

Land Retention Project

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The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) was founded 32 years ago, in 1967, and currently has projects in five Southern states (Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Mississippi). Limited assistance is also provided in other parts of the South.

FSC/LAF is committed to assisting rural communities to be self-sufficient and self-sustaining. This mission is achieved through educating communities in various areas. FSC/LAF organizes credit unions, local businesses, and cooperatives, as well as trains farmers on environmentally friendly techniques.

One particular focus of FSC/LAF is in the area of land retention. Since the turn of the century, loss of land owned by blacks has been documented time after time. In 1982, the United States Commission on Civil Rights reported that much of the land loss experienced by minorities in rural communities was due to racial discrimination. Racism was and is an integral part of the land acquisition and retention structure in this country.

In 1969, there were 87,000 black farmers who owned more than 6 million acres of land. That number had dwindled by 1992 to a measly 18,000 farmers who owned 2.4 million acres. Minority landowners were losing land at a rate of 1,000 acres a day.

At that rate, blacks would have been landless by the year 2000. FSC/LAF has employed a comprehensive strategy aimed at preventing that prediction from becoming a reality. The strategy is implemented through FSC/LAF's Land Retention Project.

The LRP is primarily focused on four Southern states: Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi. Although those states comprise the main target area of the LRP, we provide technical assistance and aid to other states such as Texas, Louisiana, and Florida.

The purpose of the LRP can best be explained in five comprehensive statements:

- To educate community organizers, staff, paraprofessionals, and community leaders about recurrent land loss issues. FSC/LAF has been fortunate throughout the past 32 years to align itself with many dedicated and sincere volunteers from around the nation. The LRP educates these individuals about the most prominent and recurring problems that landowners face. These volunteers are familiar with their community and understand its needs and concerns. They serve as the community's information source and referral agent.
- To facilitate information flow to minority landowners by publishing and distributing generic legal information about major land loss issues. Through a series of relationships that FSC/LAF has built with attorneys, law schools, and legal professionals, the LRP helps devise and distribute general, easily understandable materials so that landowners can begin to understand their rights and responsibilities as landowners. This information is in the form of a series of pamphlets entitled "What Every Landowner Should Know About the Law."
- To assist landowners in locating competent legal assistance when necessary. Through education and information we can prevent landowners from needing to hire attorneys by helping them become proactive rather than reactive. But in the event that a landowner needs to consult a lawyer, FSC/LAF has established relationships with attorneys who will take land cases sometimes at a reduced fee.
- To educate the landowner about techniques to protect his property. Even though much of the dispossession of black land has been caused by discrimination and unscrupulous dealings, some land loss can be attributed to landowners who failed to maintain and control their property. Landowners should know when their taxes are due, how much their land is worth, and whether there are any liens or encumbrances on their land. The LRP assists landowners in this respect by teaching them where and how to find important property information, and

how best to maintain ownership and control of their property.

- To inform the community about land-related issues. The LRP holds workshops, drafts articles and press releases, and publishes a newsletter - all aimed at keeping the community updated and involved in land-related issues.

These five statements combined provide an efficient skeleton through which the body of reduced land loss can be built. Education, information, communication, and personal responsibility form the foundation of the Land Retention Project.

Working to save land for the past 32 years has been an enormous challenge. Landowners often do not have the resources to legally defeat wealthy developers, public officials, and lawyers who desire their land. Five areas, in particular, have caused landowners severe grief. These areas are by no means comprehensive of all the legal issues that landowners might encounter, but they have, by far, become the thorn of dispossession in the sides of landowners throughout the South.

The LRP refers to these five areas as its Five Point Thrust: Tax Sales, Wills and Estate Planning, Adverse Possession, Eminent Domain and Condemnation, and Mineral Rights. The LRP helps the landowner acquire a working knowledge of each of the above areas so that he or she can make timely and correct decisions concerning his or her land and, when required, choose an attorney who can adequately represent his or her best interest.

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/LAF is committed to reducing the amount of land loss by blacks in the South and is the premier organization in this area of concern. The Federation has a dual mission of land retention and land-based economic development. If we can educate the black community about the law, then we are convinced that we can turn the tide on statistics that say blacks will soon be a landless people.