



Back to the future: Food, farms and renewal

The Deep South has a strong agricultural history, but too many resources are concentrated in the hands of a few. Now a group of African American farmers in Mississippi and Alabama are banding together to access larger markets, engage young people and redefine farming as a path to prosperity.

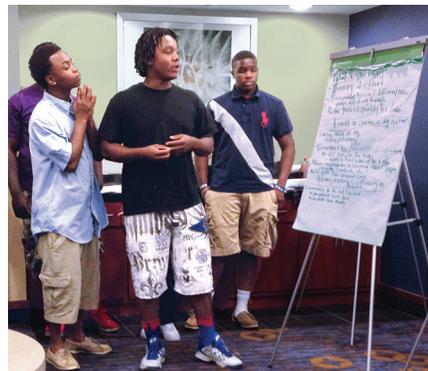
► The catalysts

People and place. Today, a quarter of African American owned farms in the country are in Mississippi and Alabama. Their owners have a wealth of know-how, but are disconnected from lucrative markets because their farms are small, in low-population areas, and without access to capital. They are “land rich and cash poor.” More than half of these farms earn less than \$2,500 per year, and many aren’t in full production. But put to more productive use, they represent a real opportunity for the region.

Partners in place. Organizations rooted in the region recognize these assets are lying fallow. The Southern Rural Black Women In Agriculture Initiative, MileSton Cooperative, The Cottage House, The United Christian Community Association, and Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network, have long worked to build a better farming system. Their common aim: improve the livelihoods of rural families in Alabama and Mississippi and sustain the region’s natural resources. In 2011, across two states and many communities, they began working together with local farmers to create what is now the Deep South Community Agricultural Network (DSCAN).

Support in place. Networks need care and feeding, especially in their youth. From 2012-2015, McIntosh SEED (Sustainable Environment and Economic Development) and Rural Support Partners stepped up to help strengthen the new collaboration, bringing local partners and farmers together to listen and think: What are our shared

dreams? What is working and what is not? How can we produce for larger markets? Working together, how can we make that happen? McIntosh SEED continues to support and help grow DSCAN and works with other groups and communities in the rural south, while RSP supports networks and groups in Central Appalachia.



Engaging young people to redefine farming as a path to prosperity

► The value opportunity

The Network farmers work land that stretches across the Black Belt—the midsection of Alabama and Mississippi named for its dark, fertile soil. They had been selling produce direct to consumers, mostly in local farmers markets or roadside stands. What they lacked was access to larger institutional buyers.

The growing local foods movement in the United States offers these farmers a huge opportunity. Consumers are demanding more organic and locally grown produce. Grocers—from down-home markets to national chains—are responding. Schools and hospitals want healthier food too—for students,

patients and staff. And farm-to-table restaurants offer a new upscale outlet for fresh and specialty produce.

But it takes resources to meet this demand. The Network found many right there, in plain sight. Good land in abundance. Farmers with deep knowledge of the region’s soil, climate and environment. Young people looking for a local future. The real value opportunity lies in farmers utilizing these resources in new ways, and increasing their control over the process. That is the job of DSCAN.

► The demand

To begin, DSCAN went to communities across the region to identify potential buyers in restaurants, schools and grocery stores. They asked: What products do you want? How do you want them delivered? What standards or certifications must we meet? Armed with this knowledge, they identified three “hot spots”—places where real demand was emerging for products they could produce.

Hot spot #1. Farmers in two southeastern Alabama counties, working with The Cottage House, started by getting fresh produce into the schools. Predictable, larger orders close to home could quickly add to their bottom line. But they also knew that children who eat more fresh greens are better able to learn. The desire to improve the next generation’s lot resounds throughout the Network.

Hot spot #2. Women farmers in Mississippi, working with the Southern Rural Black Women In Agriculture Initiative, marketed sweet potatoes and sweet potato greens to local restaurants, while

“This value chain network helps people to look up, to look forward, to think very differently and see...They can create their own opportunities.”

—Barbara Shipman, farmer and Program Director, Cottage House

MileSton farmers supplied peas and squash to small groceries throughout the region.

Hot spot #3. In western Alabama, The United Christian Community Association (TUCCA) helped organize local farmers to sell collard greens into larger markets. They too started with schools, but a dozen restaurants across the region have become their best customers.

► Putting it together

Knowing where there is real demand—and which farmers in the region can help meet it—is a great start. But actually moving product to market is another story.

So the Network mapped the pieces of the value chain they had in place—every step it takes to get products to larger markets. They looked for gaps in the chain, especially ones they could address better together.



Mapping existing pieces of the value chain to locate missing links

Gap 1: Get certified! To sell to larger buyers, farmers need USDA certification that they are following best practices. This takes time and costs money, both scarce for low-income farmers. DSCAN coached them through it. In just one year, 22 Alabama farmers working with The Cottage House became Global GAP certified, the highest certification level.

Gap 2: Produce more and better. Supplying higher-volume markets means using the land as productively as possible. Experts from Tuskegee University helped Network farmers adopt growing protocols and practices to meet buyers' standards, increasing crop yields by at least 40%, along with their value.

Gap 3: Capture more value. Farmers earn more for produce that is cleaned and packaged. Mississippi's MileSton Cooperative worked with local youth to turn an old gas station/convenience store into a facility to wash and bag peas and other produce. In Alabama, TUCCA secured space for an aggregation and production facility that now employs 13 people.

Gap 4: Find workers. Producing vegetables requires lots of people and partners struggled to find workers to meet growing demand. The solution? Engage young people. Farmers got labor at a fair price and 47 local youth in 2015 alone gained new opportunities in agriculture. Another value chain is tapping the prison reentry program to find willing workers.

► The bottom line: Grow your own wealth

So far, DSCAN has organized 35 small minority farmers and created entry points to wholesale markets. From 2012 to 2014, they generated over \$266,000 in sales of collard greens, turnips, cabbage, sweet potatoes, and pinkeye peas to high-end restaurants, schools, groceries, and wholesale buyers—a 200% increase in sales across two seasons.

These early results have led them to engage a market developer who is seeking larger deals and coordinating the value chains to meet demand together. As a result, farmers are collaborating for the first time to grow and deliver produce for regional and national grocery store chains and wholesale distributors.

For far too long, communities across the Deep South have lacked ways to control their futures. Now, farmers who have been living on the edge see they have plenty to offer the larger economy. The region's young people see opportunities in farming with new eyes. Organizations see the power of working together. DSCAN is building confidence that change can come. And, they are expanding to new places, including Georgia, so that this change can spread throughout the region.

the wealthworks inventory

The Deep South Community Agricultural Network is redefining farming as a wealth-building strategy for communities in Mississippi and Alabama. But the Network members know they must track many bottom lines if they are going to make the turn from poverty to prosperity. Here's what they track:

- **Individual capital.** Improved business skills for farmers. USDA certification to sell into wholesale markets.
- **Intellectual capital.** Implementation of universal growing protocols/sustainable production practices. Implementation of aquaponic growing techniques.
- **Social capital.** Collaborative network. Stronger relationships among farmers and support organizations. Strong working relationships with 15 wholesale customers.
- **Natural capital.** New sustainable production practices.
- **Built capital.** 91 forms of shared infrastructure, equipment or services. Hoop houses. Reclaimed buildings for processing. New processing/aggregation facility.
- **Political capital.** Understanding policies related to institutional support (e.g., universities, hospitals, schools) for local food value chains.
- **Financial capital.** Over \$640,000 in new capital investments in value chain partners. Connections to foundation investors.
- **Local ownership and control.** Shared equipment, liability insurance and market development advisor. New local businesses.
- **Better livelihoods.** \$266,000 in value chain sales in 2013-2014. New jobs for young people—and others. New businesses for local residents.