then I get a well. How would that make you feel? So I mean I can’t change the hands of time—it is what it is….” (Group 2:167)

Others merely summed that because of the lack of communication, transparency, and uniformity in procedures, the amount of successful interaction and program approval for a socially
disadvantaged farmer or producer was dependent on “the personality of that office” (Group 5:159). Though producers’ bluntness in discussions on racial discrimination varied, none of the focus groups had any discussions that disagreed with the perspective that racial discrimination within the USDA-NRCS offices exists. Conversations on the topic of racial discrimination during the focus groups would drift until they reached either suggestions for improvement—namely, making the policies, procedures, programs offered, and practices of each USDA office uniform—or stories of success in circumventing barriers.

**Theme 3. “The Grapevine”: Success in Navigating Barriers**

Although the focus group participants talked at length about the barriers to accessing and using USDA-NRCS programs, farmers who had acquired USDA funding in the past discussed how they navigated the existing barriers with other producers. They provided a vast range of answers—from spirituality to their education—as reasons for their success in acquiring USDA-NRCS funding. This section details the two most common answers—informal networks and agricultural organizations—which one farmer collectively termed his “grapevine” (Group 9:70).

**“The main resource is other experienced farmers”: Informal Network Sharing**

When producers were asked what resources they used the most to help them be successful, they often talked about their fellow farmers. For instance, one man stated, “Well, the main resource is other experienced farmers. I talk to everybody you know about this and that, so you can inquire a lot of information just by talking and listening to people” (Group 11:47). Another farmer echoed him: “So it’s [relationships] a good resource, you learn from each other. It really helps you to become better farmers and help each other” (Group 4:67).

In contrast to their characterizations of the NRCS staff and office members as doing “hidden” things that did not help them, producers often shared that other socially disadvantaged farmers were the best help to learn about programs and understand how to apply for them. One farming couple shared that they learned, “by word of mouth, it’s you know, it’s such a small tight knit community that it works well, it really does that. If you ask someone, they’ll typically point you in the right direction.” (Group 6:119). They later continued saying that they had not participated
in any USDA programs, but planned to contact farmers that had successfully landed conservation programs:

“…call them up, talk to them, go see what practices they implement the bottom line is there are a lot of practices out there and you need to understand what they are because it’s a national program so you say somebody got this somebody got that and then when you go into the office you can ask about all those thing and you can say okay based on that discussion here are the things we want to possibly apply for so you’re ahead of the game but I would say start go visit them go see what practices they implement….” (Group 6:173)

Informal networks not only provided knowledge about what programs were available and how to navigate that process, but also knowledge of the local situation, the “personalities” of the office as other farmers termed it. Additionally, informal networks provide encouragement and support. Farmers frequently communicated how their informal networks taught them not only how to do things, but also how not to do things. Because of other producers’ willingness to share their success stories and their failures, the informal networks are built around trust and cooperation. Mutual encouragement blossoms out of both, further bolstering the relationships and information sharing.

“A tremendous help…they keep me informed”: Formal Agricultural Organizations

Akin to informal networks, formal agricultural organizations fostered information sharing and encouragement. One producer characterized the groups as “a tremendous help to me….they keep me informed about what’s available, you know, through different, uh community agencies, and everything, and always encouraging and upbeat. It’s been a blessing” (Group 11:63). Another producer called his agricultural organization “always positive, always focused on motivating” which helped him achieve success (Group 11:70).

While informal relationships oftentimes resulted in human capital development through farmers teaching each other how to do various things, formal agricultural organizations helped producers develop human capital skills with formal workshops, conferences, and meetings. Informal networks yield rich relationships, whereas the formal structures of organizations help producers develop extensive social networks and rich relationships.

These formal, structured networks in turn help yield results. One producer explained: “We get information from each other with meetings every month. If we have a problem, we know we can
ask the entire group—you know, ‘I need help doing this’ and the group will help solve the problem” (Group 4:50). Problem solving and knowledge sharing are key components of organizations. One farmer further explained:

“Just gaining knowledge of from being participants in these different types of organizations and associations, you just gain a lot of knowledge because you meet a lot of experienced farmers from different walks of life, and you may not do the same thing that they’re doing, but you can adjust what you’re doing on your farm to what they might be doing, and it’s just gaining knowledge from a state level, a local level, and a national level.” (Group 10:58)

To illustrate the importance of the local agricultural organization in the producer’s success in specifically landing an approved application to a USDA program, one producer emphasized:

“It’s important, it really does work. [Because of this organization, applying] was an easy process. It wasn’t like pulling teeth or anything. She gave me instructions. She told me who to go see. I needed to go see [employee name]. I was not nervous, uncomfortable, or feeling like I was not qualified. They told me what I needed to do, what I needed to have, and I got it” (Group 5:171).

Another producer continued, illustrating the importance of agricultural organizations:

“And most of my information, uh, I use mostly for improving my farming I have picked that up since I have become a member of [this organization]. Uh, and I have discovered another thing too, uh, people is not what you know it’s who you know. I also discovered that all of these, uh, agencies are funded by the government, but each county will offer you the same thing, but they will give different perspective. Some things they allow in [that county] to get we don’t get in [here]. Even sometimes they can out up the same offer and they will be getting it over in [that county] and we won’t even get it [here]. So what I am saying is but that’s no reason to stop. I heard the gentlemen say when you go in some of the offices they look at you like you are in the wrong place, but that’s they have been looking at us like that for a long time and so that’s no reason for you to stop. Keep on keeping on. I have discovered that if you don’t give up you will get what you are looking for. It is a known fact, and I want to say this too again… if you come together you can do some things. As long as we are divided we’ll never accomplish nothing. Even though it’s rough, but it’s been rough all the time. I tell them all the time uh roughness don’t frighten me. I was brought up rough. I know how to handle rough and a lot of you have to because I have seen some of you right there while I was. We can do it together if we don’t let nobody divide us” (Group 9:105).

His statement illustrates the depth of encouragement and motivation found within the agricultural organizations—encouragement against any issue be it nature or discrimination. These bonds coupled with the knowledge and network that the organizations provided were invaluable resources to the producers, helping them to begin to overcome existing barriers.
Conclusion

In the context of agricultural promotion, USDA has been the source of several claims of discrimination. As part of the strategy to address this issue, within the USDA system, NRCS has recently implemented strategies to increase participation of socially disadvantaged, limited resource and beginning farmers and ranchers in the agricultural industry. Those strategies are identified in their budget allocations and strategic plans. Despite of their efforts, the increasing participation of these groups has been rather slow. Therefore, the significance of the current work. We began by asking what are the perspectives and experiences regarding access to USDA-NRCS funding among different groups of socially disadvantaged producers in Mississippi. Later we query this: Are there pieces of the regulation that in and of itself constitute a barrier to access NRCS funding? Or, although programs exist, are there problems at the implementation level than can be addressed in order to enhance the participation of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in conservation programs? Derived from the policy analysis and focus groups, three areas of concern emerged as relevant in the NRCS work with SDFR: 1) sustainability; 2) organizational aspects; and 3) communication and outreach strategies.

The focus group participants discussed numerous barriers and challenges as well as several factors that help them to achieve success in their farming operations. When talking about acquiring financial and environmental sustainability, one farmer mused that to accomplish those things, he needed the assistance of USDA. However, he had difficulty navigating the process. He wanted someone to “take a chance” on him (Group 4:252). In talking about his wish for that chance, he stated that he wanted to try to impress to the USDA employees and wished that they would say back to him in response:

“‘Yeah! Like this guy we know can pay back this loan. His credit’s not the best, but we’re going to help him out because it’s going to help him in the long run by increasing his credit. Plus if he fails on it, he can sell the tractor. It’s not like it’s going to go anywhere.’ But um I mean the thing is you’re giving this man a chance to improve his family, to improve his life that’s what America is supposed to be about” (Group 4:253).

America, he stresses, is supposed to be a meritocracy. It is supposed to be a fair place with no barriers for those that work hard—the American Dream. Instead he alludes to the fact that it is not; it is supposed to be that way, but falls short in numerous ways. Nevertheless, the producer states that he goes on because “doesn’t stop you from keep moving forward. You just have to go
ahead and do what you’re going to try to do” (Group 10:32). Socially disadvantaged producers are “moving ahead”, sometimes by themselves, however, they’re often joining forces and creating informal and formal networks advancing their own relationships and informational sharing and in turn, agriculture and the sustainability of the environment.

This conclusion of the focus groups summarizes farmers’ concerns and expectations regarding access to federal funding. With these results, the research team identified areas of work. As indicated earlier, the first area is sustainability. Conservation of the land by agricultural producers is the key mission of NRCS. However, sustainability efforts can clash with environmental and financial constraints of farmers, especially those of traditionally underrepresented groups. As financial stability was a chief concern, farmers shared that to continue farming and pursuing environmentally sustainable improvements, they turned to USDA for assistance. Farmers identified sustainability practices as a “valuable asset” and means to minimize risks from nature while improving the environmental and financial sustainability of their farming operations.

A second key area of work is the organizational culture of NRCS. In terms of policy, the analysis indicated that the organization’s strategic plans introduced activities aiming at increasing diversity in the workforce and funding allocation committees. However, the organization needs to increase awareness among its current workforce over potential discriminatory practices embedded in the culture of the organization. As emerged from the focus groups, there are two main organizational concerns that constitute barriers for farmers’ access to funding: transparency and uniformity. Major transparency concerns (from the policy and farmers’ voices) are those related to the lack of information regarding the totality of programs available, the lack of diversity in allocation committees, complexity in the application process, and lack of information pertaining the criteria for resource allocation. As far as uniformity, a major concern pertains to the great deal of autonomy that NRCS county offices have to determine and enforce priorities for funding allocation. Having identified these concerns, theory suggests that although programs to increase SDFR participation in the agricultural industry can be in place, the role of street-level bureaucrats in program implementation is critical (Lipsky, 1980). In this case, district and area conservationists have an important power to apply discretionary decision-making about how to apply or enforce rules. This will lead to the next area of work.
Although, communication can be considered a piece within the organizational concerns, this research suggests that communication is in and of itself a major area of work for NRCS facing the needs and expectations of SDFR. This work found that there are important communication barriers to overcome: information about program availability is limited, a non-easy access to a wide variety of administrative and technical information, and dissemination of information is limited. Through the data collection process for this work, it was evident that the NRCS website offers very valuable information, however it is not easily accessible to all publics. As part of the outreach efforts, NRCS should commit to create a user-friendly portal and combine the strong online presence with other means of communication that are more suitable for a variety of audiences considering elements such as education level and age. It is important to make the USDA-NRCS bureaucratic system available to all audiences, particularly traditionally underrepresented groups. Online presence is and should remain a key mean of communication with all farmers, however alternative and supplementary means of communication should be implemented to overcome problems of miscommunication and/or lack of knowledge of NRCS conservation programs, qualifications for participation, and alternatives to enhance the application process. To overcome the organizational and communication barriers, farmers found that a key piece of success is in the existing informal social networks and agricultural organizations. In the context of agriculture, these can be highly functional for information dissemination.
Recommendations

As a result of this research, recommendations fall into three categories: Sustainability, organizational, and communication.

**Sustainability**

- Build upon “pride and accomplishment” that comes from farming, to reinforce conservation efforts among minority and limited resource producers.
  - Develop strategies to leverage farmer’s commitment with the land, to reinforce the need of conservations practices.
  - Design strategies to incorporate non-traditional audiences into the funding streams.

**Organizational culture**

- Increase transparency of funding allocation criteria.
  - Design strategies to better communicate what are the criteria utilized to decide resource allocation.
  - If feasible, design strategies to better communicate the estimated amount of resources available per round and program.
- Increase awareness about the need to augment diversity in funding allocation committees.
  - Maintain current efforts to increase diversity in the workplace and decision-making instances.
  - Facilitate the complaint system and make results publicly available and easily accessible.
- Strengthen current outreach efforts in consortium with agricultural organizations.
  - Maintain current collaboration with agricultural organizations.
  - Recruit new personnel from these organizations.

**Communication**

- Improve communication strategies from NRCS towards SDFR.
• Identify community leaders that can be critical for dissemination of information about NRCS programs, deadlines, technical requirements of programs, administrative processes.

• Continue current efforts to establish communication with SDFR through their agricultural organizations.

• Identify avenues of communication with SDFR to address concerns related to program implementation.

- Implement strategies of outreach that includes technical and administrative training to leaders and communities
  • Outreach strategies should include details on: What are the different programs available? What makes successful candidates to programs? What program are suitable for what specific types of land and agricultural practices?

- Develop targeted communication for SDFR.
  • Design strategies to make the programs and application process easily available to multiple audiences.
  • Open channels of communication with new clienteles through agricultural organizations leadership.
  • Explore alternative means of communication that better reach minority and limited resource producers. Take into account the demographic characteristics of this group of producers.

- Illustrate what does success obtaining funding means.
  • Identify and communicate what practices are conducive to succeed in obtaining funding for conservation practices.
  • Maintain the current effort for creating and communicating success stories.
Appendix
Appendix 1 – A. Percentage of Women farmer operators, 2002, 2007 and 2012, MS
Appendix 1 – B. Percentage of African American farmer operators, 2002, 2007 and 2012, MS
Appendix 2 – Mississippi, Resource Concerns for EQIP, 2017
Appendix 3 – Results of farmer surveys (N=84)
Word cloud from responses to the question: “What is the best thing about being a farmer?”
References


