

Breaking Barriers: Examining Heirs' Property Legislation and Access to USDA Programs



The Socially Disadvantaged Farmers & Ranchers Policy Research Center, Alcorn State University

This release is a long time coming. The Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Policy Research Center located at Alcorn State University (The Policy Center) began funding research studies surrounding heirs' property in 2020. In partnership with the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC), this edition serves as an intermediary to broaden the accessibility for the rich data, research, and policy recommendations conveyed in these studies. We thank them and all the authors for their patience and willingness to be involved in this project.

Authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill, the Policy Center is located at the oldest 1890 Land-Grant University, Alcorn State University, and serves as a unified voice representing all socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (SDFR) in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Since its conception, the Policy Center has centered its research around six research priorities providing data-driven information to key stakeholders. The priority of land loss among African American farmers is where heirs' property lies. Heirs' property is a main source of land loss and serves as a catalyst for other issues that impact SDFRs. Other Policy Center research priorities such as participation in United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs and practices and access to vital resources like capital and technology are directly influenced by the lack of clear title that heirs' property owners cannot obtain. In addition, even after the policy advances enacted by the 2018 Farm Bill, barriers for heirs' property owners remain. Participation, eligibility, and good standing with USDA programs, credit institutions, and equipment companies are among the most impactful barriers.

The Policy Center felt that prioritizing heirs' property research gave insight into how the consequences of heirs' property ownership historically influenced the success of SDFR farm operations and land access. These studies helped model an accurate profile of a SDFR heirs property owner. Our partnerships with the authors enhanced the knowledge base, created policy recommendations for upcoming Farm Bills, and became the catalyst for continued work and partnerships. As an example, the Policy Center, the SRDC, and the Southern Risk Management Extension Center facilitated the creation of curriculum and workshops for trainers where, over the past two years, approximately 300 professionals have been trained to provide peer reviewed

information to their constituency across the U.S. Participants include community leaders and staff from the nineteen 1890 Land-Grant Universities. Additional funding from USDA Farm Services Agency (FSA) provided a continuation of the curriculum throughout service areas of extension agents and minority serving institutions. Other products of this collaboration include the Heirs' Property Practitioner Network, as well as a committee and research study on the ethics of working with heirs' property owners. These partnerships will help bring forth the concerns and barriers that still affect SDFRs throughout the nation.

We are proud to advance heirs' property research and provide a vehicle for increased awareness and engagement. Our goal is to continue the Policy Center's mission of advancing the success of socially disadvantage farmers and ranchers throughout the U.S.