

POLICY EDUCATION APPROACHES TO MINORITY LANDOWNERSHIP ISSUES

Clyde E. Chesney

*Agricultural Extension Service, North Carolina State University, Raleigh
and*

Emery Rann III

North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, Greensboro

My role is to discuss public policy education approaches to black landownership issues, to explore alternative solutions and their consequences, and to suggest ways for public policy education on these issues. Because the factors leading to the decline in minority rural landownership are so complex, it is often difficult to pinpoint a specific solution. However, the immediate means by which land is lost include tax sales, partition sales, mortgage foreclosures, failure to write wills, landownership limitations placed on welfare recipients, eminent domain, and voluntary sales with little knowledge of the true value of land.

The loss of land by these means points to the need for an intensive education program to reach the audience most likely to lose their land. Moreover, the ultimate unraveling of the social, economic, political, and legal complexities of the problem require a public policy approach.

Policy Education Issues

Four policy issues I will address are (1) the lack of recognition of the problem by various publics, (2) the complexity of the problem, (3) teaching rights and responsibilities of landownership to limited-resource clientele, and (4) changing the perceptions of land as a millstone to land as a stepping-stone for minorities. We have addressed these issues to some extent with the three-year Landownership Information Project (LIP) in North Carolina. I will briefly discuss these issues and provide an example of what we have done in North Carolina as one alternative.

Recognition of Problem

Before you can begin to solve a problem, you must first acknowledge the existence of a situation which is less than desirable, study and

understand the various factors causing this situation, increase the awareness and understanding of the issues among various publics, and develop strategies for addressing these factors.

The problem of minority land loss is one such case. For example, it took almost 60 years (1910–1970) for action to evolve which called for the national effort to stem the tide of the loss of black landownership — Robert S. Browne's landmark study and the formation of the Emergency Land Fund. Even then, landowners, policy decision-makers and others were slow to recognize the problem, and landowners continued to lose land. Few programs were designed to combat this apathy or to overcome this apparent indifference.

Our strategy in North Carolina to increase awareness and understanding of the problem has evolved in several ways. First, we organized a multidisciplinary advisory committee composed of District Extension Chairpersons, County Extension Chairmen, County Extension Agents, an economist with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, the state field director with the North Carolina NAACP, the president of the North Carolina Association of Landowners, a representative from the State Economic Opportunity Office of the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, staff from Legal Services, a faculty member from the North Carolina Central University (NCCU) Law School, and the clergy. Quarterly meetings with this body have been held to apprise the Advisory Committee on project progress and to exchange ideas and information on resources and retention strategies available to the minority and limited-resource landowner.

Second, we have worked long and hard to maintain media coverage of this project. Consequently, since the inaugural meeting on November 5-6, 1980, of the Landownership Advisory Committee in Greensboro, we have been blessed with excellent mass media coverage of the project. First, an outstanding article was written by Bill Kessler in the *Greensboro Daily News* detailing the impact of land loss. Since that time, many other articles have appeared in leading dailies, such as the *Charlotte Observer*, *Raleigh's News & Observer*, and the *Greensboro Daily News*, as well as in large circulation weeklies such as the *Carolina Peacemaker* and *Winston-Salem Chronicle*.

In addition, the project director has been heavily involved with media coverage of the LIP and the land loss problem. He has assisted in the production of, and/or appeared in, documentaries and features on land loss on television stations in Durham — WTVD-TV and an independent cable franchise — Raleigh (WRAL-TV), and Greensboro (WFMY-TV). The project coordinator and director have also appeared on a week-long series on Greensboro's WFMY-TV discussing resources available through the agricultural extension program. The LIP director has also appeared on various radio talk shows and has recorded

several landownership tips for the "Open Door" program which is sent to county extension offices and subscribed to by radio stations in Greensboro and other cities.

Additionally, papers on the project have been presented at the February 1981 annual meeting of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists (SAAS) in Atlanta, Ga; the January 1982 Community Resource Workshop of the Agricultural Extension Program at Florida A&M, Tallahassee; and the State Advisory Committee for North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service. Another presentation has been made in Arkansas at the Rural Life Annual Program.

In conclusion, we have worked long and hard to spread the word that retention of landownership by limited-resource and minority landowners is a crisis in North Carolina and throughout the South.

Complexity of Problem

On November 5-6, 1980, the initial meeting of the Landownership Advisory Committee convened in Coltrane Hall on the campus of North Carolina A&T State University. Some highlights and major accomplishments of this meeting were: a presentation on minority land loss by Joseph Brooks, President of the Emergency Land Fund in Atlanta; recommendations to extend an invitation to a representative of Farmer's Home Administration to serve on the advisory committee; identification of landownership problems and recommendations on initial educational emphasis.

Twenty-six landownership problems in five areas were identified by the advisory committee: access to credit, property rights and responsibilities, attitudes toward the land, technical assistance for small farmers and institutional factors. Because of so many issues, the advisory committee recommended that we focus our educational materials and extension resources on rights and responsibilities of landownership, which we have done.

Although the project developed as a joint venture of the Natural Resources and Community Resource Development (CRD) program areas (now Community and Rural Development), it has eventually involved other extension and university personnel at North Carolina A&T, North Carolina State, and other universities. For example, the Family Resource Management Specialist at North Carolina A&T has conducted workshops on estate planning at several landownership forums. Additionally, other specialists at North Carolina State have been utilized as resource people for forums and workshops and as reviewers of publications.

Because idle or unproductive land is most likely to be lost, a special emphasis has been made to encourage landowners to at least invest in forest management. According to the 1974 Census of Agriculture, minority-owned farm woodland represented about 200,000 acres or

between 2.3 and 4.9 percent of farm woodland in the state. In conjunction with the private woodlot program at North Carolina State, the natural resources specialist has worked to adapt basic forestry information for poorly educated landowners in an effort to increase their participation in forest management activities.

Other related natural resource activities involved a contract with the Small Woodlot R & D Program at North Carolina State University School of Forest Resources to do a case study of forestry ownership and management problems of limited-resources and minority landowners in two counties.

Also, in April 1983 at Greensboro, a Symposium on Increasing the Involvement of Minorities and Women in Renewable Natural Resources, recognition was given to the problem that there are too few minorities and women to help teach, conduct research and disseminate information to this audience, which may hinder the increased involvement of minorities in managing and developing their woodland.

Teaching Rights and Responsibilities of Landownership

In 1980 the challenge facing us in North Carolina was to develop material that was understandable by a limited-resource audience with less than a high school education. Our objective was to develop multimedia materials, pretest and revise as necessary. Project materials developed — or in production currently — include: the LIP notebooks, one-page information sheets on various aspects of land loss, such as adverse possession, partition sales or foreclosure; a list of available landownership resources; a LIP brochure; and videotapes and slide-tapes on “Your Rights as a Landowner” and “Your Responsibilities as a Landowner.” Finally, we have produced a 4' × 4' portable exhibit which emphasizes contacting the local county extension office for additional information.

We have also identified and coordinated our activities with local support groups around the landownership issue, which has resulted in increased awareness in those communities of the problem and of resources available through the LIP and extension. The LIP has conducted or co-sponsored numerous landownership forums on land loss, land use and ownership throughout the state.

Functionally, this “networking” of resource groups has resulted in an effective and creative working relationship with the Landownership Information Project on various programs, forums, workshops and special projects. Such joint efforts were evident with forums co-sponsored by the Black Caucus of Legal Services Workers or through a television documentary with representatives of the National Association of Landowners and the Agricultural Extension Program field staff. The LIP director has also made presentations to such diverse groups as the North Carolina Chapter of the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women, the Greensboro Young Men's

Club, Applied Youth Development, NCCU Law School, and the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers (NCABL).

With the last group, the project director helped organize the NCABL Black Land Loss Task Force which aids in securing legal services for minority and limited-resource landowners with land problems. This project has resulted in an attorney at NCCU Law School teaching a course on land loss and providing legal counsel to clients. Students from this course will also be involved in researching cases.

Finally, the Landownership Information Project has conducted an educational and awareness-raising campaign for youth in the Greensboro-Guilford County area in the form of an essay contest on "The Importance and Value of Landownership." The contest was open to all area high school and college students. The premise behind this special project was that many kids come from families who have relatives with farms or interests in farmland that they have left. Because these children may inherit some interest in property or otherwise acquire landowner status, it is important to instill in them an awareness of the value and potential of such ownership. It is also well to apprise them — and their families — of the factors contributing to land loss and how to protect their land. This project also resulted in a general awareness-raising in the community with civic and business leaders participating in the contest administration.

Another factor in teaching rights and responsibilities to landowners was to provide orientation and training for extension staff. In 1981, orientation to LIP was provided to 1862 extension agents at the Annual Extension Conference in Raleigh. In 1982, at the 1890 Conference for Paraprofessionals & Supervising Agents, another workshop was conducted and LIP notebooks were distributed to all counties with 1890 staff.

Why is this important? As many of you in extension know, we are starting a four-year Long Range Planning Development Process. It is important for us to have land loss identified as a major problem so that at least 20-30 days (16 percent) of planned time will be devoted to the land loss problem.

The POW Committee on Community and Rural Development prepared a package of study materials for County Extension Long-Range Planning Relating to Community and Rural Development. Potential major problems were categorized, based on common threads, into three groups: local governments and organizations, economic development, and natural resources.

Within the broad category of natural resources, land use was identified as a major problem. In the situational statement, the declining ownership of land by limited-resource and minority landowners was listed as a major issue. Additionally, available extension resources in land use at NCSU and NCA&T were identified. Examples of resources

we could provide include information on limited-resource and minority landownership — public policies, support groups, legal issues and program materials.

Having land loss acknowledged as a major problem in the planning material was significant because agents, with the assistance of their county advisory committee, could identify land loss/ownership as a major problem, allocate appropriate days to address this issue, develop specific objectives, specify a plan of action, and suggest results for evaluation.

In other words, where land loss or land use is identified as a major problem, agents can be held accountable for not providing an educational program. Also, even if land loss is not listed as a major problem, agents can use some unplanned time to address this issue. In counties where agricultural technicians are employed, all will be expected to be sensitive to land loss issues.

Changing Perceptions of Land

One of the strategies which I discussed earlier was an attempt during Negro History Month to conduct an educational and awareness-raising campaign for youth in the Greensboro-Guilford County area in the form of an essay contest on “The Importance and Value of Landownership.”

As many of you know, one of the socio-economic reasons for land loss was the perception that rural landownership/life on the farm was a millstone rather than a stepping-stone. During the 40s and 50s, thousands upon thousands of black folks fled the rural South to the northern and west coast urban areas to find jobs, escape discrimination, and build better lives for their families.

While many built a better life for themselves, many found that life in the urban ghetto without the trees, open space, swimming holes, and vegetable gardens of the rural South was not what they had in mind. They came seeking upward mobility only to find that, without ownership of resources or availability of capital and equity resources, they controlled less and had less power in deciding their fate.

Since the majority of black landowners are in their 50s and 60s today, it is critical that intergenerational transfer of property become a current issue. While absentee landowners — sons, daughters, grandchildren, cousins, aunts, and uncles of the landowner who stayed behind — may not desire to return to the South and live, they need to understand that this land is an alternative equity resource they need to protect and preserve.

Therefore, the single most important impact that we in extension could have would be to increase the number of limited-resource families that write wills designating how their land will be transferred. The second most important thing we can do would be to educate and

encourage at least one member in the family to act as caretaker of that property. Such duties would include filing and protecting the deed, paying taxes, securing written leases, maintaining boundary lines, and managing forest resources.

Let me summarize our recommendations on how public policy education on landownership issues might be accomplished.

1. *Establish a Multidisciplinary Advisory Committee* — a multidisciplinary advisory committee can insure inputs and expertise from several related groups such as the legal, business, or political community. Additionally, it serves to legitimize the project among various publics such as extension administration, NAACP, and the church.

2. *Local Support Groups* — How do you respond to a land-loss crisis — a situation where loss of property is imminent if some action is not taken? While we have stressed the educational aspects of our program (long range impacts), there must be a mechanism for responding to crisis situations. After all major publicity, we usually received a half dozen telephone calls about specific landownership problems.

What we are suggesting is a local support group composed of similar kinds of groups and organizations as the state advisory committee. This support group could be a separate organization or could function as a specialized committee within the extension advisory leadership system. The names and telephone numbers of these members should be publicized because it is extremely important to have a local contact for problem resolution. With either approach, extension needs to be involved and visible.

3. *Legal Support* — While the legal dimension is only one of several aspects of the land loss issue, it is important to have cooperation and support from the legal community. In North Carolina we have been fortunate to have the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers to rally around this issue. They have organized a Land Loss Task Force, secured funding for a land loss project, and are otherwise supportive of our efforts.

4. *Consider Alternative Land Enterprises* — (Economic Development Strategies) — Why save land if you cannot farm and make a living? Where traditional farming operations are not feasible, other strategies must be developed to make it attractive to retain land — short term, intermediate, and long term. For example, investment in timber production might be one long-term possibility. Another alternative may be formation of economic development coalitions or use of land to create equity capital for other ventures. However, to initiate such projects, you need support and information from many other groups and organizations.

5. *Maintain Regional Networks* — Land loss projects may generate publicity in the short term, but the complexity of the problem requires a well organized long-term commitment. I think the 1890 institutions

are in a position to provide this commitment. With the support of the legal community, business, private organizations and others, they can begin to make a difference. In North Carolina, we have received a one-year Title V grant and a two-year USDA special needs grant to develop the LIP. However, along with other organizations such as NAL, ELF and Legal Services, we have only built the basement or foundation to retaining landownership.

Now, in order to successfully build the first and second floors, some type of regional networking must be organized and support generated to continue the work of the LIP and coordinate efforts with Emergency Land Fund, or of Legal Services. I think it is extremely important for 1890 institutions — Agricultural Extension Programs in particular — to have a leadership role in this endeavor. But they must get out front and maintain their leadership with supportive teaching, research and extension programs. And, as policy specialists, you should and must be involved with these teaching, research and extension efforts. We hope you respond to this challenge.

REFERENCES

- Browne, Robert S. *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South*. New York: The Black Economic Research Center, 1975.
- McGee, Leo and Robert Boone, Editors. *The Black Rural Landowner — Endangered Species*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979.
- Salamon, Lester M. *Black-Owned Land: Profile of A Disappearing Equity Base*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, Institute of Policy Sciences and Public Affairs, 1974.
- Salamon, Lester M. *Land and Minority Enterprise: The Crisis and the Opportunity*. Washington, D. C.: Office of Minority Enterprise, U. S. Department of Commerce, 1976.
- Wunderlich, Gene. *Facts About U. S. Landownership*. Agricultural Information Bulletin No. 422. Washington, D. C.: Economics, Statistics and Cooperative Service. USDA, April 1979.

***THE U.S. FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL
SYSTEM: INTERNATIONAL SETTING***

