

## Four Decades (1967-2007)

### *Historical Review of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/ Land Assistance Fund*



In 1967, 22 cooperatives, which were an outgrowth of the civil rights movement, came together at Atlanta University to form a "federation" of cooperatives. The people and groups that met that Spring wanted to unite and create organization that would lead it's members to greater access to the information, services and resources that they had been systematically denied.

The Federation came out of the South where economic exploitation and racial discrimination were patterns of everyday life. The reality was that low-income rural communities in the south were being left behind in the civil rights movement that was sweeping across the country in the 1960's.

The fledgling self-help economic movement in the region wanted to step up to the plate – wanted to assist southern rural communities to build and sustain themselves through collective action – namely through cooperatives. For the past forty years the Federation of Southern Cooperatives has done exactly that. It has remained true to its mission and accomplished remarkable and impressive achievements in cooperative economic development in support of Black farmers, landowners and rural communities.

**Photos Relevant to Founding:** (upper right) Co-op leader Ezra Cunningham and Estelle Witherspoon of the Freedom Quilting Bee - both were at the 1967 founding meeting of the Federation in Atlanta and both were signatories of the original charter; (above photos) members of Grand Marie Vegetable Producers Co-op in Sunset, Louisiana sorting sweet potatoes in the late 1960's - this co-op was one of the 22 co-ops present at the 1967 Federation founding meeting in Atlanta- member Wilbert Guillory represented the co-op; Guillory is pictured in the insert photo



## 40 Years of Service

### **The First Annual Meeting** *Excerpt from the Minutes of the 1968 Annual Meeting*

#### **EDWARDS, MISSISSIPPI** **March 16, 1968**

The President, Mr. Miles (farmer Robert Miles of Batesville, Mississippi), gave an inspiring report. Motions carried to accept the President's report. Question and answer period on the President's report. The motion carried that the President's report be mimeographed and sent to all members of the annual meeting.

#### **Executive Director's Report**

This oral report was given in an informal manner. Mr. Prejean gave us valuable background information on the Federation, from its beginning to its present status including the direction the Federation should take in the ensuing years. A written report was distributed. A copy is attached.

Motion carried to accept the report of the Executive Director.

#### **Questions and Answers**

Mr. Tom McBride was interested in knowing how to get state associations set up.

**Answer:** The elected board from the various states would work with the member Co-ops in his state and together they would set up an advisory committee to work on setting up that particular state's association.

Dr. T. T. Williams (Southern University Professor/Department of Agriculture) made the following recommendations:

1. The Federation should bring in experts from the different schools in cooperative management.
2. Diversification of farming.
3. Exploring the local as well as district markets.



## 40 Years of Service

### First Decade 1967-77

Excerpt from the 1977 Annual Report

*A major problem with regard to cooperative economic development has been lack of capital and technical assistance from established and conventional sources, and many such problems remain with us; for most small farmers, the local co-op and the Federation are the only available responsive resources.*

*The years 1975-77 were indeed bleak ones for the Federation. After the initial "funding boom" of the 1960's during which time many community groups and cooperatives came into existence, the next eight (8) years saw funds for poor people's economic and social development grow scarce. The Federation continued to grow, however, despite the unavailability of federal funding for the most part during these years, by, among other things, finally laying off thirty (30) per cent of its staff in 1977, and by asking retained staff to take a substantial cut in pay.*

*Recently, with the change in political administrations in Washington, D.C. we have gained new hope for the future. Individuals familiar with the program of the Federation and sympathetic to its goals have been appointed to key federal positions. There is a growing realization that cooperatives and community development corporations are the "appropriate technology" for organizing and assisting low income people, who have been neglected and forsaken by the prevailing economy.*



In 1985, the Federation merged with the Emergency Land Fund, which was also the result of a meeting on Black economic development held at the Atlanta University Center in the early seventies. ELF's primary goal was to reverse the alarming trend of Black land loss in the rural south. The merger resulted in a stronger organization that employed a holistic approach to Black economic

development. The new organization then became known as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund.

The Federation's extensive work has focused on virtually all the major areas that impact the quality of life in the rural South including housing, credit, agriculture related programs and non-farm business development. In addition, the organization has played a critical role in advocacy for rural communities and policy development at the local, state and Federal level.

Since 1967 the Federation has held together over 75 cooperatives, credit unions and community-based economic development organizations, involving

**First Decade Photos:** (upper left) In 1973 the Federation held an event pictured here to launch the opening of its Rural Training & Research Center - in the center is Jim Jones, the director of the Training Center, at the podium is I. Drayton Pruitt, Mayor of Livingston, prominent attorney who ultimately opposed the Federation (elected officials in the area were invited to attend), to the far right is Reverend John Hoard who was a Sumter County Civil Rights pioneer involved in voting registration and voter education; (upper right) The purpose of this meeting in Congress in the mid 1970's was to develop a plan for making sure that black people were equitably employed on the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway construction project. Pictured here are Federation staff members John Zippert and Wendell Paris in the background representing the Minority People's Council created by the Federation; to Paris' left is Ernie Green (one of the Little Rock nine who integrated the Little Rock high School) who was head of the non-profit National Recruitment and Training Program (RTP) to help black people find jobs; to his left is Lamond Godwin who was also part of RTP; others are officials of the Corps of Engineers on the right of the table, and representatives of the AFL-CIO on the left; Senator John Stennis (D-MS) is seated in the foreground and wearing a light suit - he was the primary Senator advocating for the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway. From this meeting came an agreement that there would be an affirmative action plan in the Waterway construction; (above photo) The Emergency Land Fund (ELF) was the managing agent for the National Association of Landowners (NAL) which was an organization comprised of Black landowners and supporters - at one time it boasted a membership of 4,000 paid members. This photo is of an annual meeting of NAL in the 1970's - Bob Browne, chair of the ELF board, addressed the attendees.





## 40 Years of Service

### Second Decade 1977-87 Excerpt from the 1987 Annual Report

*Our work during this past year is embodied in the theme of the Annual Meeting, "Keep Hope Alive-Let the Family Farmer Survive". Our work continues for black and white family farmers and many other people in the rural South living on the edges of poverty struggling to maintain their land and way of life.*

*For over two decades, the Federation/LAF has worked with diligence determination, discipline and dedication to help thousands of low and moderate income families in our membership to realize and hold fast to their dreams of cooperative economic strength and community betterment.*

*Despite many obstacles: funding cutbacks, unsympathetic political climates, FBI and Federal Grand Jury investigations, hostile state governments, misguided agricultural agencies and policies, difficult economic conditions, droughts and other opponents, the Federation/LAF has continued to survive and prosper. Although positive national, state and local environments for cooperative and community based development are helpful, the Federation/LAF has proven they are not a necessary condition for the empowerment and development of poor people....*

*Less than a quarter of all black farmers have been assisted by USDA programs of credit, technical and educational assistance, such as FMHA, Soil Conservation Service, Forestry Service, ASCS, CCC loans etc. Black farmers represent the vanguard of the problems of all family farmers. If all black farmers are systematically dispossessed, can the plight of other family farmers be far behind?*

30,000 rural and low-income (mostly Black) families, including some 10,000 family farmers and landowners owning close to a million acres of land. The Federation has grown from an organization with a budget of \$547,473 in 1970 to \$3,721,880 in 2007. The overwhelming majority of that budget goes toward direct membership services.

Over the past 40 years the Federation/LAF has leveraged resources five times the amount of funds raised (more than \$50 million), and facilitated the savings of more than \$38 million dollars by 20,000 people in member credit unions.

The Federation/LAF has employed and trained over 500 people in various positions, who provide skills, knowledge, awareness and the necessary sensitivity to work creatively and effectively on behalf of poor people. Many of our former staff work in positions of significance throughout the country, including: Congress persons, state legislators, county commissioners, school board members, program directors, bank managers, attorneys, social workers, college faculty, foundation staff, business people and others.

The organization has provided services, learning and leadership experiences, saved family estates, reduced debts, increased revenues and enhanced stability for its members through producer, marketing, consumer and credit cooperatives. It has also taught techniques and skills that are of incalculable worth. A beginning estimate of the additional monetary impact of the Federation/LAF, for the past 40 years is close to \$500 million. This includes:

- \$80 million in sales through cooperative marketing
- \$26 million of member shares saved in credit union accounts and 73,516 loans totaling \$211 million to low-income families
- \$26 million worth of housing units constructed and rehabilitated
- \$60 million mobilized in resources for support of member cooperatives and credit unions
- Over 200 million worth of land saved.

The Federation/LAF has not accomplished this success without adversity and opposition from entrenched economic and political forces that benefit from the exploitation, neglect and disenfranchisement of the rural poor. Throughout our history, the Federation has experienced difficulties: from Governor George Wallace stopping member cooperative "SWAFCA" trucks in the 1960's until the produce they were carrying rotted; a major FBI-Federal Grand Jury investigation

**Photos Relevant to Second Decade:** In 1985 the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Emergency Land Fund (ELF) merged in which some staff and board members of the ELF became part of the Federation. At this time Ralph Paige also became the Executive Director of the Federation. In the above picture on the left is Ralph Paige with farmer advocate and renowned singer Willie Nelson. On the upper right is a recent (2007) photo of Alabama farmer Fred Bennett (who in 1985, was president of the National Landowners Association, and a member of the ELF board) and Jerry Pennick who was an ELF staff member and now serves as the Director of the Federation's Land Assistance Fund. Mr. Bennett in 1985 became a member of the Federation's Board of Directors.



## 40 Years of Service

### Third Decade 1987-97 Excerpt from the 1997 Annual Report

*The Federation/LAF Small Farm Technical Assistance Project is located in 52 of the poorest counties in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina.*

*Though poor, this area represents great potential for land based economic development for African Americans in this country. For it is in this area where a significant amount of African American owned land and some of America's best farmers are located. The problem is that they have not had equal access to the resources necessary to reach their greatest potential. This program, sponsored by the USDA and supported by a number of churches, foundations, state and federal agencies as well as communities, seek to find cooperative solutions to this and other problems some of which are unique to African American farmers.*

*Since the program's beginning 10 years ago, the delinquency rate has steadily decreased except in years of severe weather conditions. In addition to the 250 program participants, over 1500 additional farmers receive outreach assistance through workshops, telephone counseling, marketing and land retention services.*

*The Sustainable Agriculture Program is also responsible for developing and providing ongoing assistance to farm cooperatives, two of which are youth oriented. We continue to stress the need for diversification and alternative crop production. Alternative crops grown by farmers have dramatically risen from 10 per cent in 1988 to 90% in 1998.*



of our finances from 1979 to 1981, which found no wrongdoing but discouraged our membership and decimated our funding sources; to government administrations, from the 1980's to the present, that de-funded social programs, and generally tried to choke off funding for groups like the Federation.

Through the solidarity and sacrifice of our membership, staff and support of friends, we have overcome these challenges and difficulties. The Federation has risen above adversity to not only survive but to continue to be an effective advocate and resource for its members and the communities in which they live.

In this section, we want to highlight some of our progress in specific program areas since our last comprehensive historical review was issued in 2002.

### Law Suit Assistance

In the Pigford vs. Glickman (now Johanns) class action lawsuit on behalf of Black farmers, the Federation/LAF directly assisted some 2,000 individuals to file claims. Many were successful in receiving the Track A settlement of \$62,500. The Federation held hundreds of meetings across the rural South to inform Black farmers of the Consent Decree and Settlement.

The Pigford case is the largest class action lawsuit by Black people against the U.S. government or a private employer. Of the original 22,000 claimants, over 15,000 have been successful in the case resulting in the payment of over \$920 million to Black farmers and their heirs for discrimination by USDA in the period 1981 to 1996. This is the period during which President Ronald Reagan abolished the Office of Civil Rights in the USDA, which dealt with civil rights complaints, until the time when President Bill Clinton restored the office.

The original six-month's claim period in the case was from April 14, 1999 to October 12, 1999 during which the initial 22,000 claims were filed. An additional 77,000 people filed late claims in the case between October 12, 1999 and September 15, 2000. Only 2,041 of the late claim filers have been allowed to proceed to file full claims in the case, leaving the vast majority of late claim filers without having a hearing on the merits of their cases.

The Federation has continued working with Black farmers at every level of this

**Photos from the Third Decade:** (top photo) 1991 Federation Board meeting - left to right Curtis Inabinett (SC), Daniel Bustamante (TX), Woodrow Keown (AR), G.L. Twitty (SC) holding the CDF Hall of Fame award for 1991, (Mr. Twitty's daughter), Charles Harris (GA), Shirley Blakely (MS), Ben Poage (KY), Ralph Paige; (lower photo) 1992 outside the USDA offices in Washington during "Caravan to Washington" - activist Georgia Goode is speaking, Federation staff Ben Burkett and Jerry Pennick are handling the now famous and legendary pig named "Caravan."



**LOOKING TO THE  
FUTURE**  
Forming and supporting  
youth groups



case to ensure that they receive justice. We have assisted farmers who were turned down at the first level to file an appeal. Many have been successful. We have also helped farmers to secure “injunctive relief” and secure new loans from USDA on a priority basis, although this has been a difficult process reflecting that USDA has resisted systemic changes that were at the heart of this litigation

A recent legislative hearing in July 2007 in the House of Representative Judiciary Committee resulted in a compromise proposal that was incorporated in the House passed version of the 2007 Farm Bill. This will give the late filers an opportunity to have their cases heard. There is a chance that this provision will be kept as part of the 2007 Farm Bill and lead to a second chance for the late claim filers. The Federation is planning for the organizing and education work on this initiative to ensure that more Black farmers receive justice.

**Rural Training & Research Center**

Over the years, at our 1,000 acre Rural Training and Research Center in west Alabama, we have hosted thousands of meetings to bring information and solidarity to underserved people in the rural South, assisting them to take action when their livelihoods and communities are threatened. More recently many of the training and workshops devoted to the Federation’s “relief and recovery” for those victimized by the Katrina hurricane disaster were headquartered at the Training Center.

In recent years, we have developed a demonstration farming component at the Rural Training Center. We have developed a goatherd as part of our demonstration ‘silvopasture’ program to show that farmers can raise goats in their woodlots and forests . This extends and enhances the utilization of forested land by making it productive for the short term with proceeds from livestock sales while waiting for the longer-term returns from the timber. The goats are also effective in clearing out the underbrush between the trees.

With the cooperation of the three Land Grant Universities in Alabama - Tuskegee, Alabama A&M and Auburn - the silvopasture project has also become a research site on goat and other animal production. The Alabama Association of Land Grant Colleges have invested more than \$200,000 in this research facility and are beginning to train graduate students. The Federation’s role will be to set up workshops and programs to translate and transmit the university research results to farmers at the local level so that they will have access to the latest

Photo: 2007 youth camp help at the Epes Training Center in collaboration with the Alabama Forestry Commission and a number of other sponsors.. It is an annual four-day forestry and natural resources camp for 50 high school students from around the state. The students enjoyed the learning as well as the fun activities like fishing and volleyball.

*40 Years of Service*

**Fourth Decade  
1997-2007 & Beyond**

*We have a youth organization called the “Greene County Self -Help Youth Group” that the Federation helped us organize. The youth start in our program at about the age of 10 and since 2000 I have graduated about 65 of them. The Federation has been so helpful. I take the youth to the Training Center at Epes to learn about raised beds, livestock and so many other topics. Thanks to the Federation, we are also able to go to the farmer’s conference at Tuskegee University in February. When the youth are in the 11th grade we take about 30 of them to the conference. If it wasn’t for the Federation we wouldn’t be able to hve access with these experts and information. They even provide contacts with professors who come and see how our youth are doing - there’s no other place where we could get those kind of contacts.*

**Willie Busby**  
**Greene County Self-Help**

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Seeking collaborative efforts and equitable public policies



Staff member Leon Crump Speaking at Farm Aid

## 40 Years of Service



*What the Federation represents is an effort to become self-sufficient.*

*It continues to be a trumpet for economic self-sufficiency and economic cooperativeness. I think that the 90's, with the converging crisis, brings a unique opportunity to develop our independence and the self-sufficiency and strength that the Federation has been preaching all the time. It may have fallen on deaf ears in the 80's and in the early 90's but I think that the mid to late 90's will bring an opportunity to make a reality of that which has been a hope and an ideal.*

### **Hank Sanders**

**Alabama State Senator  
Former Board Member of the  
Emergency Land Fund**

information and technology. The Federation has also installed plasticulture and other horticultural projects at the center and is assisting farmers in the installation of these practices on their farms. A sustainable agriculture gardening project for youth has been developed on two acres at the Center. We are also upgrading the computer center to provide internet and computer access for people in the rural communities surrounding the Center. There are currently ten networked computers at the center, which are available for training sessions and community use.

### **Advocacy and Policy Development**

Through our Advocacy and Policy Development activities, the Federation conceived and successfully lobbied for the passage of Section 2501 of the 1990 Farm Bill, which has been continued in subsequent farm bills. These provisions enable community-based organizations and predominately minority Land Grant Colleges and Universities to share in a special \$25 million dollar authorization for outreach, education and technical assistance to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Section 2501, though never fully funded, provides much needed technical assistance to underserved farmers. In the House of Representative's version of the 2007 Farm Bill, 15 million dollars in mandatory funding annually has been approved for 2501. The Federation and scores of other CBO's are advocating for a 50 million dollars in mandatory funding. In addition to 2501, the Federation/LAF has been actively involved in advocating for more progressive policies and programs in the current 2007 Farm Bill. These provisions include more targeting of resources and assistance to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

### **Katrina Relief and Recovery**

The extensive work and experience of the Federation over the past four decades placed us in an excellent position to immediately assist victims of the Katrina disaster in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath was one of the worse disasters in U.S. history. The hurricane destroyed urban and rural communities, farmhouses, livestock, crops, markets, local economies and lives. It also made us realize the vulnerability and risk to our local food systems. Local farmers lost their crops, grocery stores were demolished, and various modes of transportation were disrupted. People were struggling to feed themselves and their families.

In response, the Federation immediately developed a Disaster Relief and Recovery Program that focused on the immediate needs of those impacted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as well as long-term recovery opportunities and

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Photo: The sign above identified the apartments named for Hank Sanders and Lucius Black in Alabama when the apartments were built in the 1980s - both Sanders and Black were acknowledged for their unrelenting commitment to improving the lives of Alabama communities in need.



**SOGOCO - Southern Goat Cooperative Training**

## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

**Saving land, expanding market opportunities and increasing exploring cooperative ventures**

solutions for small farmers and rural communities.

Community centers, cooperatives and offices strategically located in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana were converted into Disaster/Distribution Centers in order to receive and distribute food, clothing and emergency supplies as well as provide shelter to displaced families arriving from New Orleans and other severely affected areas.

Our recent recovery work in Louisiana has rejuvenated the Louisiana State Association of Cooperatives, which includes the beginning stages of the creation of 6 new cooperatives, including the South Plaquemines Parish United Fishing Cooperative, and successful efforts to bring in much needed funding from government and private sources. The fishing cooperative will unite Black, Native American, Vietnamese, Hmong and other fishing communities to work together to find more lucrative markets for their seafood. The Federation has provided training and technical support to move the fishing co-op from dream to reality.

One of the first efforts of the Federation after the hurricanes was the revival of the Crescent City Farmers Market, which provides an outlet for our farmers and cooperatives in south Mississippi and coastal Louisiana. This recovery phase also includes support work with partner organizations – such as Common Ground - in the lower ninth ward as well as a new farmers market in the upper ninth ward.

### **Summary**

The model of cooperative economic development fostered by the Federation in the rural south for 40 years is still needed. It has focused on the people and rural places that need the most help. We stress collective action and solutions over individual successes, but our work fosters equitable and shared development for all people and communities. We develop alternative economic models that demonstrate ways to involve people in the shared development of their communities, which are replicable on a global basis.

The Federation has developed a unique “40 Acres and a Mule Endowment Fund,” which now has close to \$3 million in assets, to provide for long permanency and stability of this important work. We hope to grow the Endowment Fund to \$10 million or more so the annual investment earnings – interest, dividends and capital gains - will support the core budget of the Federation/LAF and allow us to weather the ups and downs of public and private funding.

For more comprehensive and detailed information on the history of the Federation/LAF, please consult our website at [www.federation.coop](http://www.federation.coop) which includes the history sections of our 25<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Reports and other historical documents and records of the Federation’s long history. The Federation has also placed thousands of pages of original historical documents at the Amistad Research Center and Archive in New Orleans, Louisiana.

## *40 Years of Service*

*After my wife and I decided to get out of the hog business, we took an interest in raising goats. We approached the Federation, and received a great wealth of information, and direct hands-on training in goat production and management. Soon after we went through the training, the Federation provided us with a starting herd of goats to start our operation. We’ve also enjoyed traveling to different places facilitated by the Federation, where we’ve been able to meet and network with other goat producers, landowners, and resource agencies.*

**Johnnie & Connie Lockett**  
**Emelle, Alabama**  
**Sumter County**

*The Federation has provided a lot of valuable information at the different workshops and training events on goat production and cooperative development; and has provided assistance in securing resources to assist the “Sun-down Ranch Youth and Agriculture Program” to continue its work of teaching youth between 10-20 years about farming; and beginning farmers who need guidance and assistance in starting a farming enterprise.*

**Jacob Waddy & Virginia Fikes**  
**Safford, Alabama, Perry County**  
**Sun-down Ranch Youth and Agriculture Program**