

Participation of Minorities in Cost-Share Programs-The Experience of a Small Underserved Landowners' Group in Alabama

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Received: June 2, 2012 Accepted: February 27, 2013 Online Published: March 26, 2013

doi:10.5539/jsd.v6n4p70

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/jsd.v6n4p70>

Abstract

This article highlights aspects of the historical, social and policy developments of cost-share programs in the USA. The experiences of African Americans who are members of Limited Resource Landowners Education Network in attempting to access available cost-share resources in Alabama are presented. Literature reviews, participation in and response to the USDA's Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), and discussions with stakeholders were the primary sources of information and data used in this exploratory analysis which was conducted within the framework of a "modified action research model".

Until recently underserved landowners' participation in cost-share programs in Alabama has been very limited. Although in theory access has been open to underserved landowners, these landowners have historically encountered a range of challenges in trying to participate in the cost-share programs. Many of those challenges, the analysis has indicated, stemmed from: (a) Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS') limited pool of available and relevant technical personnel, (b) the agency's interpretation of existing program policy guidelines and (c) the low level of underserved landowners' trust and confidence in the transparency and fairness of federal and state agencies and their officials.

Successfully navigating such obstacles and challenges during the implementation of the CCPI initiative in Alabama necessitated much understanding, perseverance, collaboration, and a willingness to compromise by all project stakeholders. Strategies likely to assist other similar groups in successfully navigating the various Federal and State requirements for participation in cost-share programs are proposed. Lessons learned will inform future application of the action research model in this continuing study.

Keywords: policy, cost-share, underserved landowners, Alabama, action research model

1. Introduction

Policymakers generally employ a tool-box of policies to effect changes in individual or group behaviors, for the purposes of accomplishing program objectives or to facilitate program implementation (Janota & Broussard, 2008). The range of policy initiatives generally includes regulations, education, technical assistance, or incentives (Janota & Broussard, 2008; Kilgore & Blinn, 2004). Cost-share programs have proven to be one of the important policy instruments and incentive programs for influencing landowners' and farmers' behaviors and to promote sustainable agriculture, resource conservation, and sound land use. Based on a study of policy tools in the USA and Canada Kilgore and Blinn (2004) concluded that "...technical assistance, educational, and cost-share programs account for 88% of all state and provincial programs directed at encouraging forest landowners to use practices suggested..."

Cost-sharing can be defined as a "...multiparty agreement under which costs of a program or project are shared by the involved parties, according to an agreed upon formula" (Business Dictionary, 2011). In the case of natural resources and agricultural cost-sharing, the involved parties are the landowners who undertake to implement certain practices on their land and the government who reimburses the landowners for a portion of the cost of implementing the agreed practices. In addition, the government provides an annual financial incentive to the landowner over a specified period during which the agreed land uses are to be maintained. This formula is the

most recognizable and applies to current cost-share practices. However, when the concept of cost-sharing was first introduced in the 1930s, producers were paid not to produce certain products (Ganzel, 2003).

Cost-share programs have been studied from different perspectives such as examination of the causes for continuation of state cost-share programs (Mehmood & Zhang, 2002) and to promote ranchers and farmers adoption of selected land use practices (Lee, Conner, Mjelde, Richardson, & Stuth, 2001; Weersink, McKittrick, & Nailor, 2001). However, investigation of the programs from the perspective of African American landowners within the context of the action research model was not evident in the literature, hence the reason for this study.

The purposes and mechanisms of cost-sharing have changed over time. The first cost-share legislation applied only to six crops, dairy, and livestock production. It was funded by a tax that was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court and had to be amended only one year after its inception (Landsburg & Gale, 2004). The current cost-share legislation, "The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008", commonly referred to as the "2008 Farm Bill", covers an array of practices. The 2008 Farm Bill is funded through and administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA delegates certain aspects of program implementation to other Federal and State agencies, NGOs, and other organizations.

One relatively recent beneficiary of cost-share in Alabama is the Limited Resource Landowners Education Assistance Network (LRLEAN). LRLEAN's project, funded through NRCS' Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), aims at assisting small landowners with the development of management plans and implementation of conservation practices. LRLEAN is a group of primarily African American landowners who are active participants in land conservation in Alabama. Participation at the Southern Conference of State Foresters in 1998 by several African American landowners from Alabama as guests of the then Alabama Forestry Commission's (AFC) State Forester served as the spark that motivated some of these landowners to begin to work together. Soon thereafter the State Forester invited some members of this landowners' group to join a few other underserved landowners and producers to serve on an Outreach Advisory Council to AFC. Historically underserved producers and landowners include "beginning farmers and ranchers", "socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers", and "limited resource farmers and ranchers". Beginning farmers are defined as individuals who have not owned a farm or ranch for more than ten years whereas limited resource farmers are defined as those farmers who have had less than \$116,000 in gross sales in the past two years with a total household income at or below the national poverty level or 50% below their county's gross median income. Socially disadvantaged farmers are defined as individuals that are members of any group that has been discriminated against based on their ethnicity or race (Economic Research Service, 2008).

The AFC's Outreach Advisory Council which is still active advises the State Forester on forestry and sustainable land use matters likely to impact or be of interest to underserved landowners in the State. The 2001 appointment of Jerry Lacey to serve as the first African American Commissioner on the AFC was also a very important milestone along the road which led to the formation of LRLEAN. The participation of many underserved landowners at forums focusing on land use issues and cost-share programs further helped to galvanize members into collective action. The result was the birth of LRLEAN in 2007.

The main purposes of LRLEAN are: (1) to solicit funding for the implementation of landowner outreach, education, technical assistance, and demonstration programs for limited resources and socially disadvantaged landowners, especially minorities, (2) to build the capacity of limited resources landowners and their organizations to provide peer-to-peer support for education and technical assistance, and (3) to encourage limited resources and socially disadvantaged landowners to join and become active members of mainstream organizations such as the Alabama Treasure Forest Association [ATFA] (LRLEAN, 2009). Currently, LRLEAN is building partnerships with other community-based organizations with similar purposes and goals in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

In recognition of the long-standing problem of the lack of participation in cost-share programs by socially disadvantaged groups including females, the NRCS, an arm of the USDA which coordinates and administers the cost-share program in Alabama dedicated "...20% of the FY 2002 [Forestry Incentive Program] FIP allocation to be used in working with underrepresented groups and limited resource farmers" (NRCS, 2002). The underlying assumption of NRCS then as well as the assumption of this study was that if small landowners are convinced of the existence of equal and fair access to cost-share programs these landowners are more likely to participate in the programs and are also more likely to encourage their peers to do likewise.

This article briefly explores this assumption and examines through a "modified action research model" the experiences of African Americans and their organization in accessing cost-share programs in Alabama. Based on this assessment recommendations are advanced for reducing barriers at the USDA-NRCS level to the active

participation in cost-share programs by underserved landowners and their organizations. Results, experiences gained, and perspectives gleaned from this study helped to frame and inform recommendations and proposed future actions.

2. Methodology

Three elements are considered in this section. These are: (i) development of an understanding of the historical context of cost-share programs through literature review and supplemented by face-to-face discussions with knowledgeable professionals and stakeholders; (ii) project implementation processes (those initially envisaged versus actual); (iii) analysis of processes, associated results and outcomes, evaluations and feed-back all within the broad framework of a modified action research model. Given the nature of the study some of these steps overlapped and were not necessarily in accordance with the sequence presented.

In similar studies the application of the action research model in essence addressed the process and nature of participation, assessed the experiences of participants and facilitators, and analyzed the challenges and issues relevant to address the problem under consideration (O'Brien, 2001). The model has been widely used in different disciplines such as social science research (Dickens & Watkins, 1999; Afify, 2008; DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999; Faure, Hocde, & Chia, 2011) and information systems (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1998; Checkland, 2007). The model provides for continuous monitoring and evaluation of stakeholders participation as well as for modification of initially proposed strategies, actions and anticipated outcomes, where appropriate.

The "modified action research model" adopted in this study sought to embrace the holistic approach of the action research model, one deviation being that no clearly defined and standardized procedures and monitoring criteria were set a priori. This approach was adopted largely because of the recognition of the very fluid and constantly changing project environment. Furthermore, in the context of this study some of the stakeholders (i.e. a few individual applicants and NRCS administrators) did not have advance knowledge of the research process although they were participants in the process. Some stakeholders joined the process late, hence the reason for lack of advanced knowledge. A deliberate decision was made, however, to limit interactions between facilitators and NRCS officials simply to minimize any possible direct influence on the agency's decision making process. Throughout the study LRLEAN officials kept their membership informed of project developments through direct communication and periodic meetings. Meeting attendees discussed proposed actions and provided input to help shape and influence relevant future LRLEAN approaches. Facilitators participated in the LRLEAN meetings, held quarterly conferences with LRLEAN's leadership to discuss possible solutions to challenges encountered, and had occasional interactions with selected applicants to assess participants' experiences and perspectives. It should be noted that with the exception of the landowners' application process and on-farm practices most of the activities and interactions to facilitate project implementation were between the LRLEAN leadership and NRCS officials.

Basic descriptive statistics were generated, where appropriate. In addition, some level of qualitative analysis of relevant data and information collected was also conducted.

2.1 Historical Context of Cost-Share Programs

Until recently, the specific needs and interests of some social groups in respect of cost-share initiatives were largely overlooked. The most recent legislation has several provisions that speak to these omissions and anomalies and has provided for special programs targeted at underserved groups. A brief review of cost-share will be considered at two levels (a) Federal and (b) Alabama.

2.1.1 Federal Level

The concept of government cost-share was first introduced in 1933 with the passing of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. During the 1930s the overproduction of agricultural commodities and livestock was not only draining the natural resources of the nation, but it was also weighing down the economy. To counteract these issues, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law 'The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933' (Ganzel, 2003). Under the AAA of 1933 farmers were paid to allow a portion of their land to lie fallow (Ganzel, 2003). Producers were also paid to reduce milk production and kill off excess livestock, primarily hogs (Landsburg & Gale, 2004).

The Agricultural Adjustment Administration, established under the AAA of 1933 had the mandate to oversee the distribution of subsidies and to store surplus produce (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2006). The AAA of 1935 was funded by a tax that was levied on the processors of agricultural produce. Those funds were in turn paid to the producers of those products (Landsburg & Gale, 2004). This process was deemed

unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1936, a decision which led to the passing of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938.

The AAA of 1938 retained many of the provisions of the act of 1933 but placed a quota on the production of certain products (Womach, 2005). The AAA of 1938 also expanded the crops eligible for support. But this Act is most significant because it is a portion of the permanent legislation governing and funding income support for farmers (Womach, 2005). In the case that newer legislation, if expired sections are not re-enacted, the law would revert back to the provisions mandated in the AAA of 1938 (Womach, 2005). The Agricultural Act of 1948 shifted the level of support for crops from fixed to flexible (Bowers, Rasmussen, & Baker, 1984).

The Agricultural Act of 1956 introduced the first forestry provisions through the Soil Bank Program, which authorized the Acreage Reserve Program (ARP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) (Womach, 2005). The ARP paid producers to retire land from production on a yearly basis between 1956 and 1959 whereas CRP paid producers to retire land for a fixed period in exchange for yearly payments (Womach, 2005). As a result of CRP, 2.2 million acres of land of which two million was in the southern states were re-planted in timber during 1956-1960 (Dangerfield, Moorehead, Newman, & Thompson, 1995).

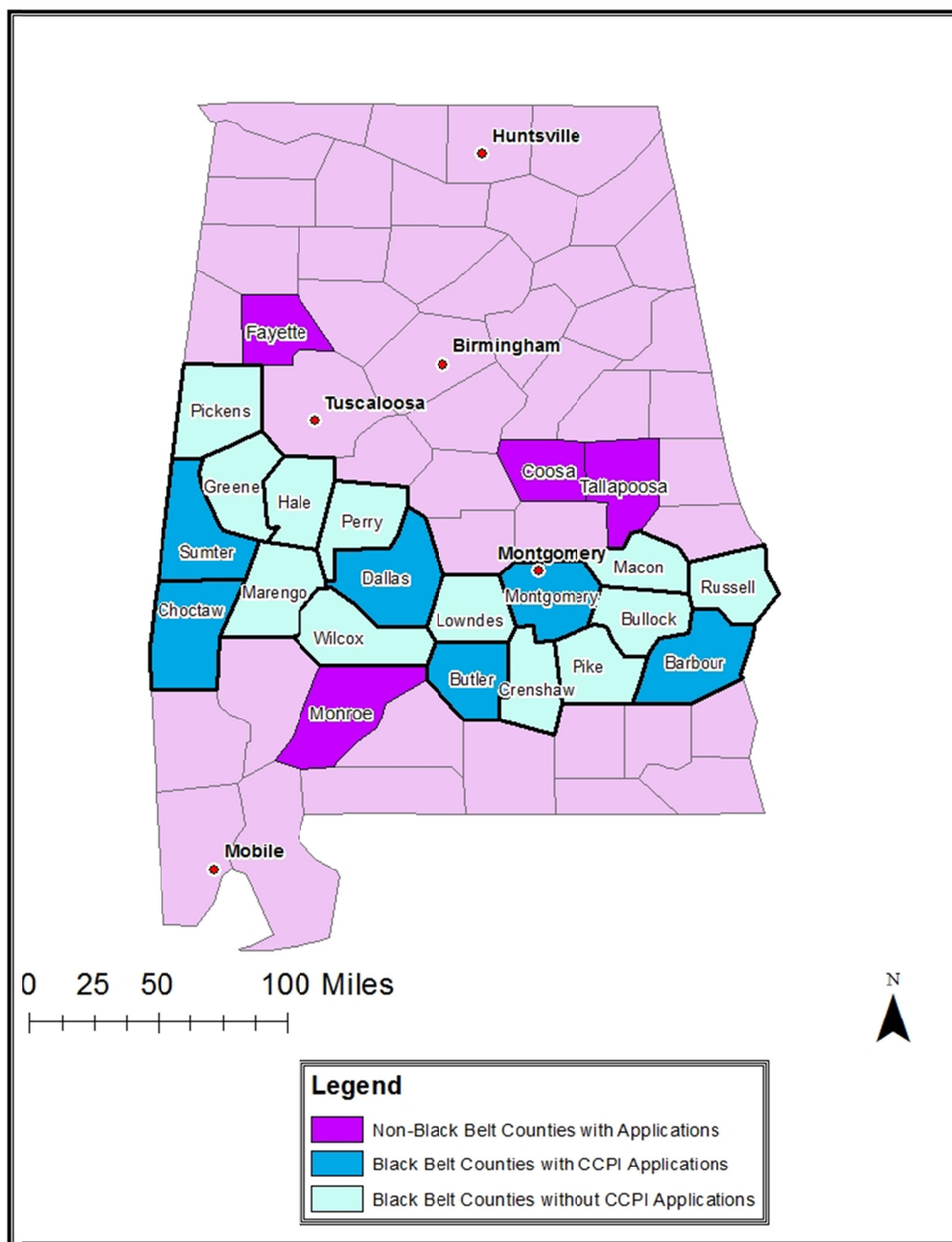
The Food Security Act of 1985 introduced the first “stand-alone” version of the CRP. This CRP was based on a previous version which was introduced under the Soil Bank Program in 1956. This newer version also contained both “swampbuster” and “sodbuster” provisions (Glaser, 1986). “Swampbuster” provisions applied to wetland conservation and were designed to keep producers from converting wetland areas into non-wetland areas whereas “sodbuster” provisions were designed to keep producers from planting on highly erodible soils without the use of any conservation practices on that land (Glaser, 1986).

The Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 was the first Farm Bill that contained a “Forestry Title” and established the Forest Stewardship Program, Forest Land Enhancement Program, Forest Legacy Program, and Urban and Community Forest Program (USDA, 2006). These programs were mainly structured to address private forest issues and protect important forest lands that were previously protected under earlier conservation legislation and that were now being threatened by non-forest and development issues. The 1990 Farm Bill also created the Environmental Conservation Acreage Reserve Program (ECARP) which contained a Water Quality Incentives Program (WQIP), an Environmental Easement Program, and a Wetland Reserve Program (WRP). These provisions were aimed at preserving and restoring wetlands and environmentally sensitive lands (USDA, 2006).

The Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 created the Farmland Protection Program (FPP) which secured and funded conservation easements on eligible lands threatened by development and authorized new enrollments in the CRP. Most notably, the 1996 Farm Bill enacted the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). Both of these programs promoted the use of conservation improvements and environmentally friendly practices on farmland (USDA, 2006). The 2002 Farm Bill created many sub-programs under EQIP along with several new watershed protection programs (Young, 2008).

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, the current Farm Bill, extended through September 30, 2013, is administered by the USDA. USDA’s supporting agencies (e.g. NRCS and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) are at the helm of most of the conservation and agricultural programs at the state level. The 2008 Farm Bill expanded some programs while scaling back on others. It also created the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) (USDA, 2008a). The 2008 Farm Bill also covers the CCPI, EQIP, Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP), and WHIP among others (USDA, 2008b). The most relevant change was the addition of provisions for traditionally underserved groups, specifically: beginning, limited resource, and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (USDA, 2008a). The CRP, EQIP, and CSP were the major programs targeted by the addition of these provisions (Economic Research Service, 2008).

The insertion of provisions for traditionally underserved groups saw the beginning of several smaller programs. One such program is the CCPI. Announced to the Alabama public in April 2009, it was created to provide financial assistance for projects that create new and successful ways to work with limited resource farmers and ranchers (NRCS, 2009). CCPI was open to eligible partners to enhance conservation practices on private lands through EQIP and WHIP. Through this initiative, projects were submitted to NRCS to be implemented in pre-selected targeted geographic areas. Within Alabama, the targeted area is the Black Belt region which includes several counties (Figure 1). In 2011, the CSP was added to the list of available programs (USDA, 2011a).



Date: 10/26/2011

Figure 1. Map of Alabama's Black Belt counties with approved Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) applications for 2010

The region referred to as the Black Belt in Alabama named for its dark, rich soils, contains roughly between 12 and 21 counties in the central part of the state. "Geographically, Alabama's Black Belt is part of a larger crescent-shaped area known as the Southern Black Belt, which extends from Maryland to Texas....During the twentieth century, Alabama's Black Belt became a hotbed of activity for the civil rights movement in the South" (Encyclopedia of Alabama, 2011).

2.1.2 Highlights of Cost-Share in Alabama

The Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) was one of the earliest examples of cost-share programs in Alabama. Under this program landowners were assisted for undertaking conservation practices on their land. A few years later the Rural Environmental Assistance Program (REAP), initially funded to the level of approximately \$1 million, was introduced (Tim Boyce, Alabama's State Forester [retired], pers. comm., November, 2011). The level of participation in both ACP and REAP was much lower than expected. It has been speculated that the leadership of these programs may have been partly responsible for the low level of participation of minorities (Tim Boyce, Alabama's State Forester [retired], pers. comm., November, 2011).

In an effort to encourage more participation in cost-share initiatives in the state by underserved landowners, the Forestry Incentive Program (FIP) was introduced in the 1970s to replace REAP. FIP had three unique features namely: (i) socially disadvantaged and limited resource landowners and farmers were strongly encouraged and facilitated to participate in the program, (ii) FIP facilitated a higher reimbursement level than ACP, and (iii) a deliberate effort was made to include minorities in the program's administration and leadership (Tim Boyce, Alabama's State Forester [retired], pers. comm., November, 2011). The scope and number of federal and state agencies administering cost-share programs in Alabama have expanded in the recent past.

NRCS is undoubtedly the leading federal agency involved in the administration of cost-share programs in the state. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) and US Fish and Wildlife Service (US-FWS) also administer selected cost-share initiatives in Alabama (Alabama Forestry Commission [AFC] 2011). The three leading state agencies which support and administer aspects of the federally-funded cost-share programs are AFC, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and Soil and Water Conservation Districts. The Longleaf Alliance Program, a non-profit organization, is very active in promoting the reintroduction of longleaf pine in its former range through a cost-share initiative (AFC, 2011).

This history of cost-share in Alabama, coupled with current initiatives and significant funding levels, have together created a greater sense of awareness and interest among underserved landowners. In 2006 and 2007 the percentage of successful applications for participation in EQIP was approximately 50% (Table 1, Figure 2). Interestingly, whereas 75.5% of applicants were successful in 2008, in 2009 only 24.6% of applicants were successful (Table 1, Figure 2). Available data indicates that the level of interest in WHIP was less than that in EQIP. During the five year period 2005-2009 an annual average of 55.1% of WHIP applications were funded (Table 2). The evidence from NRCS suggests that the number of EQIP and WHIP applications funded in any given cycle is largely influenced by the level of available funding.

Table 1. Funded and unfunded EQIP applications in Alabama during 2005-2010

Fiscal Year	Applications for Participation in EQIP (2005-2009)				Totals
	Approved/Funded		Not funded		
	Number for Yr.	% for Yr.	Number for Yr.	% for Yr.	
2005	1577	59.6	1067	40.4	2644
2006	1162	49.4	1188	50.6	2350
2007	1274	50.3	1261	49.7	2535
2008	1182	75.5	383	24.5	1565
2009	1199	24.6	3673	75.4	4872
2010	1279	N/A	N/A	N/A	1279
Annual Mean	1278.8	51.9*	1514.4*	48.1*	2540.8

*For the 2005-2009 period; N/A= Not Available.

Source: USDA, 2011b.

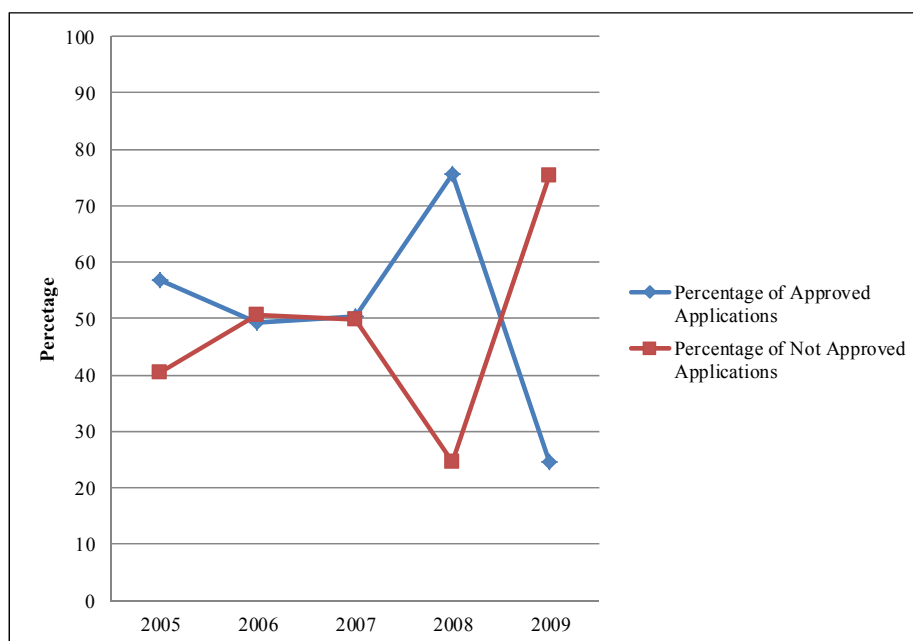


Figure 2. Graph of funded and unfunded EQIP applications in Alabama during 2005-2009

Source: USDA, 2011b.

Table 2. Funded and unfunded WHIP applications in Alabama during 2005-2010

Fiscal Year	Approved Contracts		Unfunded Applications		Totals
	Number for Yr.	% for Yr.	Number for Yr.	% for Yr.	
2005	134	70.9	55	29.1	189
2006	83	46.4	96	53.6	179
2007	53	29.6	126	70.4	179
2008	145	68.7	66	31.3	211
2009	142	59.9	95	40.1	237
2010	384	N/A	N/A	N/A	384
Annual Mean	111.4	55.1*	87.6*	44.9*	229.8

*For 2005-2009 period; N/A= Not available.

Source: USDA, 2011c.

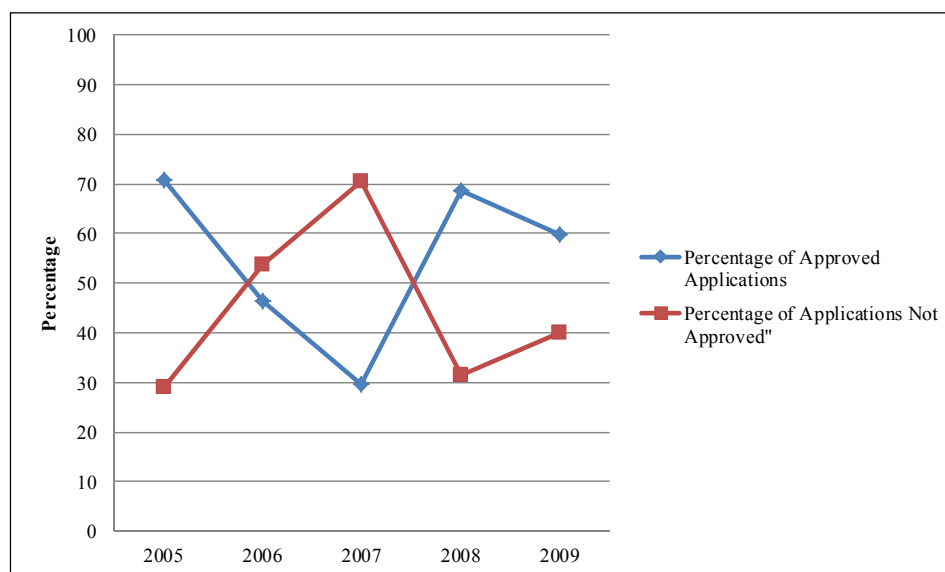


Figure 3. Graph of approved and unfunded WHIP applications in Alabama during 2005-2009

Source: USDA, 2011c.

2.2 Project Implementation Processes Initially Envisaged and Those Actually Followed

Five groups of stakeholders (i.e. LRLEAN's leadership, NRCS officials, individual applicants, researchers/facilitators, and a few other collaborators) contributed to the LRLEAN-NRCS project. LRLEAN officials - the project coordinators, NRCS - the administrators, and individual applicants - the direct individual beneficiaries, were the key players in this project. In addition to the facilitators from Alabama A&M University (AAMU) other project partners consisted of representatives of AFC, National Network of Forestry Practitioners (NNFP), National Wildlife Federation (NWF), Tuskegee University (TU), Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), Alabama Treasure Forest Association (ATFA), Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF), and the Community Based Landowners Development Consortium (CBLDC).

The funding agreement for LRLEAN's most ambitious endeavor to date, a five year (2009-2013) project funded by NRCS as part of CCPI was signed in April 2009 between LRLEAN and NRCS (Figure 4). The facilitators assisted LRLEAN in the development of its CCPI proposal and pledged to provide support and technical advice during project implementation. The overall goal of the project is to assist limited resource landowners who: (1) had never participated in EQIP or WHIP, (2) have a strong sense of commitment and responsibility, (3) would share knowledge gained with peers, (4) may not have had prior knowledge of EQIP or WHIP, and (5) had been reluctant to participate in such programs in the past (LRLEAN, 2009). Landowners who most fit these criteria were to be given priority consideration.

The estimated budget for the LRLEAN project was \$850,000. In 2009 LRLEAN was scheduled to receive \$50,000, followed by \$150,000 in 2010. In 2011, 2012, and 2013 LRLEAN was scheduled to receive \$200,000, \$225,000, and \$225,000 respectively (Table 3). By the end of 2013, LRLEAN hopes to reach at least 650 landowners. To achieve these objectives LRLEAN has been collaborating with AFTA, AAMU, TU, NWF, FSC, NNFP and CBLDC (Table 4).

LRLEAN's leadership and the facilitators were under the impression that project implementation would have commenced soon after the signing of the agreement. The hope was that within one to two months after interested applicants had completed the application, requested assistance would have been made available on farm. Unfortunately, the experiences were much different.

Table 3. Financial resources requested of NRCS and contributions from partners

Year	NRCS	LRLEAN*	AAMU*	TU*	AFTA*	NWF*	CBLDC**	Total
2009	50,000	5,000	5,000	5,000	5,000	5,000	5,000	80,000
2010	150,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	210,000
2011	200,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	290,000
2012	225,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	315,000
2013	225,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	315,000
Totals	850,000	60,000	60,000	60,000	60,000	60,000	60,000	1,210,000

*Estimate in-kind match (US\$) consisting of salaries, travel, equipment, and supplies.

** The CBLDC project ended in 2010. The National Network of Forest Practitioners (NNFP) filled the void created due to the absence of CBLDC.

Source: LRLEAN, 2009.

Within a couple months following the signing of the agreement LRLEAN sought to begin the implementation of the project. However, several obstacles were encountered. Numerous telephone and electronic exchanges, face-to-face encounters, and much perseverance were necessary in order to successfully address these obstacles. The collective efforts of representatives of NRCS, LRLEAN, AAMU, and AFTA were necessary in order to overcome some of the hurdles.

One of NRCS' initial concerns was verification of LRLEAN's eligibility under the IRS' definition of an NGO before any funds were disbursed. In this regard NRCS requested official documentation confirming that LRLEAN was a legal subcommittee of ATFA and was covered in every county in Alabama under the umbrella of ATFA's 501(c) (3) status (Jerry Lacy, LRLEAN's President, pers. comm., November, 2010). The parties were able to meet in June 2009 at which time this issue was finally resolved.

Table 4. LRLEAN's proposed project activities and implementation schedule for 2009-2013

Activity	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
<i>No. of landowners contacted about CCPI</i>	50	150	150	150	150	650
<i>No. of landowners participating in workshops and training on CCPI</i>	25	50	50	50	50	225
<i>No. of landowners with base data & management plans</i>	5	15	25	35	45	125
<i>No. of landowners applying for CCPI program</i>	5	15	20	30	40	110
<i>No. of landowners successful in CCPI</i>	5	15	20	25	35	100
<i>No. of acres in CCPI program</i>	100	325	600	800	1,000	2,825
<i>No. of landowners selling ecological services</i>	5	12	15	20	25	77
<i>No. of landowners participating in demonstration of CCPI</i>	5	15	20	25	35	100

Source: LRLEAN, 2009.



Figure 4. Official signing ceremony of the NRCS/LRLEAN Agreement in April, 2009.

Sitting: Ms. Shannon Weaver - Assistant State Conservationist for Technology flanked by LRLEAN's President Jerry Lacy to her right and Vice President Edward Davis to her left. *Standing (from right to left)*: Tim Boyce, LRLEAN member and former Alabama State Forester; Colmore S. Christian, Assistant Professor at AAMU; Buddhi Gyawali, Assistant Professor at KSU; James Malone, Executive Director, ATFA; John Curtis, Resource Conservationist; and Rory Fraser, Professor at AAMU.

NRCS' proposal of June 2009 to defer further project implementation until the 2010 funding cycle did not meet LRLEAN's approval. NRCS' proposal was based in part: (i) on the fact that the 2009 funding cycle was just about over and (ii) on the challenge of being able to complete 10 technical service provider (TSP) certified conservation activity plans (CAPs) for approved applicants, in a timely manner. LRLEAN disagreed with this NRCS proposal partly because of the fact that none of the approved applicants had yet received any of the grant monies. Furthermore, LRLEAN argued that late receipt of official communication from NRCS about project approval coupled with the many issues raised by the NRCS were responsible for the slow process. LRLEAN therefore insisted that the opportunity to help many landowners should not be missed and feared that it would be difficult to get disappointed and frustrated applicants re-interested in participating in the cost-share program. Ultimately, LRLEAN and NRCS decided to move forward with project implementation.

The next dilemma that arose revolved around the preparation of plans. Forest management plans prepared by registered State foresters, while acceptable to AFC are unacceptable to NRCS. Only registered foresters who had successfully completed additional NRCS training requirements can be listed on NRCS's register of technical service providers and were authorized to certify CAPs to NRCS stipulated standards. In 2009-2010 there was only one TSP certified forester, an NRCS employee, on NRCS' Alabama technical register. Consequently, LRLEAN argued that the limited number of TSP registered foresters in Alabama hindered the timely preparation of CAPs. Although some plans were completed, no solution to that problem was evident. NRCS stated that under NRCS/LRLEAN agreement LRLEAN was expected to bring landowners to the program as well as to get enough foresters certified and registered to facilitate timely preparation of plans (Steve Musser-Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, pers. comm. February 2012). LRLEAN only accepted to bring applicants to the program (Jerry Lacy, LRLEAN's President, pers. comm., February 2012).

3. Results and Discussions

One success of the first year was a landowners' workshop. In July 2009, representatives of the NRCS, LRLEAN, and other partners met and established parameters for planning the workshop. During the planning process, much emphasis was placed on having cost-share applications on hand to be completed by landowners. NRCS was able

to secure these and arranged for attendance of two FSA representatives to help landowners complete the applications.

A group of over 40 persons attended the first LRLEAN workshop which was held in Selma, Alabama in July, 2009. Landowners from 14 counties, the majority of which are in the Black Belt were present. The focus of that workshop was to get landowners to sign-up to participate in the CCPI project. In addition to an overview of the CCPI program, sessions were offered on the eligibility criteria, the application process, and on how to fill out applications.

Review of available correspondence indicates that 2010 began with the familiar dispute about the requirement that only NRCS registered foresters could certify CAPs under the CCPI initiative. LRLEAN expressed the same concerns as it had in 2009, believing that this requirement would doom the initiative to fail. In mid-2010 a partial solution to that problem was found when a registered, TSP certified forester from Mississippi was identified to assist with preparation of CAPs. Additionally, the AFC's State Forester agreed to allow a few of her employees to go through the training to become TSP certified to assist.

In 2009 a total of 29 out of 46 applications for CAPs were approved for funding. Of these approved applicants the counties of Autauga, Pike, Perry, and Tuscaloosa had one each, Geneva and Lamar counties had two each, seven were in Fayette, and 14 were in Wilcox County. CAPs for only three of these were completed and ready for funding or obligation of funds by the end of March 2010 (Jerry Lacey, LRLEAN President, pers. comm., November, 2011). NRCS and LRLEAN agreed to start the 2010 sign-up in March 2010 and have all program funds obligated by April 2010. That decision was announced via a press release from the office of the State Conservationist. The parties also put forward a proposed ranking framework for selection of applications. Ultimately, 57 applications for implementation of conservation practices were received, out of which 19 were approved for funding. Five successful applications came from Fayette county, three from Tuscaloosa county, two from Dallas, and one from Barbour, Butler, Choctaw, Coosa, Lamar, Monroe, Montgomery, Pike, and Sumter counties respectively. See Figure 1 for a graphical representation of the counties.

In an effort to ensure that project applicants realized the maximum benefits from their participations in the CCPI initiative LRLEAN made an extraordinary request to the State Conservationist. The request which was approved was that a timber cruise should be undertaken as part of all CAPs to be developed. The objectives of such an action were to estimate timber volumes as well as to facilitate applicants' future option of participation in carbon credit trading. Available evidence suggests that this was the first time that such a service has ever been offered by NRCS.

Another issue resolved between NRCS and LRLEAN was the best approach for collection of Assignment of Payment Forms (Form CCC-36). The purpose of that form is to allow the landowner, once plan has been completed and accepted by NRCS, to authorize payment directly to the TSP who prepared the plan. LRLEAN undertook the collection of these forms in several counties to expedite progress in completion of the plans.

The announcement for the 2011 sign-up was made by way of an NRCS press release of April 1, 2011 from the office of the State Conservationist. Statewide sign-up targeted underserved landowners through EQIP and covered conservation practices such as prescribed burning, establishment of fire breaks, site preparation, tree planting, stand improvement/thinning, and other forestry practices. The cut-off date for application submission was April 29, 2011. According to the NRCS, 40 applications were received in response to the 2011 sign-up announcement, of these 20 (50%) were approved for funding (Table 5, Table 6). CAPs, generally prerequisites for consideration of any other form of assistance under CCPI, were the focus of applications approved in 2009. During 2010-2011 NRCS focused on providing support for implementation of practices.

Table 5. Applications submitted and approved under EQIP during 2009-2011

Fiscal Year	EQIP Applications		Nature of Approved Requests/Applications
	Submitted	Approved	
2009	46	29 (63.0%)	Conservation Activity Plans (CAPS)
2010	57	19 (33.3%)	Conservation practices
2011	40	20 (50.0%)	Conservation practices

Source: Steve Musser, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, pers. comm., March 2012.

Historically, federally funded cost-share programs have not been readily accessible to underserved landowner groups such as LRLEAN and its members. A major obstacle to LRLEAN was the obligation placed on the group to meet federal requirements in addition to the state of Alabama requirements which its members were already largely fulfilling. To be effective at the state level, federal programs should be flexible enough to be aligned to state requirements. When federal programs are not set-up in this way, major roadblocks are developed which some interested individuals and community groups may not have the funding, staffing, or fortitude to overcome.

Table 6. Distribution, by Black Belt county, of EQIP applications in Alabama during 2011

Year	County	EQIP Applications		Nature of Approved Requests/Applications
		Received	Approved	
2011*	Baldwin	3	2	Conservation practices
	Barbour	7	3	Conservation practices
	Bullock	1	0	Conservation practices
	Butler	6	6	Conservation practices
	Choctaw	2	2	Conservation practices
	Dallas	3	1	Conservation practices
	Hale	1	0	Conservation practices
	Henry	1	1	Conservation practices
	Macon	4	0	Conservation practices
	Madison	1	0	Conservation practices
	Marengo	1	1	Conservation practices
	Monroe	2	2	Conservation practices
	Perry	7	2	Conservation practices
	Sumter	1	0	Conservation practices
	Totals	40	20	-

* No applications received from Crenshaw, Pickens, Pike, Russell, and Wilcox counties in 2011.

Source: Steve Musser, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, pers. comm., March 2012.

Some of the challenges encountered were largely due to the NRCS policies which apparently did not provide much room for flexibility and management's discretionary decisions. The presence of only one TSP on the NRCS' register was one of the factors which constrained the timely and successful implementation of the project. The incentives, particularly in terms of compensation for preparation of conservation plans to NRCS standards were apparently not attractive enough to motivate registered consulting state foresters to pursue TSP certification.

Lessons learned from this study were (a) that the procedures and guidelines governing the administration of cost-share programs are not always "in line" with the existing realities at the state level, (b) that underserved landowners in Alabama had to overcome a range of challenges before successfully accessing cost-share resources, (c) NRCS had apparently failed to adequately prepare for timely and successful project implementation by either ensuring the availability of TSPs and/or introduction of procedures to address the problem and (d) the failure to make budgetary provisions to support the coordinating agency's (i.e. LRLEAN's) administrative and operational costs may have been an oversight.

Informal periodic discussions with applicants who sought to sign-up to participate in the CCPI program revealed that although these applicants were initially very optimistic and enthusiastic, eventually they became very frustrated because of the many setbacks, disappointments, and delays experienced. The long interval between the time an applicant initially signed-up to participate in the cost-share program and the time of the first follow-up contact from NRCS officials was generally four months or more. Furthermore, the fees reimbursed by NRCS for the preparation of CAPs were not attractive enough to motivate state registered consulting foresters to seek NRCS' TSP certification. NRCS' initial reluctance to accept AFC developed and approved plans was rather disturbing to LRLEAN, considering that the AFC was the State agency mandated and entrusted with the overall responsibility for the management and protection of forest resources in the state. Also rather interesting was the

fact a sister USDA agency, the Forest Service, recognized and collaborated with AFC as the lead forestry agency in Alabama.

Neither the factors which motivated USDA-NRCS to introduce the CCPI nor the criteria for monitoring and evaluating the program were very clear to the facilitators. The absence of such criteria made it somewhat difficult to determine whether NRCS was able to accomplish the desired objectives and targets. The initial NRCS stipulation that applicants for support to undertake practices should first have approved CAPs was frustrating to applicants because of the limited number of available TSP certified foresters on the NRCS' technical registry. In recognition of this problem NRCS eventually waived that requirement and approved a limited number of applications for conservation practices in 2010-2011 with respect to properties for which CAPs had not yet been completed. Furthermore, NRCS worked closely with LRLEAN to address LRLEAN's other concerns and made adjustments to ensure the program's success. In 2012, LRLEAN collaborated with NRCS to establish the prescreening criteria that will be used to select applications for funding in the future.

The evidence indicated that NRCS officials were on many occasions, receptive to alternative approaches which were contrary to the agency's initial positions. These administrators were, though reluctantly, willing to adopt new strategies to accommodate the unique characteristics of LRLEAN and its members. Similarly, the LRLEAN leadership and its members were forced to accept compromises in an effort to ensure progress on project implementation. From the researchers'/facilitators' perspective the project provided "teachable moments" for all the project partners. Surely, the experience gained from this project to-date will lay the foundation for the continued implementation of the LRLEAN/NRCS-CCPI initiative through 2013, as well as serve all stakeholders and project participants well in similar future endeavors.

There were challenges in the application of a "modified action research model" in this exploratory study. The application of the model was based on the assumption that important structures and conditions were available for project implementation. Those assumptions were not entirely correct. For example it was assumed that the NRCS had enough TSP certified foresters on the register to address the needs of underserved landowner applicants and if not the work of state registered foresters would have been acceptable to NRCS. This was not the case and resulted in several challenges. The action research model has been used "...by social scientists for preliminary or pilot research, especially when the situation is too ambiguous to frame a precise research question..." (O'Brien, 2001). This exploratory study, pursued through a modified action research model, has identified many of the critical elements necessary for successful implementation of cost-share programs among underserved landowners in Alabama in the future.

4. Conclusions

Cost-share programs have done a relatively good job staying relevant to the needs of the nation. In areas where they have not, the program administrators have made some efforts to correct problems and update areas where past strategies have been inefficient. The CCPI as well as the other programs that now target limited resource and socially disadvantaged landowners speak to these efforts. The success of LRLEAN in securing its grant and being able to put its ideas into action in the best interest of its members demonstrate that cost-share programs can be successful in underserved landowners' communities.

There is no doubt that the implementation of this CCPI initiative in Alabama has presented some unique and unforeseen challenges for participation of underserved landowners. One of the most critical challenges which had to be overcome was the issue of "trust and confidence" of minorities in the fairness in the administration of Federal and State programs such as cost-share. Discussions with stakeholders towards the end of the research clearly indicate that LRLEAN and its members had developed a much higher level of trust and confidence in the fairness of Federal officials. Adjustments and revision of initial approaches had to be adopted at many levels in order to ensure that progress was made towards the accomplishment of desired results and outcomes. The NRCS had to relax some of its requirements, LRLEAN, as an organization, had to encourage its members to accept more stringent and time consuming standards, and individual participants had to develop a higher level of tolerance of bureaucratic bottle-necks as well as develop a higher level of patience and perseverance. In addition, other collaborators had to be more supportive and involved. Although the current life of NRCS-LRLEAN project agreement ends in 2013, it has been very evident that the first three years of that project was marred by several hurdles.

Several lessons have been learned. The importance for all parties to be informed of and/or aware of guidelines and procedures governing the administration and implementation of the CCPI program from the onset is one such lesson. The LRLEAN experience will serve as a road map and an example to other organizations desirous in helping their communities to participate in cost-share programs in the future. The need for providing financial

support to LRLEAN, an NGO without any fulltime employees, became very evident during the course of project implementation. Fortunately, LRLEAN was able to secure the technical and professional assistance of its partners from the academic and NGO community to support landowner education and mentoring. Regular communication between LRLEAN and NRCS was one of the keys to success. Face-to-face meetings and continual feedback from the leaders of NRCS and LRLEAN seemed to have reduced stalemates and kept the process moving whenever problems arose. Perseverance was also critical to the accomplishments. At several instances during the process there were temptations to give-up, yet the leadership of LRLEAN consistently sought to negotiate and explore possible mutually acceptable options.

LRLEAN is of the view that the strong passion and commitment of its officers coupled with the fact that its officers are unpaid volunteers were among the primary contributing factors to the overall success of the project (Jerry Lacey, LRLEAN's President, pers. comm., March 2012). The structure of LRLEAN helped to ensure that all available project funds went directly to applicants, none went to meet overhead costs (Jerry Lacey, LRLEAN's President, pers. comm., March 2012). Despite this structure it should be emphasized that LRLEAN's ability to operate and be successful was only possible largely because of the support from its non-NRCS partners.

The approach whereby both the "process" as well as the 'results' of the research were continuously monitored, evaluated, and adjusted as appropriate, in addition to the direct participation in the process by stakeholders is consistent with the action research model. Continued monitoring and evaluation of this project will be pursued in the future within the framework of the action research model. In this regard the need to develop very clear and mutually agreed targets and outcomes as well as a priori monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that milestones are met is recognized. Lessons learned from the application of the 'modified action research model' in this study will inform future research methodology.

It can be assumed that although the project implementation process was rather long and challenging, the small number of LRLEAN members who have received direct on-farm benefits from this CCPI initiative are likely to be strong advocates among the underserved landowners' community for the CCPI initiative. Furthermore, these successful applicants will be more willing to apply to participate in cost-share programs in the future. Unfortunately, however, the few applicants who became frustrated and did not realize any direct on-farm benefits from the project are likely to continue to be strong critics of cost-share programs. It would be in the best interest of all concerned, particularly in the interest of NRCS to actively pursue efforts to bring benefits to "disgruntled applicants". Disgruntled customers are potential strong advocates if their needs can be addressed.

"From NRCS stand point this CCPI project was a learning process that has helped the agency in understanding and meeting the needs of underserved landowners. The leadership of LRLEAN is to be commended for consistency in its desire to offer these programs to all landowners. The patience and determination of LRLEAN's leadership team have contributed in a significant way to this CCPI success" (Steve Musser, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, pers. comm., February 2012). This project has helped to confirm that many of the NRCS' requirements (i.e. eligibility, ranking, signing of contracts, etc.), while not designed to, do discourage applicants who have never participated and if not funded might never try again (Steve Musser, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, pers. comm., February 2012). The potential long-term contribution of cost-share programs to underserved landowner education, effective land management, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, wildlife habitat enhancement, maintenance of water quality, and outdoor recreation and leisure throughout the state of Alabama should not be underestimated. Very importantly, the participation of the LRLEAN membership in the CCPI program has provided a good vehicle for introduction of underserved landowners to the procedures and guidelines of cost-share programs as well as to the benefits to be realized from participation in such programs.

Acknowledgements

This work, a product of a project targeted at beginning, limited resource, and socially disadvantaged farmers in Southeastern USA, was funded by the USDA's Office of Advocacy and Outreach [award # **USDA-OASDFR #59-2501-10-002**]. The authors acknowledge the collaboration of representatives of LRLEAN [Jerry Lacey-President and Timothy Boyce-advisor/member] and USDA-NRCS [Tim Albritton-State Staff Forester, Julie Yates-Director of Communications, and Steve Musser-Assistant State Conservationist for Programs]. The constructive comments of reviewers were highly appreciated.

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