

social sciences

Strategies for Successful Engagement of African American Landowners in Forestry

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Engaging African American landowners in forestry has been an enduring challenge because of historical discrimination, ownership issues such as heirs' property, lack of experience with, and distrust of, the forestry profession, limited use of technical and financial assistance, and difficulties and predatory practices associated with harvesting timber. The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program has achieved success through eight long-term, community-based projects in seven states in the US South. We conducted qualitative research with a diverse range of participants and stakeholders in the three longest-running projects to identify lessons for success. These lessons include addressing obstacles and constraints identified by prior research, establishing community-based networks to provide coordinated education and outreach, linking legal assistance for heirs' property with forestry assistance, patiently engaging landowners through a process of forestry awareness and action, and resolving difficulties and maintaining momentum with regular feedback and problem solving.

Keywords: minority forest owners, outreach and extension, family forestry

The issue of African American participation in forestry is a topic with a long history in this journal (Payne and Theoe 1971, Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985, Gan et al. 2003, Dwivedi et al. 2016, Schelhas et al. 2017a). Research on African American landowners over the past 30 years has identified an interrelated suite of obstacles and constraints they have faced regarding involvement in forestry, many of which persist. Historical patterns of discrimination and African American land loss continue to manifest themselves in ownership issues, including unclear property boundaries and heirs' property (land owned in common by multiple heirs, generally after being passed on without a written will), that often preclude investment in forest management (Dyer and Bailey 2008, Gordon et al. 2013, Dwivedi

et al. 2016, Hitchner et al. 2017). Lack of experience with, and distrust of, the forestry profession has hindered engagement with professional foresters and participation in forestry organizations (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985, Gordon et al. 2013, Dwivedi et al. 2016, Schelhas et al. 2017b). Discrimination and insecure land tenure have prevented or restricted participation in the financial assistance programs that help landowners make investments in forest management, an enterprise that often requires significant upfront expenditures and long waits for returns (Schelhas 2002, Gan et al. 2003, Guffey et al. 2009, Gordon et al. 2013). Limited use of technical and financial assistance for forest management has reduced economic returns from forests (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985, Schelhas et al. 2017a), and predatory practices and

difficulties in harvesting smaller tracts of timber have further lowered returns from timber sales (Gan and Kolison 1999, Gan et al. 2003). Awareness of these interrelated obstacles and constraints is the first step toward resolving them, but it is not sufficient. We also need research that focuses on strategies for success and how they work in practice. In this paper, we examine the experiences of an innovative community-based program working with African American landowners in the US South to distill lessons and strategies for successful engagement of minority and underserved landowners in forestry that could be useful for other outreach efforts.

The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR) was initiated in 2012 by the US Endowment for Forestry and Communities in collaboration with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the USDA Forest Service. The program has supported community-based projects led by organizations experienced in working with African American landowners and communities. These organizations work through networks that include federal, state, and private forestry and natural resource agencies, conservation organizations, and businesses. The SFLR began with pilot projects in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama, and was extended to include additional projects in Georgia, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Virginia

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in 2016 and 2017 (Figure 1). The primary activities of the projects are raising awareness and educating landowners about forestry, providing information and legal assistance for resolving heirs' property issues and estate planning, and building links among landowners and forestry assistance providers (Schelhas et al. 2017a). As of December 2017, the program has had considerable success, engaging 813 African American landowners who own a total of 65,447 acres (with an average landholding of 81 acres, and a median of 40 acres) through eight projects in seven states. Specific outcomes included forest management planning; access to programs, loans, and financing; implementation of diverse forestry practices (e.g., thinning, harvest, site prep, reforestation); marketing forest products and other economic land uses (e.g., hunting leases); and heirs' property education, steps toward resolution, and title clearing.¹

The pilot projects themselves focused on outreach and network building to create local and sustainable outreach capacity. Each project was led by a community-based organization with experience in its locality, and each formed a network of public and private entities for outreach and service provision. Each project coordinated: (1) forestry services for forest-management planning, forestry practices, forest certification, and access to forestry markets; (2) land tenure services focused on resolving heirs' property issues and preventing future land tenure problems; (3) activities to support landowner access to, and success in, federal and state financial assistance and landowner support programs; (4) a forestry education program that created a group of well-informed landowners to counsel peers and refer them to services; (5) a program to connect landowners to forestry professionals to enable forest management and access to markets, and (6) a program to fill gaps for landowners and forestry professionals (US Endowment 2016).

Baseline research in the areas served by the pilot projects found that African American landowners frequently had very limited previous experience with forestry (see Hitchner et al. 2017, Schelhas et al. 2017a, b). Historical land use was rooted in small-scale family farming, and most families had little experience with forest management. Small-scale farming declined during the course of the 20th century, and

many landowners found it difficult to move into capital intensive farming. Migration to urban areas, particularly industrializing northern cities, was common, and many families emphasized professional education to reduce dependence on family farms. African Americans continued to own land and considered it an important intergenerational family resource, but land was often underutilized, and very few landowners profited from their land. Forests had reclaimed old fields through natural regeneration, and whereas timber was occasionally sold, few landowners had engaged in practices like tree planting, prescribed burning, or thinning to increase timber productivity and value. Many current landowners had pursued careers in urban areas and professions that allowed little time for managing forest land; additionally, many felt that opportunities to learn about forestry and participate in programs had been unavailable to African Americans. As a result of this combination of factors, very few African Americans were involved in forest management, most had low levels of knowledge about forestry, and there was widespread lack of familiarity with and distrust of forestry professionals. At the same time, retirees and return migrants were reclaiming family land and purchasing new land; forest management was of interest to them and appropriate for their circumstances.

The SFLR provided a unique research opportunity to move beyond problem identification to document successful African

American forestry experiences and innovative program strategies. Participants in the pilot projects represented relatively accessible and concentrated groups of African American forest landowners and service providers working with them. There were examples of innovative arrangements being developed in pilot sites as work progressed, and we wanted to understand those experiences from various stakeholder perspectives. We also wanted to systematically analyze diverse participant perspectives and experiences with the full range of forestry activities, including education and awareness, ownership issues, technical assistance, financial assistance, forest certification, and participation in landowner organizations.

Methods

Our research focused on the pilot project sites in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama after the projects had been operating for about four years. We had conducted baseline research in 2014 with landowners and forestry professionals at the beginning of the SFLR pilot projects (Dwivedi et al. 2016, Hitchner et al. 2017, Schelhas et al. 2017a, b), and we were broadly familiar with the program, lead organizations, partners, and experiences. We developed a qualitative interview guide in consultation with SFLR personnel. The interview guide focused on both broad questions and specific issues, including: (1) how African American landowners had become engaged in the SFLR projects;

Management and Policy Implications

The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program comprises eight community-based projects across seven southern states. Each project was implemented by an organization with experience and trust in their community, forming formal networks of organizations with shared interests in encouraging forestry and land retention among African Americans. The projects found that prioritizing relationships was a critical first step in the education process. Combining legal assistance with forestry outreach created synergies that enabled landowners with heirs' property to implement forest management practices. Forestry technical and financial assistance services were provided collaboratively by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service, state forestry agencies, the Cooperative Extension System, conservation organizations, community loan funds, Resource Conservation and Development Councils, and consulting foresters. These groups began by listening to landowners and then worked with them as they resolved ownership issues, developed objectives, and became familiar with forestry. Workshops and peer-to-peer learning allowed landowners to learn and share experiences. Forest management plans and project foresters played key roles in guiding landowners as they engaged in forestry practices. The eight projects were embedded in a larger program that provided a flexible model for collaboration, facilitated institutional coordination, provided venues for project participants to share their experiences, and helped overcome obstacles that emerged. Our findings suggest that reaching underserved landowners requires visible local projects that integrate known and new techniques into coordinated efforts that are diligently and patiently applied over time.

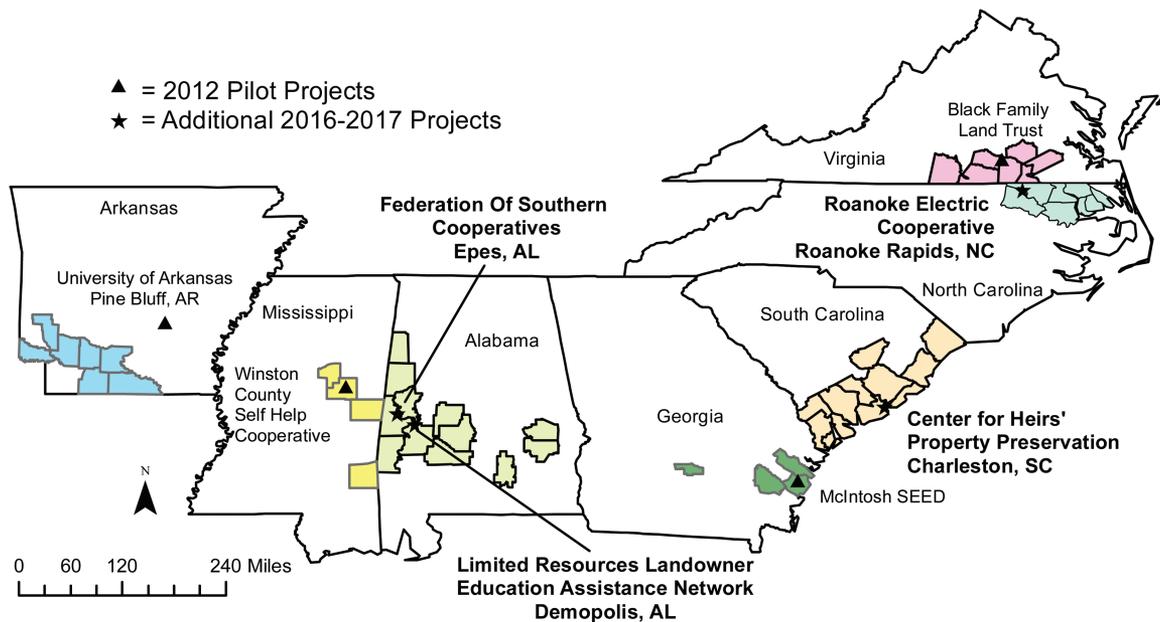


Figure 1. Map showing 2012 pilot projects, additional 2016–17 projects, and all counties served by the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program.

(2) types and assessments of relationships that landowners had formed with forestry professionals and markets (including consulting foresters, agency foresters, and timber buyers/forest product industries); (3) types and assessments of systems that had been developed for forest landowners to obtain necessary technical and financial assistance; (4) whether and how landowners with smaller tracts and lower-quality timber stands had been able to obtain services and access markets; (5) types of timber and nontimber forest products African American forest owners had sold; (6) specific new ideas and arrangements that had emerged during the course of the SFLR projects and potential for replication; and (7) accessibility and benefit of forest owner organizations and certification for African American forest owners as they become engaged in forestry.

We then worked with project foresters to identify landowners and forestry professionals to be interviewed, developing

a purposive sample focused primarily on those involved in new and innovative relationships, but also including some landowners who had challenges or difficult experiences. In late 2016 and early 2017, we interviewed pilot project program foresters, program collaborators, landowners, and forestry professionals. We began with in-person interviews, but followed up by phone when in-person interviews could not be arranged. A total of 33 interviews, ranging from one to two hours, were conducted with a broad range of individuals. We emphasized successful landowners and ones facing enduring obstacles (nine in AL, five in NC, and six in SC). In each state, we also interviewed one or more individuals in each of the categories: project foresters, state forestry agency employees, and NRCS employees. We also interviewed two cooperative extension agents (SC & NC), one forest industry employee (SC), one private forestry consultant (AL), and one logger (SC). The

total numbers of interviews by state were 13 for Alabama, eight for North Carolina, and 12 for South Carolina. We analyzed data from these interviews using NVivo software, beginning with our key themes but also identifying and exploring new themes as they emerged.

Results and Discussion

We are presenting our qualitative research results on successful strategies for overcoming five major constraints to African American participation in forestry (see Table 1): (1) low levels of awareness about forestry opportunities, benefits, practices, and programs; (2) ownership issues and heirs' property; (3) obstacles to implementing forest management practices; (4) limited participation in financial assistance programs; and (5) difficulties with and low returns from timber harvesting. We also address the role of the SFLR itself in coordinating and implementing a diverse set of activities.

Table 1. Approach of the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program, tailored to addressing well-documented constraints to engagement in sustainable forest management.

Constraint	Approach
1. Lack of awareness and knowledge	Gradual community-based relationship building and outreach.
2. Ownership and heirs' property issues	Land tenure education and services. Forestry opportunities for income and asset building.
3. Inexperience with forest management	Education, assistance, and guidance through the entire forest management cycle.
4. Underutilization of financial assistance programs	Create awareness of conservation programs and procedures. Facilitation of successful enrollment and implementation.
5. Low returns from timber harvests	Promote awareness of the value of timber, use of forestry professionals, and multiple bids when selling timber.

Awareness and Education

When landowners do not have a history of engagement in forestry, increasing awareness and knowledge are necessary. Forestry professionals from outside their community must first identify, meet, and earn the trust of landowners through a consistent process over time. The first step for the SFLR was implementation by local community-based organizations who already were trusted and had contacts in communities and with landowners, even if they had little experience in forestry. Forestry experience was provided by hiring project foresters and engaging networks of forestry professionals. Second, project foresters developed outreach programs through a gradual process of building trust, generally working through existing contacts and community groups. Churches represent a key institution in the rural South and were important venues for outreach. In some cases, the project engaged a receptive minister, but ministers were often reached through parishioners who were participating in the program.

Third, once landowners and community leaders were engaged, they were encouraged to talk to other landowners about the program. Many landowners reported frequently talking with friends, relatives, and acquaintances to encourage them to come to meetings and become involved in the local project. Many of the early participants were already active in their communities, often as teachers; as they benefited from the program, they sought to involve others. Project personnel supported these efforts, recognizing the importance of building true community-based projects. Fourth, regular workshops and tours allowed people to get to know landowners facing similar situations, see forestry practices on the land, and learn about how others were managing their forests. Projects also hosted celebrations to honor achievements by landowners, both to recognize progress and to showcase examples of success.

The culmination of these efforts was the formation of a peer-to-peer learning program of Woodland Community Advocates (WCA) in South Carolina. This program enlisted highly involved community members and provided workshops with in-depth presentations on legal issues and forestry such as financial assistance through NRCS, estate planning, financial literacy, and specific forest management topics. The

2015 and 2016 WCA training programs, each comprising three workshops, graduated a total of 31 landowner advocates. The program prepared and inspired them to talk to other landowners about the SFLR project, and our interviews confirmed that advocates were actively engaging new landowners. The success of the WCA program in South Carolina has led SFLR projects in other states to develop similar peer-to-peer learning programs.

Ownership Issues and Heirs' Property

Heirs' property is common among African American landowners in the South, reflecting the original owners' distrust of or poor access to the legal system. It is also linked to a desire to maintain tracts of land as *family* resources, available to later family members as a place to live and farm (Hitchner et al. 2017). Informal arrangements recognizing land ownership were common within families and African American enclaves, as existing outside the legal system had worked for many families in the past. As a result, there were varying levels of awareness of the ways that heirs' property made land ownership precarious and impeded productive use of the land, including forestry. Many families were retaining land because of its importance to their family's heritage, but few were earning money from the land. For many, tax payments made landownership a burden and caused tension within families regarding how they were to be shared. The projects first needed to educate landowners about the risks and disadvantages of heirs' property and the steps that could be taken to develop a legal structure that could secure their ownership. Projects also offered legal services to landowners and provided workshops that promoted awareness and action. For many landowners, the process of resolving heirs' property was time-consuming and difficult. In particular, it is often very difficult for family members who share ownership of a property to agree on a future ownership structure and a management plan. Several landowners expressed their appreciation that the SFLR project personnel understood the issue of heirs' property and continued to work with them patiently while their families worked toward a plan for resolution.

Importantly, a number of landowners were able to get started in forestry while working to resolve heirs' property. One project forester noted that whereas people

often want a step-by-step approach, i.e., resolving heirs' property before starting forestry activities, there are advantages and opportunities to beginning them simultaneously. A single member of a family can begin planning opportunities for income through forestry, and agency foresters can generally do a management plan for one owner. The advantage is that the interested individual can bring a plan, and sometimes even an estimate of potential returns, to the family and thereby stimulate their interest and guide discussions. Another project forester noted how a forest management plan could provide an impetus for families to work together to resolve heirs' property by showing how land can be an asset rather than a financial burden and by demonstrating an opportunity to build intergenerational wealth and knowledge.

Implementing Forest Management

Because of their limited engagement with forestry, many African Americans have little knowledge or experience related to the practices used in forest management today. For most families, historic forest management took one of two forms. One form we encountered was selective harvest and natural regeneration, likely linked to older, less mechanized harvesting systems (Bliss and Flick 1994). Several landowners had experience with uneven-age management, harvesting mature trees, and "spot planting" new ones, but this method had largely fallen into disuse with changes in standard harvesting practices and equipment. In the second and more common form, trees had naturally regenerated after agricultural land abandonment or opportunistic timber sales, resulting in secondary stands of pine (Schelhas et al. 2017a). Both of these forms typically produce lower returns than managed, even-aged pine plantations, but they have worked for people historically because they involve low investment and risk while producing a store of natural capital that can be harvested to meet occasional or unexpected expenses. However, low and infrequent returns often left forest landowners without regular or sufficient income to cover tax payments or build assets, and many landowners were interested in intensifying management to generate greater and more consistent returns. To meet this need, forest management was introduced to landowners through a series of comprehensive and integrated steps.

Initial Contact. Individual SFLR projects had slightly different ways of approaching landowners to discuss forest management; however, all acknowledged the importance of listening as a first step. When the forester began by listening to the landowner tell his or her story about the history, circumstances, and importance of the land and learn about the landowner's interests and objectives, these elements became the center of subsequent discussions. This approach empowered and motivated landowners, and many of the landowners we interviewed noted that this was key to their involvement in the program. Similarly, all the project foresters recognized the importance of careful listening and tailoring plans to landowners' interests and situations. Although this is recommended outreach forester practice, we highlight it here to emphasize that relationship building, not information transfer, is the key step to engaging inexperienced landowners in forestry. Some SFLR projects began this process with a visit by the project forester to a landowner, whereas others began with a more formal meeting that included a project forester, NRCS representative, and state forestry agency employee.

Building Trust: Longstanding racial divisions and inexperience with forestry have led to a widespread trust gap between African American forest owners and the forestry profession. This was compounded by distrust of the government; an African American NRCS employee noted that, being from the government, he still had to earn landowner trust. Project personnel recognized that the process of building trust was gradual and incremental, and often proceeded by achieving small successes and working through community networks. The combination of working through trusted community members and institutions, and patiently educating and working with landowners, has enabled the SFLR projects and their partners to gradually earn the trust of landowners.

Landowner Meetings for Exchange and Storytelling. The projects also organized regular meetings and workshops that featured presentations by natural resource professionals, but also brought landowners together and encouraged them to talk to one another and share information. This less formal peer-to-peer learning was highly valued by landowners, who talked about

the importance of workshops for meeting other landowners and sharing experiences. Natural resource professionals reported that these workshops formed some of the largest and most engaged groups of landowners that they work with.

Forest Management Plan. The projects put considerable emphasis on helping landowners obtain a written forest management plan as the beginning of the process of engagement in forestry. Project foresters discussed how a forest-management plan begins a landowner's relationship with a professional forester, lays out in writing the steps they should take, and introduces them to the agencies and businesses that can help them with activities. We found that many landowners were using their plans; they mentioned having "beautiful plans" that addressed their objectives and reiterated their commitment to following their plans.

Diverse Management Objectives. Notably, the plans that were written covered a broad range of forest management options. Timber management and future income it could provide were often important to landowners, but management plans were not simply timber management plans. Careful listening to landowners' interests and objectives revealed that many landowners had multiple interests, including managing for wildlife and native species, planning future family experiences, and maintaining ownership of very meaningful family land. Plans were developed that addressed multiple and diverse forest management goals, while also often including timber as an economic land use well suited for the time constraints of working landowners and the life stage of retirees.

Engagement with Forestry Professionals. Implementing management plans requires landowners to engage with forestry professionals. Activities that generally require professional help include selling timber (in order to know the value of timber and get multiple bids), site preparation and reforestation after harvest, and taking care of a stand while trees mature through prescribed burning and thinning. The SFLR projects encouraged landowners to develop a relationship with a forestry professional that can guide them through the management process. Landowners who used a forestry professional reported that it had improved management and increased their returns. But, as one forester noted, there are often

challenges in getting them to meet and trust a forester because there are few in their social circles, and also challenges in finding foresters that will work on small acreages.

Implementing Forest Management Practices. Throughout the management process, landowners must stay on track and implement the recommended practices. Both landowners and project foresters talked about the importance of this commitment for successful outcomes, and many landowners relied on trusted project foresters to remind them of what they needed to do or to talk through their options. Project foresters recognized, given the length of just one cycle of forest management, the long-term importance of a knowledgeable contact person and coordinator to interact with landowners and help them stay on track.

Forest Owner Organizations. In addition to hosting their own meetings and workshops, the SFLR projects also encouraged involvement in existing forest owner organizations such as American Tree Farm. Once landowners had obtained a forest management plan and begun to implement it, they were eligible to apply for the American Tree Farm Certification Program. Project foresters encouraged them to do this because it connected them to another network of forest owners, helped them learn more about forestry, and helped establish an identity as a forest owner. Landowners talked about how they appreciated the recognition and proudly displayed their sign because they valued what it stood for and thought it would help interest other landowners in forestry.

Certification and Easements. The American Tree Farm Certification Program connects to the Sustainable Forestry Initiative for marketing certified forest products. Landowners spoke favorably about being certified, noting that in addition to expanding their forestry networks, they hoped that certification might help them market their timber either more quickly or for a higher price in the future. In a few cases, families had environmentally sensitive lands and organizations interested in purchasing development rights. In these cases, easements were compatible with their interest in maintaining their family heritage and also provided economic benefits. Because most landowners were not wealthy, easements were most effective when they either were associated with the purchase of

development rights or were intended to preserve working landscapes and allowed management for timber.

Tax Guidance. Tax guidance is also important for landowners. In some states, a forest management plan enabled landowners to obtain a present use valuation for their property taxes, providing them with an immediate financial benefit when they formally began forest management. Some landowners had worked with project attorneys to set up their land ownership in an LLC or other partnership, which may provide tax advantages. A few complained about having to pay taxes related to payments they had received for conservation assistance, highlighting the importance of providing tax education and assistance to landowners.

Financial Assistance Programs

Low levels of participation in cost-share programs, particularly those administered by USDA, has long been considered a roadblock to African American engagement with forest management. Participation for family forest landowners in the US South is low, only 10.8 percent (Butler et al. 2016). However, African Americans have faced additional challenges, including discrimination in program access, and have been distrustful of assistance providers and less able to afford cost sharing (Schelhas 2002, Gan et al. 2003, Guffey et al. 2009, Gordon et al. 2013). Our research found that relatively few current landowners had used forestry cost-share programs, even when their parents or grandparents may have used them for farming. Similarly, whereas many states provide some cost-share for tree planting, few landowners had used them. Low awareness of forestry programs, historical discrimination in access, and limited experience in forestry all appeared to play a role. The SFLR has achieved significant success in boosting enrollment through a variety of means. NRCS and state forestry agencies were involved as core project participants in each state and thereby had a stake in the project. Personnel from partner organizations gave presentations at landowner workshops, met landowners on their land, and viewed the projects as an opportunity to reach minority landowners. At the same time, the larger SFLR Program caught the attention of upper-level USDA administrators at the state and national levels, as well as in state forestry agencies. These leaders

recognized that the program was addressing an issue that was already a concern for them, and they strongly endorsed it.

NRCS also made a number of adjustments in program administration to serve landowners. Although programs already included measures to make them more accessible to historically underserved landowners, oftentimes landowners were still not enrolled because they did not rank high enough according to NRCS internal criteria to be awarded any of the limited funding. State NRCS offices were able to create specialized funding pools open only to program participants to ensure that landowners were able to effectively compete for funding. NRCS was also able to moderately increase access to programs for those with heirs' property; for example, they allowed landowners with heirs' property to participate in certain programs such as EQIP, which strengthened the synergies between engagement with forestry and resolution of heirs' property. Furthermore, NRCS allowed landowners who had been paying taxes and managing heirs' property to provide documentation showing that they controlled the land (e.g., tax receipts) in lieu of the more stringent previous requirements for a signed document designating a manager. NRCS employees also reported that the SFLR helped them improve their communication and ability to work with minority landowners. They endeavored to help landowners be successful when applying for assistance, reducing disenchantment with the process. NRCS recognized that their programs are often confusing for people, and several employees noted that programs should come later in a process that begins with education and family discussions. Engagement with the SFLR allowed them to fit into a larger process in this way. Landowners, who often felt that they had been historically denied access to financial assistance programs, were glad to be involved, appreciated that project personnel guided them through the process, and found the programs useful.

Timber Harvesting

African American landowners have historically faced difficulties in harvesting and selling their timber. Lack of familiarity with forestry and timber markets has led many to engage in opportunistic timber sales in response to offers from a logger working in their area. When they do not work with a professional forester, they often do

not know the value of their timber and do not receive multiple bids when selling it. Families and natural resource professionals commonly talked about landowners being preyed on by unscrupulous loggers and often accepting offers that sound impressive but may be only a fraction of the value of timber. Furthermore, the tendency for them to have smaller tracts of land and natural regrowth, rather than planted trees, means that their forests may be of lower value. This may make it difficult for them to market their timber and attract a logger.

Project foresters recognized that low returns from timber contributed to low interest in forestry and a tendency to not replant trees after cutting. They also recognized that many landowners had not got as much as they could have when they sold their timber. To address these problems, they emphasized the importance of landowners knowing the value of their timber, receiving multiple bids when selling timber, and working with a consulting forester who receives a percentage of the sale and thereby has an incentive to get the highest price. Although many landowners reported bad experiences selling timber before becoming involved with the SFLR, those who had recently used a forester's advice when selling timber were very satisfied. The program emphasized that, whereas only a small percentage of timber buyers are dishonest, it is important for landowners to have the guidance of a professional who knows the value of the timber and represents the landowner's interests.

Nevertheless, challenges remained in selling timber due to heirs' property, small tracts, and low-value stands. Projects addressed these issues in various ways. Timber on heirs' property cannot be sold legally without involving all owners, although loggers have been known to buy from just one owner of heirs' property at very low prices. Landowners were encouraged to wait until the resolution of heirs' property to sell timber in order to maximize their returns and to be able to work with legitimate timber buyers. To address issues of small tracts and low-value stands, foresters working with the projects were often able to pool or aggregate tracts into larger jobs to attract a logger. Landowners were also encouraged to work with family members and neighbors to get their timber harvested, which some interviewees had done

successfully. In some cases, foresters were able to tap into bioenergy markets (generally chips) to help landowners harvest very low-value stands and get some return or reduce site prep costs for replanting, helping with difficult transitions from unmanaged to managed stands. In one state, a third-generation African American-owned logging company was working closely with the project and was involved in project workshops and training programs. As a small company, it was able to harvest smaller tracts and was already known and trusted in the community. The SFLR projects found it helpful to support forestry professionals and loggers interested in working on smallholdings and with African American landowners.

Role of the SFLR

It is important to recognize that the SFLR projects, while local and community-based, were not stand-alone projects. Rather, they were embedded in a larger program that created a model for collaboration among diverse actors, provided guidance, and encouraged information sharing. The SFLR provided coordination that played a critical role as the project developed. SFLR personnel worked with government agencies and companies to facilitate their involvement and motivate them, and they also helped identify and overcome obstacles that the projects were encountering. Annual retreats brought together partners and landowners from the various state projects to discuss activities, identify problems, and share successes. The SFLR called attention to the need for an opportunity to work with African American landowners to resolve ownership issues, build assets through forestry, and catalyze the formation of partnerships. After positive experiences, partners expressed their plans to continue to work together. The SFLR also played a critical financial role, when it created a forestry fund that the projects and landowners could use to cover costs not paid for by NRCS assistance, such as land surveys. Although this provided modest funding, it importantly created the capability to quickly overcome obstacles and keep projects and landowners on track to achieve their desired objectives. Finally, in 2017 the US Endowment began a gradual process of transitioning coordination of the SFLR Program from them to a broader partnership. That transition will continue through 2018 and beyond, and will include processes to ensure the sustained impact

of both the local projects and the regional network.

Conclusion

Successful engagement of African American landowners in forestry can help prevent land loss, build assets, and retain family and community heritage. In this study, we have analyzed an integrated and long-term program to engage African American landowners in forestry based on interviews with a broad range of its participants. The SFLR has achieved significant success by integrating a variety of good practices and experiences from forestry outreach into a group of comprehensive and visible projects implemented by community-based groups. The community-based approach helped develop trust in local communities and established an on-the-ground presence that allowed the projects to grow and thrive. Each project was coordinated by a local organization but implemented through a network of organizations that shared an interest in encouraging forestry and land retention among African Americans. Partners such as NRCS and state forestry agencies helped focus existing forestry expertise and resources on landowners involved in the projects, and in turn were able to strengthen their outreach programs. Providing both legal assistance to stabilize land ownership and forestry assistance simultaneously addressed two of the major obstacles while also operating synergistically to motivate and help landowners take action.

The SFLR project personnel engaged landowners respectfully by actively listening and building social networks and community while helping landowners learn about and engage in forestry practices. Although not every effort will have access to the resources of the SFLR, other efforts to reach underserved forest owners can benefit from seeing how the different elements of the program fit and worked together. First, the projects themselves each provided forestry and land tenure services as a part of an integrated education and outreach program. Second, program activities addressed a suite of obstacles and constraints identified by prior research (Table 1). Third, engagement in forestry was itself broken down into a series of steps and activities that the projects addressed (Table 2). Intractable problems require visible and integrated programs that assemble known and new techniques

Table 2. Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program, which succeeded in engaging landowners in forestry through a series of steps involving listening to, educating, and assisting landowners.

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- Initial contact
 - Building trust
 - Landowner meetings for information exchange
 - Forest management plans
 - Planning for diverse objectives
 - Engaging forestry professionals
 - Implementing forestry practices
 - Participation in landowner organizations
 - Certification and easements
 - Tax guidance
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into coordinated efforts that are diligently and patiently applied over time, leading to enduring changes that benefit both people and forests.

In this paper, we have reported on a program for African American forest owners, who have faced a unique and well-documented set of obstacles and constraints to forest management over time. Many landowners from other minority groups likely have faced similar obstacles. The entire family forest owner population also has diverse management objectives, tends to harvest timber but rarely has management plans, and seldom uses programs and/or forestry practices (Butler et al. 2016). All programs aiming to engage more family landowners in forestry could benefit from the lessons learned through the SFLR.

Endnotes

1. Data from US Endowment for Forestry and Communities, February 16, 2018.

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