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Expanding the Marketing Opportunities and Sustainable Production Potential for Minority and Limited-Resource Agricultural Producers in Louisiana and Mississippi

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**EXPANDING THE MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES AND
SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION POTENTIAL FOR MINORITY AND
LIMITED-RESOURCE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS IN LOUISIANA
AND MISSISSIPPI***

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of sustainable agriculture requires the development of alternative production techniques and marketing strategies. Unfortunately, just as with the dominant agrifood system, minority and limited resource producers are often not incorporated into planning processes. As an attempt to forge an alternative framework, this paper provides findings and recommendations from an exploratory planning project funded by the Southern Region Sustainable Agriculture and Education (SARE) program designed to bring together traditionally-underserved producers, their membership organizations, regional nonprofit organizations and universities, and a variety of customer interests. Participants worked collaboratively to identify opportunities and challenges associated with expanding access to diverse agricultural markets and creating incentives for sustainable production. Findings show a continuing need to access financial capital, land, equipment, education and technical support, and to develop innovative cooperative arrangements and expand opportunities for youth involvement in agriculture. The rural development policy implications of these findings are analyzed.

Introduction

Historically, underdevelopment, poverty, and political exclusion have plagued people in the southern United States. The political, economic and racial inequalities that underlie the barriers to livelihood security and quality of life continue to pose hardships for small-scale, limited resource, and minority agricultural producers. Agricultural restructuring has negatively affected the South, having particularly

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troubling consequences for these agricultural producers (CRAT 1997; Wood and Gilbert 1998). Conventional agricultural market access points are increasingly being cut off by the growing concentration of control over the agrifood system by large agribusiness firms (see, for example Heffernan 2000). Concentration is also occurring in the organic food market (Howard 2003). Marketing problems encountered consist of the prevailing systems privileging large-scale producers, insufficient information on market outlets and prices, and the cycle of market price disasters (Green 2001; Green and Picciano 2002). Exploring the viability of sustainable production and markets, including organics, could result in development of worthwhile alternatives for minority and limited resource producers. Still, the potential for them to enter and succeed in such venues faces challenges, despite the inevitable domestic growth of large supermarkets and nationwide producers in these arenas (Walz 2004).

In this article, we analyze the results of a project designed to facilitate collaboration between minority and limited resource producers, regional nonprofit organizations and universities, and to strengthen existing networks and expertise of producers and their communities and customers. Information gathered through joint meetings and focus groups identified niche markets, value-added production opportunities, and direct marketing techniques targeting customers. We also discuss the structural and technical challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable production, as they relate to the experiences described by the participants, and how rural development policy may facilitate alternative production methods.

Minority and Limited Resource Farmers

There is increasing recognition of the diversity of producers and types of operations. Given this realization, many labels have been created concerning those producers and their farms viewed as somehow different from both the traditional white/Euro-American family farmers and the corporate agriculture base. In advocacy and policy circles, frequently used labels include small-scale, limited resource, minority and socially disadvantaged. These terms have a variety of sources, including social movements and government responses. The labels are important in framing policy debates, and they are used in actual programs, structuring who qualifies for what kinds of assistance. In other words, these social constructs have real-world implications. Researchers from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) have attempted to formalize these terms, and the Economic Research Service (ERS) has created a “farm typology” (ERS 2000).

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Focusing on the intersection between the farm operation and the farm operator, it consists of three primary farm types combining the dimensions of scale and structure: non-family, other family (large and very large) and small family farms. Small family farms are those characterized as having sales less than \$250,000 annually. Within this broad category, there are five subtypes (adapted from ERS 2000)¹:

Limited-resource: Any small farm with gross sales less than \$100,000, total farm assets less than \$150,000, and total operator household income less than \$20,000. Limited-resource farmers may report farming, a non-farm occupation, or retirement as their major occupation.

Retirement: Small farms whose operators report being retired.

Residential/lifestyle: Small farms with operators who report a major occupation other than farming.

Farming occupation/lower-sales: Small farms with sales less than \$100,000 whose operators report farming as their major occupation.

Farming occupation/higher-sales: Small farms with sales between \$100,000 and \$249,999 whose operators report farming as their major occupation.

Minority farms are characterized as those operated by individuals from minority racial/ethnic groups (Black/African American, American Indian, Asian and Hispanic, among other categories). Although there are minority-operated enterprises along the scale of farm sizes from small to large, on average, they are often smaller in acreage and have lower sales than those operated by their white counterparts (for historic and contemporary studies of minority farmers and their farm enterprises, see: Beale 1966; Dismukes, Harwood, and Bentley 1997; Federation of Southern Cooperatives 2000; Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002; Grim 1996; Jones 1994; Munoz 1985; Wood and Gilbert 1998). After lawsuits, pressure from nongovernmental organizations, and policy reforms, the USDA now operates the Minority Farm Register to collect information to help ensure more equitable access to farm programs.

¹The limited resource farm category is unique in that it is the only farm category identifying parameters for measuring gross sales, total farm assets, and total operator household income, which is to be less than the poverty level for a family of four or less than the county median to be considered a limited resource operation (see also: Hoppe et al. 2007). There is also flexibility in how a limited resource producer's major occupation may be defined.

Women farmers have typically been classified as a traditionally-underserved group served through USDA programs targeting minority groups (e.g., Community Outreach and Assistance to Women, Limited Resource, and Other Traditionally-Underserved Farmers and Ranchers Program). There are also programs specifically designed for women farmers, such as the Women Outreach Program through the Farm Services Agency (USDA 2007). Several studies have focused on challenges faced by women in agriculture, consisting of experiences unique to that minority group, but also some common among other traditionally-underserved groups (Meares 1997; Picciano, Toommaly, and Green 2004; Trauger 2001; Wells, Phillips, and Neuman 2004; Women on Farms Research Initiative 2007).

Socially disadvantaged farms were given official attention in the 1990 passage of the Outreach and Technical Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers, again the result of significant work by several nongovernmental organizations.² Under this program, socially disadvantaged producers are viewed as those who have been “subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities.” Among other entities, the USDA’s Risk Management Agency has demonstrated commitment to better addressing the needs of socially disadvantaged producers (Dismukes et al. 1997).

Evidence of imbalances in domestic food and farm policy programs exacerbate the challenges associated with establishing alternative marketing and production systems. The Farm and Food Policy (FFP) project (2007) reports the bulk of commodity payments supports a small number of the largest farms in the US. In addition, a history of discrimination in farm program delivery has prevented minority producers from obtaining adequate credit and participating in numerous programs, such as those providing crop insurance and conservation assistance (FFP 2007; Green 2001; Oxfam America 2007). Traditionally-underserved producers face many challenges associated with using insurance as a tool for managing risk. Some of these challenges include limited access to applicable information, insurance companies and policies that are not responsive to their needs, and cost prohibitions (see Green et al. 2003).

²Together, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund and the Rural Coalition/Coalicion Rural comprised of over 80 culturally and regionally diverse community-based organizations, such as those representing African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian farmers and ranchers.

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Theoretical Framework

Resulting from critique of the dominant positivist research paradigm³ and the “technology transfer” and “adoption-diffusion” approaches prevalent in agricultural research, outreach and education and rural development initiatives overall, numerous attempts have been waged to develop grassroots alternatives to research practices traditionally defined by and controlled through the knowledge-generation activities of disciplinary experts within the academy. Reason (1994) contends that established interests typically monopolize the production and use of knowledge for their own benefit. He advocates a more holistic research experience that allows people outside the academy to play an integral role in the definition and implementation of the research process. From his perspective, conducting research with people as partners in the research process, and not as the subjects of research is critical.

Increasingly common in this respect are those research frameworks said to be “participatory” and “action” oriented (e.g., Chambers, Pacey and Thrupp 1989; Pretty 1995; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Selener 1997; Stringer 1999). Following from a diverse background of philosophy, theory and method, these various approaches share several common principles, including empowerment, collaboration through meaningful participation, acquisition of knowledge, and pursuit of social change. Overall, the primary goal of participatory and action research is to generate knowledge and thereby power (Kleiner 2005; Selener 1997). Power can be measured by the degree to which an individual or group can increase options for action, autonomy in using these options, and the capacity to deliberate about choices for action (Selener 1997).

As a synthesis of various participatory approaches and as a strategy for addressing quality of life issues, we have used a community-based research (CBR) framework, building partnerships between university-based researchers, formal and informal organizations, and community members. A key objective of CBR is to engage groups and individuals in systematic research that gives them the tools and strategies for effective problem-solving that further empowers them to achieve social change.

³The positivist research paradigm combines deductive logic with empirical observations of individual units in order to discover and confirm a set of probabilistic causal laws used to predict patterns of human behavior. Although providing a wealth of insights through theory testing, the concern with this approach is the reduction of people’s identities, thoughts and behaviors to numbers and equation sets, losing their experiences and perspectives along the way (see: Neuman 2003, Stoeker 2005).

Of the many contributions that the more collaborative and participatory approaches to agricultural research have made, attention to livelihood strategies and systems has been at the forefront. “Livelihood” refers to the strategies that individuals, households and their communities use in attempts to survive and achieve a higher standard of living. They involve ongoing processes of defining/redefining cultural, social, economic and political relations within communities and broader social institutions to address material and experiential needs with the goal of achieving some level of security and standard of living (Bebbington 1999; De Haan 2000; De Haan and Zoomers 2005; Ellis 1998). Special attention in livelihoods studies is directed toward understanding the assets people have and the challenges they face in their everyday endeavors to use those assets. Overall, research has shown diverse strategies as critical for sustainable livelihood systems that can withstand and/or adapt in the face of short-term stresses and long-term shocks (Bebbington 1999; De Haan 2000; Ellis 1998; Meert 2000).

The livelihoods framework, driven by a strong “bottom-up” approach to development, has important policy relevance to responding to the needs and interests of traditionally-underserved minority and limited resource producers. As Hall and Midgley (2004:107) state in their discussion of international rural development, “As both an analytical device and a practical tool, the livelihoods framework highlights the social policy concern with the well-being of people as the central focus of development efforts. This process will involve both micro- and macro-level actions through a whole range of institutional channels.”

Informed by the livelihoods framework and community-based research, this article seeks to articulate the experiences and recommendations of minority and limited resource producers so that their information, as conveyed through appropriate verbal and written channels, can be more clearly understood by those individuals and organizations responsible for developing policies and programs to meet the needs of these producers.

Methods

Six partner organizations collaborated and used existing networks and the expertise of farmers/producers and organizational liaisons to begin identifying and developing diverse market opportunities for minority and limited resource producers in Louisiana and Mississippi. The partner organizations included the Northeast Louisiana Black Farmers and Landowners Association, the Morehouse Parish Black Farmers and Landowners Association, Heifer Project International,

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Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, Delta State University and Southeastern Louisiana University.

Project activities were modeled on the community-based research framework that focuses on involving people at the grassroots level in collecting and analyzing data to inform social change (Pretty 1995; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Selener 1997; Stringer 1999). Focus groups have demonstrated effectiveness in facilitating participation in the research process and tapping the views of minority and other often neglected populations (Baker and Hinton 1999). Several project partners had successfully used focus group techniques toward such ends (citation withheld for the review process) by developing focus group discussion questions that further explored the experiences of their organizational members and related individuals from their communities. Each partner cosponsored at least one focus group meeting and assisted with additional focus group activities throughout the duration of the project, including review of the information generated by the focus group discussions to validate the accuracy of the reported experiences of minority and limited resource farmers in their communities. We provided focus group training and related technical assistance, as we had experience with organizing and conducting focus group research with producers (citation withheld for the review process).

Each partner organization was responsible for inviting producers and community representatives to focus group meetings, drawing from lists of organizational members and external networks in the respective region. Sponsors also secured meeting locations, facilitated focus group discussions, and provided refreshments. The focus group discussions, ranging from approximately 6-15 participants per discussion group, lasted about 1-2 hours, commencing with the participants reading and signing consent forms ensuring confidentiality. The focus group discussions explored these topics:

1. The role that agricultural operations play in local communities.
2. The effect of recent hurricanes on agricultural operations.
3. Existing and desired customer bases and market outlets.
4. Opportunities and challenges associated with the desired market outlets.
5. The meaning of sustainable agriculture.
6. Resources and organizations currently available to support sustainable agriculture.
7. Resources needed to explore opportunities in sustainable agriculture.

Focus group participants were also asked to complete a written questionnaire seeking information about the location of their own food purchases and the issues and values associated with their food purchases, the scope and type of farming or gardening operation in which they may be personally involved, their knowledge about a variety of potential market outlets, and their general demographic characteristics. To gain additional information from farmers on marketing through cooperative arrangements, field visits were conducted with representatives of two cooperatives in July 2006.

Data from the questionnaire administered to focus group participants was analyzed for descriptive purposes to characterize the farmers and their farming operations. Qualitative analysis of focus group data consisted of a team of researchers reading the notes to identify common themes. The themes and sub-codes were revised to account for new issues emerging from the data. A draft project report was written and distributed to all project partners, who were asked for critical feedback. The revised report was provided to the partners for their own use, and the data were used in generating this article.

Results

Five focus group meetings were conducted between December 2005 and June 2006 and included 82 participants. The meetings were held in the communities of Cleveland, Louisville, and Collins, Mississippi and in Bastrop and Oak Grove, Louisiana. Based on responses to the written questionnaire given to focus group participants, the mean age of the participants was 49 years, with the ages of participants ranging from 17 to 77 years (see Table 1). Seventy-two (72) percent of the participants were male, and 86 percent of the participants were African American. About 65 percent of the participants were married, and about 44 percent of the respondents had children below the age of 18 living in their household. Over one-third of the participants had earned a high school degree, and nearly 60 percent were currently employed full-time. Twenty percent of respondents identified themselves as self-employed. More than one-third of the respondents reported a household income of less than \$20,000 per year, with 44 percent of them reporting an annual household income of \$40,000 or more.

Agricultural Experience

Survey responses indicated nearly three-fourths of the participants currently either farmed or had active involvement in a farming operation, and 65 percent participated in gardening (see Table 2). More than four-fifths of respondents owned

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TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS FROM FOCUS GROUP SURVEY

	PERCENT
Gender	
Male.....	71.6 (53/74)
Female.....	28.4 (21/74)
Race/ethnicity	
American Indian.....	1.4 (1/69)
Black/African-American.....	85.5 (59/69)
White/Euro-american.....	11.6 (8/69)
Hispanic/Latino.....	1.4 (1/59)
Children below age 18 living in household	
No children.....	56.3 (36/64)
One child.....	23.4 (15/64)
Two children.....	15.6 (10/64)
Three children.....	4.7 (3/64)
Marital status	
Single, never married.....	19.7 (14/71)
Married.....	64.8 (46/71)
Separated, divorced, or widowed.....	15.5 (11/71)
Highest level of education	
Less than high school degree.....	7.0 (5/71)
High school degree or general education diploma (GED)....	38.0 (27/71)
Some college, but no degree.....	19.7 (14/71)
Two-year college degree.....	14.1 (10/71)
Bachelor's college degree.....	15.5 (11/71)
Master's degree or higher.....	5.6 (4/71)
Current employment status	
Disabled, unable to work.....	5.8 (4/69)
Unemployed.....	4.3 (3/69)
Employed, part-time.....	4.3 (3/69)
Employed, full-time.....	58.0 (40/69)
Self-employed.....	20.3 (14/69)
Other.....	7.2 (5/69)
Total household income in 2005 before taxes	
Less than \$20,000.....	36.0 (22/61)
\$20,000 – 39,000.....	20.0 (12/61)
\$40,000 and above.....	44.0 (27/61)

Source: SARE Focus Group Project, 2006

land, ranging in size from ½ acre to 300 acres. Total acreage in production in 2005 equaled 1,800 acres or more for only 4 percent of respondents, with the average (mean) being 130.23 acres. The average number of acres in production for 2006 was 126. Only 10 percent of respondents participated in some form of contract production.

Approximately 19 percent of respondents sold vegetables or fruit in 2005, with 30 percent expecting to do this in 2006. Nearly half of them produced commodity crops in 2005, and three-fourths raised livestock, with cattle being most common. Over three-fourths of the respondents reported the value of their total annual farm and/or gardening sales in 2005 as less than \$10,000, with 45 percent reporting it as less than \$1,000. Only 3 percent reported their 2005 sales as ranging from \$60,000 to \$70,000.

TABLE 2. FARM AND PRODUCTION CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS FROM FOCUS GROUP SURVEY

Farm or have active involvement in farming operations.....	74.0% (57/77)
Garden.	65.4% (51/78)
Own land.	82.1% (55/67)
Rent land from others.	35.8% (24/67)
Own <i>and</i> rent land.	19.5% (16/82)
Acres in agricultural production in 2005 (n=51)	
Mean.	130.23
Median.	30.00
Minimum – maximum.	0-2,000
Acres in agricultural production in 2006 (n=49)	
Mean.	126.00
Median.	35.00
Minimum – maximum.	0-2,000
Produced agricultural commodities in 2005	47.4% (27/57)
Produced fruits/vegetables in 2005.....	50.0% (29/58)
Sold fruits/vegetables in 2005.	18.5% (12/65)
Expect to sell fruits/vegetables in 2006.	29.7% (19/64)
Raised livestock in 2005.	76.6% (49/64)
Participate in contract production.....	9.7% (6/62)
Value of total annual farm and/or gardening sales for 2005 (before expenses)	
Less than \$1,000.	44.7% (17/38)
\$1,000 – 9,999.....	34.2% (13/38)
\$10,000 – 19,999.	18.4% (7/38)
\$60,000 – 69,999.	2.6% (1/38)

Source: SARE Focus Group Project, 2006

Food Purchasing and Market Outlets

Respondents were asked to identify existing food outlets in their area. Approximately 80 percent noted the existence of a full service grocery store. Slightly less than half identified a “mom and pop” grocery store existing in their area. Ninety percent of the respondents were aware of a convenience store in their

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area that sells food. Concerning agricultural markets existing in their area, half the respondents said that a farmers market exists, 44 percent identified community supported agriculture as available, 66 percent noted the existence of roadside stands, and 62 percent indicated the availability of on-farm sales of fresh foods. Compared with their overall access to nutritious food in their community, just over half the respondents identified it as “good,” while a third identified it as “fair.” Only 13 percent rated local access to nutritious food as “excellent.” Two of the most important issues affecting people’s food purchasing decisions were the freshness of the product and a desire to support local farmers, followed by the nutrition of the product, and worker pay. At least 58% of all respondents rated *each* issue as “very important.”

The written questionnaire explored participants’ knowledge of food marketing outlets that may be used to sell food products and whether they had ever used these outlets. Respondents were very familiar with traditional commodity buyers, wholesale markets and marketing directly to grocery stores; however, less than a quarter of them had ever sold products through these outlets. While 60 percent of respondents were aware that selling directly to restaurants comprises a market outlet, only 7 percent had ever sold products to a restaurant. Less than 3 percent had sold products to public institutions although more than half had heard of this market opportunity. While three-fourths of the respondents were familiar with roadside stands and door-to-door direct sales, less than one-fourth of them had used these market strategies. Knowledge about farmers markets and community supported agriculture was approximately 50 percent, but only 33 percent and 14 percent of the respondents, respectively, had ever sold products through these outlets. Almost 70 percent of the respondents had heard about cooperatives, as a type of marketing outlet; however, only 20 percent had ever sold products through a cooperative.

Focus Group Discussion Results

Focus group discussions were organized around three broad topical areas:

1. The role of agriculture in the community and existing customer bases.
2. Desired local food outlets for agricultural products and the opportunities and challenges associated with them.
3. Producing for local food markets, including sustainable production and the opportunities and challenges associated with this type of production.

Role of Agriculture and Marketing Opportunities and Challenges. Across the two-state project area, focus group participants represented the farming community, education, nutrition interests, and farmers markets in the region. Analyzing the importance of agriculture to the local community generated a comprehensive list of its benefits, such as providing fresh, high quality products, supplemental income, employment and other economic development opportunities. Agriculture's potential as a hobby was perceived to be a benefit. It can be a catalyst for land ownership, animal husbandry, and building a sense of self-reliance and teamwork within a family. If done using more sustainable methods, agriculture can protect and improve the natural environment and soil productivity, and support a perpetual cycle of sustainable food production. Community-level benefits associated with viable production could be opportunities for youth development and the building of networks with social institutions, such as churches.

Focus group participants emphasized the need to be creative with agricultural marketing through the development of niche marketing (e.g., export, ethanol, cultural niches) and sales to Internet audiences and institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and prisons). Other sales outlets could include roadside stands, restaurants, grocery stores, and processing and/or slaughtering plants for local products. Local food markets are valuable as they can bring producers and customers closer together, adding an element of quality to the food products and the relationship between these two groups. Strategies to increase public awareness of the value of local agricultural production could include "you pick" farms, agrotourism, the sale of local products in cafes, stores, and schools, and the establishment of food policy councils that bring together producers, consumers, and community developers. Relative to expanding particular types of production, participants identified vegetables and fruits, pecans, livestock ranching, goats, grapes, and feed to support game hunting. New opportunities may also lie in catfish and seafood production. In several focus groups, the desire to get youth involved in agriculture was an important issue, not only to maintain agriculture as an intergenerational tradition and livelihood activity, but as a way to encourage young producers to expand their agricultural knowledge and markets into more technical and innovative arenas.

Participants discussed interest in developing a commercial kitchen for value-added products (e.g., sweet potato pies) and a vegetable packing and processing facility, converting vacant school buildings into kitchens and processing plants. Additional recommendations for planning and organizing local market potential focused on opportunities for wholesaling, financial planning, information on how

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to organize producers and build networks, developing a regional marketing plan, and establishing a farm bank.

Participants discussed how food markets can succeed if they are established properly. Viable markets may help producers make money and even enable them to live solely off agriculture, a rarity among limited resource producers. They can provide safe and nutritious food for consumers and can support a system that keeps tradition and a way of life alive.

Several challenges associated with expanding local markets, however, were extensively discussed by the focus group participants. Common challenges were obtaining financial capital, marketing and advertising, securing a decent price, locating needed labor, securing land and equipment for production and processing (e.g., corn grinder, pea sheller), managing transportation issues, and improving public recognition of the value of local agriculture. Related issues were time constraints, legal bureaucracies, price, insurance, and proper planning for uncertainties and risk, such as weather. Participants were interested in more market and production coordination, a comprehensive identification of new markets, effective advertising, multi-year contracts, and receiving education and technical assistance for these endeavors. To build support for family farm agriculture, production loans and general information about production strategies are desired. Producers need to unite to be more competitive, but need the technical training and information to do this.

Advocacy to policymakers, such as at the state level, and receiving information from them, is critical according to the focus group participants, as is public education and awareness of what food is produced in this region of the South. Concerns persist regarding strict regulations limiting new market potential (e.g., food inspections and other standards), the bidding process for institutional sales, fears about risks associated with some types of production (e.g., mad cow disease, bird flu), and cultural factors, such as racial inequality regarding access to financing, sale barn prices, and contract specifications.

Producers in this region experienced several market setbacks due to recent hurricanes and the region's proximity to coastal areas. Extensive damage was done to homes, fences, timber, livestock, food availability, gas availability, employment, processing plants, sheds, and barns. Some producers experienced a total loss, essentially ending their agricultural business and their family legacy in agriculture. The farmer-to-farmer economy was affected through the loss of support services. Refinery shutdowns affected many components of agricultural production. To make matters worse, a drought recently affected the region, resulting in hay shortages

and other crop damage. Some producers have struggled with various levels of personal loss. These experiences may have short- and long-term personal and community-wide affects, such as stress, depression, abuse, poor health, increases in poverty and welfare dependency, and sometimes even suicide. It remains unclear how agricultural production will recuperate in this region.

Exploring and Achieving Sustainable Production. When examining the concept and components of sustainable agriculture, focus group discussants defined it as a form of agriculture that will last forever and be profitable. It is designed to protect the soil, improve animal and human health, increase grazing and composting activities, protect natural resources, and add value to products. Sustainable production means getting youth involved early with these methods, reeducating people through a “paradigm shift,” finding ways to get more out of the land and its resources, and generally thinking “bigger” through cooperation and networking. Sustainability can also mean bringing suitable industry to a community that provides jobs for youth. Overall, participant views of sustainable production were equated with the achievement of quality of life, enhancing the community, ensuring long-term stability and profitability for agriculture, and producing safe food, all with an eye toward opportunities for youth.

When assessing the promise of sustainable production, some participants viewed it as potentially cost-prohibitive unless savings can be realized through large-scale production. Economic risks associated with environmental factors and with rising fuel costs remain a concern. Producers often receive confusing messages about what sustainable products are in demand, and the public faces the same confusion about what to consume to stay healthy. Participants maintained that the term “organic” needs to be clearly defined for producers for them to consider using organic production methods.

If these producers are to engage in sustainable agriculture, it needs to be profitable and dependable for them each year. From the respondents’ point of view, it should involve alternative production, such as forestry, producing substitutes or product diversity, and maintaining the environmental integrity of the land.

Participants identified several organizations they believed to be supportive of sustainable agriculture, such as the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Services Agency (FSA), University Extension and regional universities, USDA/SARE, the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, the Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SAWG), some local banks, and the regional transportation system. Many more resources are needed, however, to support sustainable production.

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As for needed resources, focus group participants mentioned a range of topics. People need fences, equipment, dogs for herding, land, ponds, labor, ability to rotate crops and grazing, water, buildings, seasonal housing, youth involvement, and general education and creativity to help sustainable production become a reality. Producers want access to technical assistance on how to get started, how to maintain viable production levels, and securing capital. They also noted that required collateral should be unencumbered (not connected to every other aspect of their existence). People need access to the Federal Land Bank, to the Fannie Mae housing program, and other federal resources. The ability to network and pursue alternative production through producer organizations was important to the participants. The knowledge base for sustainable agriculture should be increased through Extension agent participation and demonstration projects.

Discussion and Policy Considerations

Several common themes emerged through this community-based research project with minority and limited resource producers in Louisiana and Mississippi. Key challenges that have faced agricultural producers in the U.S. for several decades with growing concentration in the agrifood system continue to affect small-scale producers in the South disproportionately, restricting the pathways they might use in pursuit of their livelihoods. These challenges require that producers unite to identify and pursue alternative and innovative production methods and market outlets for the wide variety of vegetables, fruits, meats, and value-added items that they can produce. Producers want to explore how to use more sustainable production techniques, as well as explore how to establish an organic agricultural operation, if they can first clearly understand what these terms and practices mean and if they have the necessary resources and customer base to ensure long-term economic viability. If the financial risks associated with investing in new market outlets or alternative production methods appear too great, producers are reluctant to pursue them. There is simply too much at stake given that agricultural production continues to be financially risky.

Regulations associated with these markets (e.g., standards associated with organic production) need to be adequately addressed by the producers without undue restrictions. Dealing with “red tape” has been viewed by some as a disincentive to market expansion. Farmers need to acquire the appropriate financial resources, equipment, land, and labor when pursuing new markets and investing in new production strategies. Technical support, financing, and opportunities through contractual arrangements need to be equally accessible to and fairly administered

for minority and limited resource producers. Historically, this has not been the case, and these producers have been underserved.

The findings from this exploratory research correspond with other studies concerning the challenges faced by small-scale, limited resource and minority farmers (e.g., Dismukes et al. 1997; Federation of Southern Cooperatives 2000; Gilbert et al. 2002; Grim 1996; Jones 1994; Oxfam America 2007; Wood and Gilbert 1998). Previous research supports the argument that these farmers face a variety of challenges, some of which are inherent to farming and others that result more from political and economic inequality. Challenges include environmental production constraints such as low soil fertility and disasters that are partially attributable to these producers' disproportionate reliance on small and often marginal land holdings. Constraints to landholding, including high land prices, loan interest rates and property taxes, and predatory actions by other producers, lenders and government agencies are also problematic. Limited financial resources and access to credit for short-term production cycles and longer-term farm improvements and restricted access to markets and subjugation to low prices present challenges as well.

Throughout this project, the focus group participants provided input that could be used to inform rural and agricultural development policy. They discussed the importance of producers staying politically active regionally, statewide, and nationally. Participants proposed that the data from this project be used to develop resources to inform discussions on the Farm Bill. This research could also be used to inform state-level policies and be a catalyst for obtaining and disseminating information from state governments about agriculture.

One focus group discussed establishing a food policy council in this rural region of the South to study the food system and make recommendations for improvements through policy initiatives and consumer education. Advocates for food policy councils—coalitions of public, private, and nonprofit organizations that develop local food production and distribution policies—contend that local and state governments can be important allies in addressing food security issues. They often have financial resources, mandates to address people's needs, mechanisms for increasing citizen involvement in local projects, and the ability to pass and enforce legislation supporting food security initiatives (see Biehler et al. 1999). With the ability to influence where grocery stores are located, identify available land for agriculture and other businesses, and deliver nutrition education, governments can influence the framework of food production and distribution. Food policy councils should also include several partner organizations that have the combined capacity to address

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various aspects of the food security puzzle (e.g., public schools, granting agencies, businesses, housing and neighborhood organizations, human service organizations, youth programs, transportation providers, and healthcare providers).

While these new or expanded policy strategies continue to be needed to support conventional production by minority and limited resource producers, additional policy programs must be created and/or enhanced to support their efforts to experiment with and establish sustainable production systems. Based on the content of the focus group discussions, we recommend further exploration of the following policy initiatives and their related social, economic, and political implications for minority and limited resource producers.

- Increase access to capital, technical information and marketing education necessary to develop sustainable production through existing agencies and nongovernmental organizations. For example, producers frequently identify the need for capital to make the transition from conventional to sustainable agriculture; however, much of the funding for this is provided as competitive grants. Until more emphasis is placed on programs that provide assistance to all producers that qualify rather than a very small demonstration group, sustainable production and marketing will remain limited in scope.
- Use research on sustainable agricultural practices to inform discussions on the Farm Bill and other rural policy programs for providing and/or increasing capital for producers interested in establishing or expanding sustainable production. Information documenting minority and limited resource producers' needs should be appropriately distributed and evaluated throughout all phases of policy development and program design. This information can be used to monitor the resources (such as funding and technical assistance) and outputs from these investments, and highlight areas where support for sustainable production needs to increase to make this model of production more accessible to minority and limited resource producers.
- Establish food policy councils through local, regional, state, or national organizations bringing together producers, consumers, community developers, and a variety of other stakeholders (e.g., healthcare providers, educators, business representatives, and youth) to study the food system and make recommendations for improvements through public policy. Recognizing that food policy councils already exist in many cities and states, there remains a need to develop more of a presence in rural areas and to give them resources. These councils could build consumer awareness about sustainable agriculture and the

social, economic, and environmental benefits of supporting local producers engaged in sustainable production.

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