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**PRESENTED AT THE 74TH PROFESSIONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS
CONFERENCE, 2016, THE JAMES HILL MEMORIAL PLENARY SESSION**

**SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE: FARM SERVICE
AGENCY IN GEORGIA**

***Fred Harrison¹**

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First of all, let me say to my brother Dr. Hill, you are my keeper. That is something that he and I have in common (Am I my brother's keeper?) and let me also acknowledge Tuskegee University for all that it does, for all that it has done, and for all that it will continue to do for people like us. Well, I bought a farm down in Macon County, GA, and it is a small farm, as a matter of fact where is Dr. Tasha Hargrove? Tasha and one other person, Dr. Zabawa did a study several years ago about the farm.

In the early iterations of the Farm Service agency (FSA) in Georgia, the USDA did something right. It put up enough money to begin to stem the tide of sharecrop farming. It sought to purchase 100 farms in the state of Georgia, place Black farmers on those farms and moved them from subsistence to wholesome farming. The original project was scheduled to go to Peach County, Georgia, but the local power structure raised so much hell that the Secretary had to withdraw. They moved it to Macon County, Georgia and they bought those 100 farms and placed 100 Black farmers and their families on those farms. The reason why I mentioned Dr. Hargrove and her colleague Dr. Zabawa is that they did a study three, four, or five, years ago and they looked at those original 100 farms and you know what? As of two years ago over 60% of them were still in Black farmers' hands. The good part about that for me is that I now own one of them. I know the original farm family, and I have the original deed. Now it might not be as productive as it used to be when other people had it because I am a hobby farmer.

Regarding the FSA, here is what we found out when I went to the Agency for service; I found poor customer service. I walked into the Macon county office, went to the counter, introduced myself and told the administrative assistant what I was there for. She said to me, "Dr. Harrison we will be with you soon just have a seat." Well, I said, "I cannot sit I have to walk around and read and look at something." Another farmer came in after me who did not look like me, and she told him the same thing; he sat. The county executive director (CED) came out of his office after about thirty minutes, and he walked right past me and he told that other farmer, "come on in and let me help you." In southeast Georgia where I come from, excuse me, ladies, that really pissed me off and my first thing was to get irate, but I learned a long time ago that when you get mad, you have lost half the battle, so I did not get mad; I sat there and waited. Well, the CED went into the office with the white farmer and took care of business with the farmer. He then walked him back out; he did not just let him go, but walked him back out right past me, walked out to the parking lot and stayed for five minutes. He then came back in, walked past me again, and then turned around and came back and said, "Can I help you", and I said, "I do not think you can." I then said, "but is that your office over there you just came out of?" and he said "yes" and I said, "well let's go in there." We went in and I closed the door behind us. I then gave him some "firm-worded" words like they do in Edison, Georgia in the back street. I do not know where I got some of the words from, but I got them, and out of that came a letter to my colleague before me Harvey Strippler.

I wrote Harvey a letter because when I drove home, the more I drove the madder I got. Before I wrote the letter, I went by and talked to the State legislator for my area and I told him, “I was going to write a letter” and he said, “write it.” So I wrote him a five-page letter and I sent the State Executive Director a copy of the letter and I saved a copy for the Secretary of Agriculture, but I did not mail it. A few days later, I got a call from the State Director, and you know what he said to me Daniel, “when do you want me to fire him?” and I said I did not write the letter for you to fire him, I wrote that letter because of the older people who would not stand up, who did not feel right about standing up, and who were not able to stand up and not verbal enough to stand up and speak for themselves; that is who I wrote that letter for. I can take care of me.” But out of that, the policy was changed; whenever a person visited a county office, they would sign-in, and when the staff behind the desk become available they would walk up and say who is next and they would take care of you. Well, after Harvey left, and in between Harvey leaving and an Acting Director some of the district directors decided they wanted to discontinue that process and they did and I know exactly which one of them did it. So when I became State Director, I reinstated that process; when you walked into an office you sign-in and whenever the next person was available they would ask who is next, and they would cross-check the list and find out if it was so and that is whom they would serve.

Also, I found that we had a history in Georgia of not returning calls and not getting back with people when they had complaints. One thing I did in a meeting in Albany, GA with the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Crystal Harding, in attendance was to give my cell phone number to the attendees and also gave them the telephone number of the FSA Administrator. I got back to my office that Monday morning and had received a long email from our overall supervisor. I never told you this, but he said, “I got a report from the meeting in Albany, and was told that the first thing you did when you stood up in that meeting was to give out your phone number,” and I said, “yes, I did that; I gave mine and yours too.” Bottom line is I did not think anything of it at the time, but one thing I wanted to do was to say, people, especially small farmers, minority group farmers, farmers of color is that there was somebody that was going to be in that office who was going to return their phone calls. If a person calls my office, I am going to take the call or return the call. If I receive a letter from anyone in the state of Georgia, within three days I am going to send a reply, I am not going to call you on the phone, I am going to send a letter. If I receive a certified letter, which I often do, I am going to respond that same day and send the response certified. My goal is to be responsive to the people’s needs in the state of Georgia.

I want to share a few other reflections after thirty-one months as State Executive Director. As Daniel said a few minutes ago, I also submitted my letter of resignation last Friday at 3:15 pm, meeting the required deadline. The letter did not say, “I was resigning;” it said, “I am retiring” because I have worked forty plus years with all my federal-time combined. I am retiring and going back to playing golf and enjoying all the other things I used to do. However, let me end by saying this, there are many things I could talk about, but I think Daniel mentioned several critical points in his remarks. We have an open mic here, and after we finish our presentations, you can ask questions. However, let me say this, that the Chair of the state committee in Alabama is Walter Hill, who looks like you and me. In Georgia, we also have a chairman who looks like me, and that is unusual. Let me also say that there is a gentleman who is sitting right here, Rodney Brooks, who I was able to hire, based on this qualifications, as the coordinator for new and beginning, veteran,

women farmers, and other groups. He has loan approval authority. I, however, suspect that his position might disappear in the next administration. If that happens, at least, he will still have his loan approval authority. Also, if you are dealing with the FSA anywhere in this country especially in the south, communication is the key. If you go into an FSA office, do not just take what you “are told” as being the gospel; ask questions, and if you do not understand ask more questions, and if you do not get the answers you want, call the State Executive Director. I guarantee that Daniel Robinson will take the call, I will take the call, but you have to make the call.

Another thing, if you get a loan and for some reason things go bad on your farm, for example, you did not make your crop, the cows died, or the tractor broke down and you are behind in paying and you get a letter that says, “Dear Mr. Harrison you know as of the 1st of December 2016 you were delinquent on your note,” do not throw it in the trash can. Go to that office and sit down and talk with those people in the office just like you did when made that loan and ask for a reconsideration, ask for a restructuring, ask for whatever. One of the things that I failed in was not being able to quickly help a minority farmer who owned 650 plus acres of land in Georgia. He is a friend of mine, he is just about that close to losing it all and I have done all that I can, but it is so convoluted and I regret that I have not been able to make sure that it does not happen. What I have told our loan officer is that, “I am not going to walk away from it.” When I leave office on the 7th of January I will be a public figure and I know how to write the letters if I have to. We in the FSA should not just say no, or hell no, but look for ways to make that loan. I told our people I would never tell you to make a loan, but one thing I will say is that you are going to have to convince me that you have done everything you can to make that loan and after you have done that and you cannot do it, then turn it down, then I can live with that, but give them a chance.

Let me say in closing that there is a future in agriculture for young people. We are not going to quit eating. We talk about three meals a day, or now it is three meals a day plus a snack, and so there is a future in agriculture. We have a challenge whether it is Tuskegee, Alabama A&M, Fort Valley State, Florida A&M, South Carolina State, North Carolina A&T, Virginia State, Kentucky State, Alcorn, Delaware State, Eastern Shore, Prairie View, or other universities. We have to graduate more young people to take these jobs. A specialist job at FSA right now, a GS-11 or so makes eighty thousand dollars or more per year. Who does not want one of those jobs? For a program technician job in a rural county you are talking anywhere from 30 thousand dollars to 40 thousand or more dollars, and I can tell you in my county where I am from, Calhoun County, Edison, Georgia a 47-thousand-dollar job in Calhoun County is one heck of a job; it makes a difference. The FSA and other USDA agencies are going to continue to buy farm trucks, tractors, all those farm instruments, and pretty soon buy those tractors that do not need anybody to drive. So jobs for agricultural professionals are going to be there, and it is our job, my job, your job to make sure that we graduate young people who can fill in behind Daniel Robinson, who can fill in behind Fred Harrison, who can fill in behind Wilfred Pace and who can fill those farm loan jobs because they should.

We in Georgia have three minorities out of ten farm loan office administrators, Dawson, Statesboro, and Louisville. Three out of ten that is 30%; we are lacking as it relates to what Daniel was saying a while ago and I tell our people all the time that we stink. We have one person of color in the great State of Georgia who runs a county office and she is a female. Now I was on the state committee that chose her, but that is the only one. We now have a young lady whose is in our next

training class and they start tomorrow. We have job to do. Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Hill thank you very much for inviting me; it is always a pleasure to come. I was going to tell you about the state committee member who called me yesterday and left a message on my cell phone and said he had to go to his brother's daughter's wedding in Houston, Texas, and as a matter of fact, he is a Tuskegee graduate. He said to me, "just calling to let you know I will not be able to go to Tuskegee with you, but there is one thing I want you to do" and he used a term I have not heard since P.W. Brown left us. He said, "give my regards to Mother Tuskegee!" Thank you very much.