

Raising the Rural Voice: A Preliminary Report on Agricultural Policy Focus Groups

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Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural
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Introduction

The policymaking process often fails to incorporate the needs of limited resource and minority farmers, ranchers and farmworkers in the development of agricultural programs and services. To help resolve this inequality, the Rural Coalition has partnered with the Missouri Action Research Connection (MARC) to obtain policy input from limited resource and minority agricultural producers. This research project has included focus groups with members of community-based organizations in the United States and Mexico. The following preliminary report briefly describes the methods used in this research endeavor and provides a summary discussion of the findings from the US focus groups held in January and February 2001.

Research Questions and Method

The purpose of this research project is to gain a better understanding of the experiences, assistance needs and programs of interest among limited resource and minority agricultural producers. Specific research questions of interest include the following:

- What are their hopes and dreams for the future?
- What barriers do they perceive in achieving these dreams?
- What types of assistance do they need to overcome these barriers?
- What types of programs would they develop if given the opportunity?
- How do they evaluate current programs and services?

This project has utilized focus group methods to obtain information for answering these questions. Following a research methods workshop held in Columbia, Missouri, focus groups were organized, conducted, documented and analyzed through collaboration between the Rural Coalition, its member organizations and MARC. Each focus group session consisted of a research team including a facilitator, co-facilitator, documentors and local participants recruited from the general membership of the organizations. The facilitator used a protocol developed by the Rural Coalition/MARC research team that consisted of primary themes based on the research questions and on activities for stimulating group discussion. Documentation used for analysis of the focus groups included audio tapes, transcripts, notes, flip-chart notes, surveys and the written information produced through group activities. Seven focus groups have been conducted thus far: two in Mississippi, three in California and two in Mexico. This report discusses the five focus groups conducted in the United States.

Description of the Focus Groups and Participants

The Beat 4 Farm Cooperative conducted a focus group in Shuqualak, Mississippi. All but two of the fifteen participants were African American, and seven were women. These farmers primarily produce vegetables, cattle and timber.

Winston County Self Help held a focus group in Louisville, Mississippi. There were a total of eighteen participants, all of whom were African American. Eight of the participants were women. They raise cattle and produce vegetables and timber.

Information programs were also created by focus groups. Winston County Self Help participants were primarily interested in receiving information on market prices and government programs through the cooperative and other community-based organizations. The Fall River Wild Rice focus group was interested in using the Internet to access information that is locally based and provides contacts to local people.

The Beat 4 Farm Cooperative and Fall River Wild Rice focus groups developed disaster programs. The former addressed the need for disaster assistance according to applicant need and a wider variety of assistance options. The latter focused attention on the need for low cost crop insurance and protection from market disaster for niche products, such as organic wild rice.

The Hmong American Community focus group expressed interest in a marketing program that would assist farmers in locating buyers and working out the terms of contracts. Fall River Wild Rice called for assistance with export markets and the development of alternative markets, such as farmers markets and direct marketing initiatives.

The Fall River Wild Rice focus group was interested in several aspects of a comprehensive technical assistance program. These included pest control, new crop development and new production strategies. Also of great interest was technical assistance with improving energy efficiency and networking through the Internet.

Rather than each of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies administering several different programs, some of the focus groups called for the creation of a general small farm agency that would serve as a "place" where they could go for any of their assistance needs.

All of the focus groups called for greater local participation of small farmers in the development and implementation of agricultural programs. With the exception of Fall River Wild Rice, the preferred model of operation was for the USDA to fund the programs, but for administration at the local level to occur primarily through community-based organizations and/or cooperatives.

Evaluation of Current Programs and Services

It is important to note that evaluations of current programs and services were hampered by participant unfamiliarity with government agricultural agencies and programs. The Beat 4 Farm Cooperative and Winston County Self Help focus group participants were unsure of the distinction between agencies and specific programs. Hmong farmers and those from AMO Organics had little experience with the agencies and programs. Focus group participants often identified this lack of knowledge and contact as being a result of inadequate outreach efforts on the part of the agencies.

Who/What is Helpful or Not Helpful

When asked who or what is helpful in the attempt to achieve their objectives, focus group participants most often identified individuals that they know and have worked with personally. They also spoke highly of their cooperatives.

The Beat 4 Farm Cooperative and Winston County Self Help identified the 1890 Land Grant Universities as helpful, and the Hispanic/Latino farmers with AMO Organics mentioned the student assistance they have received from area colleges and universities.

Focus groups also identified broader-based non-profit organizations as helpful. These included the Rural Coalition, Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, National Campaign for Family Farms and Oxfam America, among others.

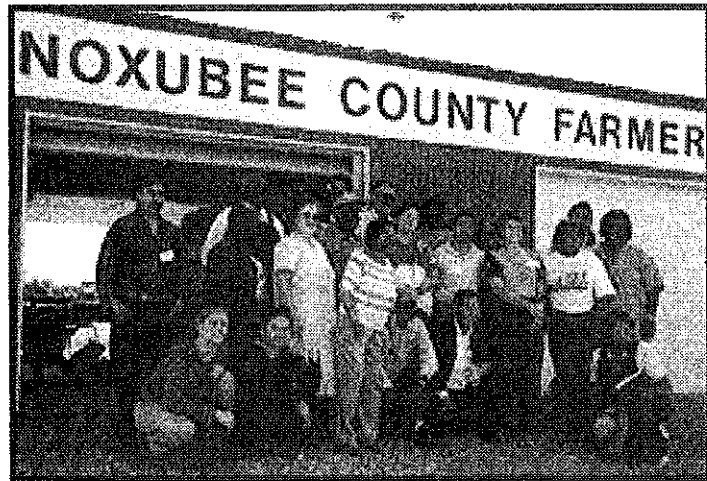
Only in one group were bankers mentioned as helpful. This was the result of one particular individual.

At different times, the USDA in general, Farm Services Agency (FSA) and the Cooperative Extension



Rural Coalition: Using the Internet to Preserve Family Farms¹

In 1993, a group of small farmers in Alabama and Mississippi loaded freshly harvested watermelons, peas, okra, tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, squash, cantaloupe, corn, peppers, and peaches onto a rented refrigeration truck, and headed north. The next day, they reached Chicago, where a community-based organization called No Dope helped them unload their goods at a farmers market. Soon, residents of a nearby public housing project, many of whom undoubtedly could trace their roots to southern farms, flooded into the market to buy the inexpensive and unusually fresh fruit and vegetables. The farmers, for their part, left two days later with substantially higher profits than they could have earned delivering their produce to wholesalers and food brokers closer to their farms.



This story helped inspire an ambitious project by the Rural Coalition, a Washington, D.C.-based alliance of community-based groups dedicated to helping small and minority farmers. While it has become almost a cliché to say the Internet is producing massive change in the economy and society, the Rural Coalition's project seeks to use the Internet to achieve the exact opposite goal to preserve a way of life that increasingly seems part of our past. If small-scale farmers could regularly connect more directly with consumers and with each other, the coalition argues, they could meet a real market need and, at the same time, increase their own income. In the process, they would learn more about food markets, and they might have opportunities to exchange information with each other on how to produce and market their goods more efficiently.

With support from TOP, the Rural Coalition set out to put this idea into action by creating a new kind of "SuperMarket." Existing only in cyberspace, this market will carry or at least describe in a comprehensive database the output of literally thousands of family farms stretching from Maine to California to Mexico. Buyers will be able to see at a glance what family farmers have to offer. And the farmers will gain insights into the workings of a marketplace that many find mysterious and less than benevolent.

A Diverse Constituency

The coalition that is building this new market represents a diverse group. Among its members are the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which represents 25,000 low income rural families; the Intertribal Agricultural Council, a non-profit corporation whose member tribes control 79 percent of the land held in trust for Native Americans; the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, which represents primarily African-American producer cooperatives; Homeworkers Organized for More

¹ This article is taken from the September 2000 report published by the Department of Commerce's Technology Opportunities Program, which provides funding for the SuperMarket Project. The entire report can be found online at http://www.ntia.doc.gov/otiahome/top/publicationmedia/comm_conn/community_connections.html

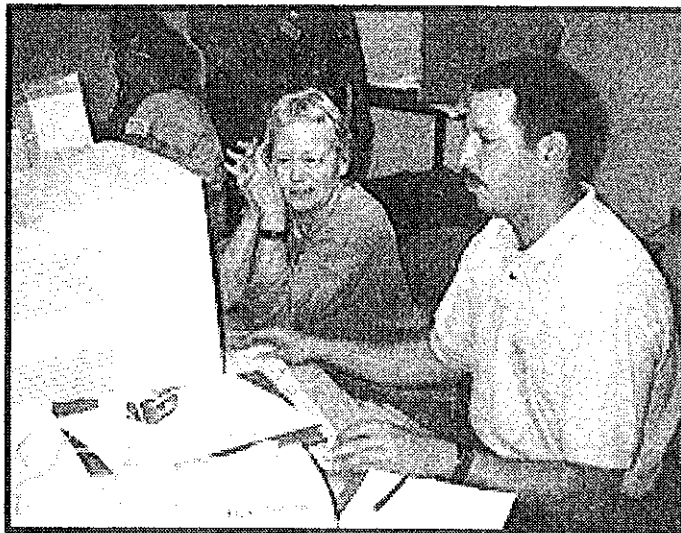
instance, but will pay more for greens that are packaged and ready to eat.

One of the main goals of the SuperMarket project is to teach farmers about such consumer preferences. "This is going to give farmers the information they need to decide what they need to be growing," says Rebecca Bond, manager of the project. "Instead of guessing, they are going to see how the market is moving. It will show them what is being purchased and when, what variety is being demanded, and what prices are. We think this will show our non-organic farmers how they can get higher prices by producing organic goods."

Nevertheless, the farmers and farm cooperatives represented by the Rural Coalition will have to come a long way to start using their digital tools. "They need everything from how to use a mouse to understanding what the web is about, and why it makes sense to invest time, money, energy and resources to learn any of this stuff," says Richard Cville, executive director of the Center for Civic Networking. The Rural Coalition began by training members in computer and Internet basics.

But the centerpiece of its project will be the massive database showing what coalition members produce. When fully developed, users will be able to use the SuperMarket website to find out in advance what various farmers expect to produce. When the goods are harvested, the database will show exactly what is available and in what sizes and grades. The website also will show the prices of the various products, as well as various packaging options.

The website recently launched a retail section so that farm co-ops can use it to make direct sales (www.supermarketcoop.com). The advantages of using the web are abundantly clear to those who have tried it. HOME, the Maine cooperative, cut its costs sharply by switching to web-based advertising rather than printing and mailing catalogues and it realized a 30 percent gain in sales of jams and jellies. Sales of Christmas wreaths also soared.



Farmer-to-Farmer Networking

In general, though, the Rural Coalition doesn't believe the success of the SuperMarket will depend on direct sales. While the Internet may present good retail opportunities to some producers, especially those who make non-perishable, packaged products that can be shipped easily, many small farmers lack the tools needed to get fresh foods to distant markets, and many wholesale buyers still want to see their produce before buying it. The SuperMarket can benefit small farmers in countless other ways, though. Among other things, it can enable them to form partnerships that could lead to efficiencies currently available only to large-scale farming operations. Food buyers often buy seed for large farmers, for instance, but small farmers don't get such help; by banding together, small farmers in the Rural Coalition might gain enough clout to win similar treatment. Similarly, small farmers might be able to lock in sales with groups like the Chefs Collaborative in advance. "It may be that specialty buyers will be able to make arrangements with our farmers before the seeds go in the ground," notes Bond.

Joint marketing through the SuperMarket also could enable farmers in different parts of the country to increase the value of each other's goods. For instance, producers in the southern U.S. and Mexico could jointly market tomatoes, effectively extending their growing season; when tomatoes are no longer available in the U.S., buyers still could obtain them from Mexican producers an opportunity that would appeal to many buyers looking for a steady supply.