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National Black Growers Council models
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The
PROGRESSIVE
FARMER

SEPTEMBER
2016



The Model Farm Series demonstrates the best combinations of technology and USDA programs. P.J. Haynie (right) is secretary-treasurer for the National Black Growers Council.

PHOTOS: LANCE MURPHEY

independent organization of black growers would better address their production and business concerns. The moment came one evening as the group was going to dinner. Bill Bridgeforth, who farms outside of Tanner, Alabama, describes the scene: "We were in a minibus. It was not a big bus, it was a minibus, and several of the seats were empty." That image said something to the whole group about their declining and isolated numbers. "We decided then that we needed to get our people more interested" in the agronomic, financial and management issues common to all farmers, but issues particularly critical for the survival of black farms and farmers, he says.

The issues created by "massive demographic losses" among black farmers, as Dewayne L. Goldman, outreach lead for Monsanto, describes it, made clear the need for an independent group focused on the betterment of black row-crop producers.

"[This] opportunity had to be shared ... not confined to a single company," Goldman says.

NEW GROWERS GROUP. The advisory group never materialized. Instead, with support from Monsanto, the National Black Growers Council (NBGC) was born to sustain diversity in production agriculture by focusing on often-isolated black row-crop farmers. The nonpartisan, Washington, D.C.-based NBGC has a straightforward mission: "To improve the efficiency, productivity and sustainability of black row-crop farmers."

"If there is any sector of agriculture that needs to be on the endangered species list, it is the black farmer," says Bridgeforth, who is chairman of the NBGC. Bridgeforth Farms is 9,300 acres. Only 72 black growers in Alabama farm more than 500 acres.

An issue that gave rise to the advisory group idea was Monsanto's planned purchase of Delta and Pine Land (now Deltapine) in 2006. D&PL was the world's largest producer of cottonseed, and Monsanto was a leader in cotton biotech traits. It was said by critics the acquisition of D&PL by Monsanto would be catastrophic to black farmers, many of whom would be unable to afford biotech seed products.

Bridging THE GAP

National Black Growers Council works to improve the efficiency, productivity and sustainability of black row-crop farmers.

BY DAN MILLER

A dozen growers—owners of some of the largest black operations in the U.S.—gathered at the St. Louis World Headquarters of Monsanto in December 2008. They discussed the impact of biotech seed costs on their farms, learned about Monsanto's technologies and business plans, and explored formation of a black grower advisory group to Monsanto.

As the growers talked with Monsanto executives on the second day of the two-day meeting, they came to believe an



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“We had to respond,” Goldman says. “We wanted to be proactive, to form a group to respond to this issue, as well as other issues.”

FINDING MEMBERS. But who should sit on an advisory panel? “The most logical person was a black cotton farmer, and surely we know some,” Goldman recalls thinking. Goldman is a third-generation black farmer from Arkansas with a Ph.D. in agronomy from Iowa State University. He has grown cotton, himself. “But we couldn’t come up with a core group to respond to this issue.”

Working with a team of trusted individuals in the black agricultural community (including the late Pearlie S. Reed, who was the Natural Resources Conservation Service chief under Ag Secretary Dan Glickman and respected for his civil rights work inside USDA), Goldman spent months bringing the group together. Those farmers were surprised at who they found seated around them.

There sat Bridgeforth and J.D. Jacobs, who farmed 8,500 acres outside of Dallas. Harper Armstrong farms 2,500 at Bastrop, Louisiana. He sat near Ray Sneed, who farms at Millington, Tennessee. Goldman estimates the average acreage of the farmers at the table was 3,000. Few of them knew each other.

“My mouth hit the floor,” P.J. Haynie says. “I couldn’t name 10 other black farmers with more than 500 acres.” Haynie is a fifth-generation farmer whose farm spans the four counties of Virginia’s Northern Neck. He is the NBGC’s secretary-treasurer.

“We didn’t even know there were other large black growers in Alabama and Florida,” says Armstrong, who



is the assistant chairman of the NBGC. “I didn’t know there were that many black farmers, farming,” adds Jacobs, who has been farming full-time since 1985 and is a member of the NBGC board. “I served on the [Farm Service Administration] county committee for 19 years, and I never saw another one.”

There are 33,371 black farmers in the U.S., a decline of more than 96% in less than 100 years. There are more Native American farmers in the U.S. today than black farmers and nearly twice as many Hispanic producers.

In fact, there may be fewer than 350 black-owned farms of more than 1,000 acres in the entire U.S. ▶

Model Farm field days offer information on business and finance management, succession planning and USDA programs. In the foreground is Leigh Allen, executive director of the National Black Growers Council.

An Inside Track

The National Black Growers Council has seen success on a national stage. Under the Obama administration and the tenure of Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is encouraging diversity in commodity groups. AMS oversees checkoff programs.

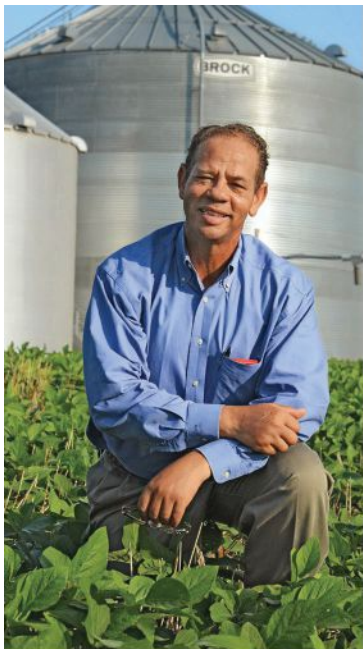
AMS worked with the United Sorghum Checkoff Program in one effort. Members of the Sorghum Checkoff board are nominated by Certified Nominating Organizations (CNO). AMS recognized the National Black Growers Council as a CNO for the Sorghum board of directors. The

NBGC nominated Carlton Bridgeforth, of Tanner, Alabama. He was appointed as an at-large board member in 2014.

Recruiting minority farmers for commodity boards was discussed this year at the inaugural National Black Growers Council annual meeting in Tunica, Mississippi. Bob Parker, president and CEO of the National Peanut Board, and Bill Gillon, president and CEO of The Cotton Board, both encouraged council members to join commodity boards. “If you are a young man or young woman, and see an organization you like, get involved in those organizations at the local level and at the state level,” Parker says.

Black farmers are moving into ag-related organizations. For example, Ray Sneed, of Millington, Tennessee, serves on the Federal Crop Insurance board; Haywood Harrell, Halifax, North Carolina, is an adviser to The Cotton Board; Dexter Gilbert, of Campbellton, Florida, is participating in the National Peanut Board Class IX Leadership Academy; Antron Williams, of Rowesville, South Carolina, was chosen by the United Soybean Board for its “See for Yourself” program; and John Lee, of Little Rock, Arkansas, was chosen by the National Corn Growers Association to participate in the NCGA DuPont New Leaders Program.

Dewayne L. Goldman, Outreach Lead for Monsanto, was instrumental in bringing together the group of black farmers that became the National Black Growers Council. PHOTO: LANCE MURPHEY



“My experiences showed that black farmers lagged in the adoption of new technology,” Goldman says.

Black farmers also lag in usage of USDA programs. Historically, black farmers’ access to credit has been abysmal. It may be better today, but many don’t understand, or even know, of all the financial mechanisms available to them, Goldman says.

Bill Bridgeforth farms 9,300 acres near Tanner, Alabama. He is chairman of the National Black Growers Council. PHOTO: BRENT WARREN

INFORMATION OBSTACLE. Haynie agrees. A big obstacle to black farming is the “transfer of practical information.”

Multigenerational farms have an infrastructure all their own, often benefiting the farm owner. Acquaintances and family may extend to local suppliers, dealers and sources of finance. “Those close relationships offer advantages,” Haynie says. “So, hopefully the NBGC will be the hub of a new network that presents relevant information to all farmers.”

The delayed transfer of pertinent information to isolated black farmers is a condition destructive to black farming. But it doesn’t surprise Lloyd E. Wright. “We don’t go to church together. We don’t go to school together or eat together. We don’t do much of anything together,” says Wright, a respected soil scientist who spent 37 years with USDA, some of them in the late 1990s as the department’s Director of the Office of Civil Rights. “So you end up with a white system and a black system. And the system doesn’t work well for black folk.”

“We’ve been left out of the circle,” Louisiana’s Armstrong says. “It’s not so much discrimination as it is isolation. If you’re not in the loop, you may miss out on good ideas, products to reduce operating expenses or better technology to reduce your workload and increase yields.”

PROVING YOURSELF. J.D. Jacobs started with 46 acres and a 1941 Farmall M. “I couldn’t lease land,” he says. “They wouldn’t lease to a black farmer. You had to prove yourself. But you couldn’t prove yourself because you didn’t have anything.” Today, Jacobs produces corn with his son, Jeff. “You had to stay motivated,” he says. ▶



PHOTO: THE PROGRESSIVE FARMER ARCHIVES

THEN AND NOW

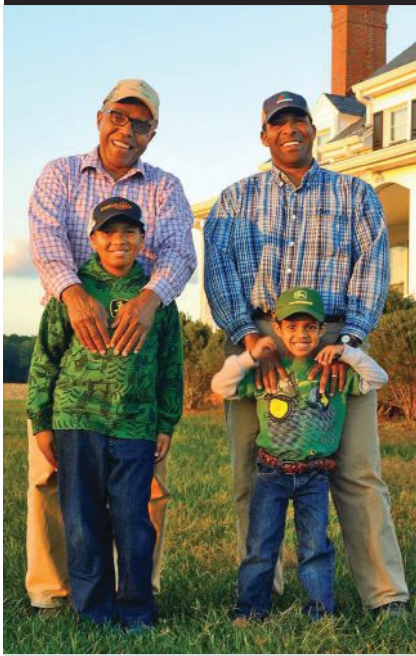
Both 1920 and 2012 Census of Agriculture offer snapshots of the black farmer in America.

Census of Agriculture: 1920

- ▶ The 1920 census counted 949,889 black farmers, likely the peak of black farming in the U.S. By the 2012, the number of black-operated farms had declined 96.5%.
- ▶ Of all black farms in 1920, 233,222 were operated by full owners or landowners who also rented land. Black landowners managed 16.7 million acres in total.
- ▶ 75% of black farmers were landless tenant farmers in 1920. Half worked as deeply indebted sharecroppers, which, in reality, resembled the pre-Civil War plantation system of management, according to USDA’s own assessment of the practice in 1920.

Census of Agriculture: 2012

- ▶ The 2012 census counted 33,371 black operators, 1.6% of all U.S. principal operators.
- ▶ Texas is home to more black farmers than any other state, but only 3% of the state’s farmers are black. Black farmers make up a larger share of farmers in Alabama (6%), Georgia (4%), Louisiana (7%), Mississippi (12%) and South Carolina (7%).
- ▶ Black farmers own 3.6 million acres, 0.4% of all farmland.
- ▶ Black farm sales were \$846 million, 0.2% of all sales; 79% had sales under \$10,000, 1% above \$1 million.
- ▶ 49% of black farms are 50 acres or less; 1% are larger than 1,000 acres.



P.J. Haynie III (right) stands outside his Reedville, Virginia, home with his father, Philip J. Haynie II, and P.J.'s two sons, Philip IV (left) and Trevor. PHOTO: JIM PATRICO

Monsanto itself came to understand it had an information issue. The company has seed-financing programs in which producers buy seed ahead of planting and pay for it at harvest. Goldman found that some black producers at the St. Louis meeting knew nothing about the program. He understood that smaller operations might not know about the program, “but then you find an 8,000-acre farmer who never knew about the program and realize that there were factors other than size that were preventing the knowledge transfer,” he says. “So we fixed the problem by sharing the information

directly with the growers and reaching out to places where they source information. We also asked the group to spread information [about the program] to their neighbors.”

The challenge of that, however, is that there are no concentrated farming “neighborhoods” of black farmers. Most black row-crop farmers are scattered across the old Cotton Belt. All are left to negotiate USDA Service Centers and private lenders that, while these institutions are willing to work closely with black growers, few black farmers will ever fully trust—or even desire to interact with because of their shared acrimonious histories. Demographics work against improvement. Black farmers are older: 42% are more than 65 years old compared to 33% of all U.S. principal operators. Black farms are typically smaller: 49% are less than 50 acres compared to 39% for all U.S. farms. Seventy-nine percent of black farms have sales of less than \$10,000.

DEFINING A NEW VIEW. “If the NBGC is going to remain committed to its mission, it is imperative that we provide our growers with access to the most relevant information, programs and equipment, whether offered by USDA or private industry,” says Leigh Allen, executive director of the National Black Growers Council. “By doing so, we create substantive improvement not only in the operations of black row-crop growers associated with the Council, but we are able to have a considerable input with respect to defining the optics of the black farmer today.”

Allen goes on to say, “Many of the NBGC members are concerned with industry and global issues, such as water

resources, opening trade with Cuba, biotech trait approvals and GMO labeling legislation. We understand how challenges in the global marketplace impact our bottom lines and that we need to be on top of the latest industry news.”

The NBGC has 150 farmer members who farm from 40 to 10,000 acres. But regardless of size, it is an advocate for all black row-crop farmers. Monsanto is a sustaining member, as is Farm Credit, Great American Insurance Group and Syngenta.

“We hope black farmers reach out to the council directly for help before they reach the point where, because of lost time or lack of trust, they have only limited solutions remaining,” NBGC chairman Bridgeforth says.

MODEL FARMS. The NBGC works to close knowledge gaps through its Model Farm Series (one-day field days held on leading black farms but open to everyone). The field days deliver information about biotech and irrigation technologies, agronomic practices, farm structures and estate planning, risk management and crop insurance, labor issues, cost-share programs, farm credit and financial management. Six field days were scheduled this past summer across the South.

“It’s our signature event,” Allen says. “These are increasingly make-or-break issues for the farm. The members of the NBGC are eager to share ideas and personal experiences that have improved their operations.”

“The Model Farm Series,” Goldman says, “was implemented out of a necessity to demonstrate the best combination of agricultural technologies and USDA programs, rather than focusing on single programs or technologies. These field days strive to break down the trust barriers that exist and show how these resources can be combined to improve farm operations.”

The National Black Growers Council is concerned also about the wider issue of diversity in all of agriculture, agricultural businesses included. So the group engages youth in various ways. (Haynie has brought local youth to his farm to show them modern farming technologies.) The NBGC has created an industry-leading Agricultural Apprenticeship Program. Students attending 1890 land-grant universities who are interested in an agricultural business career are selected to work on the farms of NBGC members.

The farmer hosts commit to teaching the student, over a period of about 10 weeks, modern management practices and practical farming skills. Afterwards, the students are better equipped to compete for positions within the company or organization that sponsors them. The program is offered as a service to the NBGC’s sustaining members.

“It’s serious work,” says Armstrong of the apprenticeship internship, which can also be used to train future black farmers. “We give them an on-farm experience; they gain a good perception about the farm. If they want to get a job in corporate agriculture, they’re going to need to know what happens on the farm.” ●