

SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY & AFRICAN AMERICAN LAND RETENTION

Newsletter



Welcome back!

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

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In this issue, the Sustainable Forestry & African American Land Retention (SFLR) network newsletter features our partners, the Black Family Land Trust (BFLT) and the Winston County Self Help Cooperative (WCSHC).

BFLT is among just a handful of conservation land trusts dedicated to the preservation and protection of African American and other historically underserved landowners' assets. As part of the SFLR network, BFLT has assisted more than 120 families in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia with special projects in Alabama, Mississippi, and Vermont. BFLT was also one of three lead organizations responsible for the successful passage of Virginia's Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act in 2020.

WCSHC, located in Louisville, Mississippi, was established in 1985. Since joining the SFLR network, WCSHC has assisted over 130 families to realize the environmental and economic benefits of a forest management plan and to see their forest as a sustainable resource that can form a legacy that benefits multiple generations.



Feature Story

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022 Provides Significant Support for Farmers, Ranchers, and Forest Landowners

The newly enacted Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) recognizes the critical role of America's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. Significantly, a number of the measures specifically address challenges faced by many of the African American families served by the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention (SFLR) network.

According to Ebonie Alexander, Executive Director of the Black Family Land Trust, "Many of the provisions in this amazing legislation will improve the quality of life for landowners by providing families with the tools necessary to make informed, proactive decisions about their land assets and their use."

Conservation Programs

According to an analysis performed by the American Farm Bureau, the law will invest in helping farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners deploy climate-smart practices that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase the storage of carbon in soils and trees, and make their operations more productive. (Myers, 2022.)

The IRA funds, distributed through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), include:

- \$8.45 billion for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).
- \$4.95 billion for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).
- \$3.25 billion for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).
- \$1.45 billion for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

In addition, the IRA allocates \$1.4 billion in Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA). This funding will assist farmers in adopting conservation practices and implementing programs to quantify carbon sequestration and reduce carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxygen emissions.

All of these programs are extended through 2031 and double the funding for current USDA programs. This assistance will help up to 280,000 farmers and ranchers apply conservation practices to approximately 125 million acres of land.

Further, the law helps to shield rural lands from climate impacts. Measures include \$4.9 billion toward increasing the climate resiliency of forests on 280,000 acres of non-federal land, supporting conservation easements on 475,000 private acres and preparing management plans for an additional 1,500,000 private acres.

The IRA also offers incentives for farmers, agribusinesses, and other rural residents to adopt renewable energy technology and practices. This includes \$1 billion designated for the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP), established in the 2008 U.S. Farm Bill, which provides financial assistance to agriculture producers and rural small businesses to purchase, install, and construct renewable energy systems or energy efficiency improvements. A larger component of the law provides \$9.7 billion in USDA assistance to rural electrification cooperatives.

“This funding presents woodland owners with a tremendous opportunity for rural farmers to convert their property into a significant asset. By doing so, they can strengthen their families’ financial positions for generations to come while improving the health of their forests and the habitats within them,” says Alton Perry, Director of the SFLR program at Roanoke Electric Cooperative.

Protecting the Property Rights of Underserved Landowners

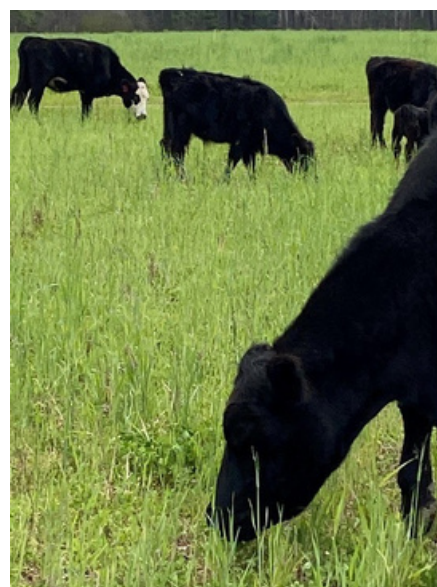
The IRA will help provide much-needed assistance and protection to landowners who have experienced discrimination in accessing USDA programs.

Reference

Myer S. (2022). *What’s in the Inflation Reduction Act for agriculture? American Farm Bureau Market Intel. What’s in the Inflation Reduction Act for Agriculture? (fb.org).*

New provisions include:

- \$125 million for outreach, technical assistance, and other forms of assistance to underserved farmers, including military veterans who are farming, limited resource farmers, beginning farmers, and farmers operating in high-poverty areas.
- \$200 million to help farmers resolve or clarify land title issues.
- \$250 million to fund research, cooperative extension programs, and education for minority farmers through 1890 land grant institutions. The funds can be used to support scholarships, internships, and pathways to the agricultural sector or federal employment.
- \$2.2 billion to provide discrimination financial assistance to any farmer, rancher, or forest landowner determined to have experienced discrimination prior to January 1, 2021, from a USDA farm-lending program.
- \$10 million to fund the establishment of an equity commission.



Photographed above: The Willis family carbon farm planning project. The IRA will continue the work of small farmers in agriculture.

Site Spotlight



Winston County Self Help Cooperative (WCSHC) Helps Landowner Fulfill Life-Long Dream



*Kiara Syph, Advocacy Specialist, WCSHC
with Bonnyet Johnson*

More than 90 years ago, Ms. Lue Virgia Miller was born in Louisville, Mississippi, on land that had been in her family for many years. Today, as Ms. Miller prepares to celebrate her 91st birthday, she has the assurance that the land that is so much a part of her family's birthright will now become a legacy for generations to come.



*Photographed
left:
Lue Virgia
Miller*

Her daughter, Ms. Bonnyet Johnson, explains that some of the lands were from her mother, Mattie Miller's side of the family, and some from her father, James (Gene) Miller's side of the family. "Mom owns several lots in Winston County. She paid taxes on these lots for many

years but got no real use out of the land," says Ms. Johnson. She adds that her mother moved to Chicago and lived there for more than 50 years, and now resides with her daughters in Maryland.

"In early 2021, Mom started talking about selling timber on the lots. This was not going to be an easy task because she wanted to sell the wood in Mississippi while living 800 miles away. She called family and friends still living in Louisville, as well as in Chicago, asking if they knew anyone looking to buy timber. When that didn't work, we started searching the internet for buyers, but we were unable to find anyone," says Ms. Johnson.

Then a miracle happened.

Frank Taylor, Team Leader for WCSHC, called Ms. Miller to see how she was doing. Ms. Miller and Mr. Taylor's mother, Artie Mae Taylor, were cousins and good friends growing up. During the conversation, the subject of land arose and Mr. Taylor talked to the family about the WCSHC and the services they provide. He offered to assist them with Ms. Miller's timber sale project.

In their work with Ms. Miller, WCSHC provided the family with the technical support to make the sale a reality. This process included sending forester Malone Buchanan to perform a timber cruise, which is a woodland-area survey, to determine its timber volume, species composition, and forest product allocation. Like many African American landowners, the Miller family was a little wary and somewhat distrusting because they had never met Mr. Buchanan. "But Frank reviewed the cruise reports with us, answered our numerous questions, and assured us that we were headed in the right direction," says Ms. Johnson.

The family entered into a contract with Mr. Buchanan to act as Ms. Miller's representative. However, in the process of bidding on the timber and securing a buyer, Mr. Buchanan found that Ms. Miller had a tax deed but needed a warranty deed to sell the wood.

Stepping in, WCSHC researched and helped the family secure a local lawyer who specializes in land and property law. "They even made several visits to the law office on Mom's behalf. There were lots of e-mails back and forward and documents that had to be notarized, but Mom never had to make a trip to Mississippi. It took almost five months, but the deeds were cleared, and we were able to proceed. On February 22, 2022, the timber sale was finalized. The entire process took approximately 12 months to complete, but it was definitely worth the wait," says Ms. Johnson.

WCSHC continues to assist the family in the reforestation of their land through the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Through EQIP, NRCS provides agricultural producers and non-industrial forest managers with financial resources and one-on-

one help to plan and implement enhancements, such as forest stand improvement. Further, WCSHC helped the Miller family sell some of their property and offered support with will and succession planning.

All of these services not only protect the family lands but can help ensure intergenerational wealth. Ms. Johnson says, "This project and our conversations with Frank have given us a new-found pride in land ownership and a new appreciation for family heritage and legacy. We have nothing but praise for Frank and his staff for all that they did to shepherd us through this process. We could not have done it without them."

Site Spotlight



Preserving the Land in Perpetuity



Ebonie Alexander, Executive Director, Black Family Land Trust (BFLT)

Since purchasing their farmland more than 30 years ago, Joe and Geraldine Thompson have seen an increase in commercial and residential growth near their Cedar Grove farmstead in North Carolina. The couple was concerned that after all their years of hard work, their land could one day be lost to development. This prompted the Thompsons to begin working with the BFLT to pursue a perpetual agricultural conservation easement to preserve their 40-acre farm.

A conservation easement provides an asset-protection approach, protecting a property owner's specific parcels of crop and agricultural land, forestland, waterways, and grassland. An easement is a voluntary agreement tailored to meet each landowner's needs that restricts the use of land for a specific period of time while allowing the landowner to retain ownership of their land.

With resources from the North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation (ADFP) Trust Fund, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) Farmland and Ranchland Preservation Program (FRPP), and Orange County Lands Legacy program, a perpetual agricultural conservation easement was closed on the Thompson Prawn Farm. This easement ensured that this farmland would forever be used for agricultural purposes.



*Photographed above:
Mr. Joe Thompson preparing to feed the prawn on his farm that is protected by the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program.*

The funds the Thompsons received allowed them to diversify farming operations. Mr. Thompson continues to be one of the area's leading producers of farm-raised prawns, which is far less labor intensive than the tobacco farming he transitioned from following the

USDA Tobacco Buyout program. In addition, the couple benefitted through debt elimination and the ability to reinvestment in the farm.

Mr. Thompson summed it up best, saying, "When my time comes and I die, I can lay my dead bones down in peace knowing that my land will always be used to feed people."

BFLT also assisted Martha Leonard-Mobley, the owner of a 925-acre agricultural farm located in Franklin County. The land also contains a home constructed in the 18th century and large mule and grain barns constructed in the 1920s.

When her grandfather purchased the original farm in 1911, it totaled 1,000 acres. Since his passing in 1940, the farm has been split among four siblings. Portions were subsequently repurchased by Ms. Leonard-Mobley's parents, necessitated by the passing of an heir who died without a will. She has worked diligently to recover the family-owned farmland but realized action was necessary to keep her land in agriculture, according to her family's desires.

Like the Thompsons, she decided longer-term conservation was the appropriate measure. Besides being able to keep her land in agricultural use, her 25-year conservation agreement protects the farm from development and preserves its heritage and historic buildings. Further, the funding provided will assist her in purchasing parts of the farm that have been divided off and are at risk of being sold.

This longer-term strategy enables Ms. Leonard-Mobley to maintain her farm in agricultural use until she decides on more permanent means of preserving the farm. Most importantly, it offers peace of mind in knowing that her family's wishes are being honored.

Preserving the Legacy of African American Land Ownership

The use of easements and other conservation tools, utilizing the basic elements of conservation as a means of securing land assets long-term, is one of the strategies that collectively comprise BFLT's Wealth Retention and Asset Protection (WRAP) program. WRAP is a comprehensive intergenerational program designed specifically to reduce the rate of land loss among African American and other historically underserved populations.



Photographed above: The Fuller family is working with BFLT to preserve the African American Folklore legacy on land owned by an African American family for over 100 years in Orange County.

Beyond easements, core WRAP strategies include:

- Ensuring clear land ownership, providing families with educational seminars and legal services to obtain an unencumbered land title and or deed.
- Promoting intergenerational land protection and estate planning, breaking the cycle of heirs' property through wills, estate and trust planning, and corporate structures.
- Intergenerational financial management, focusing on the challenges of rural economies.
- Moving beyond subsistence farming and green economies, by focusing on new and beginning farmer programs, cultural tourism, 21st-century farming, alternative crops, entrepreneurship, and business and sustainable energy development.

Through WRAP and our other programs, BFLT honors the legacy of those stewards of the land that came before us and ensures faith in those stewards of the land that will come after us. We believe that the land is an asset and that land ownership represents wealth, power, community, sustainability, and economic opportunities for generations yet born.



Photographed above: Views of former NBA star Ralph Sampson's family farm in VA. Mr. Sampson and his family are utilizing BFLT's Wealth Retention & Asset Protection Program.