



The Small Farms Resource and Innovation Center (SFRIC): A One-Stop Shop to Support Farmers and Rural Communities in North Carolina

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Abstract

The work of SFRIC will include disseminating information on farming best practices, farm management and the use of technology in farming, offering help and advice to small farmers in securing loans and developing new microloan funding models, establishing a small farms database to implement data-driven decision-making and the wide use of agriculture technologies, assisting small farmers in deciphering the “alphabet soup” of USDA agencies so they have better access to the assets that USDA provides, building bridges to community resources and stakeholders to ensure that small farmers have a role in their local business ecosystems, fostering new interdisciplinary collaborations between the CAES, Extension at A&T, and other A&T colleges and departments to create programs that emphasize sustainability, profitability, stewardship of land resources, and cutting-edge production and marketing techniques. We envision the SFRIC as a “home” for small farmers and a catalyst for agriculture innovation, where experts from the CAES and Extension, agricultural service providers, conservation organizations, lenders, students, and farmers and their families work together to create fair and equitable agriculture policies, productive small farms that utilize new technologies, and vibrant, sustainable local food systems and rural communities.

Keywords: Environmental Quality, Technologies, Stakeholders, Small Farmers, Agriculture

Background

For the past century, U.S. agriculture has focused on increased labor efficiency and cheap, reliable food and fiber sources (Ahearn and Korb, 2005). While this focus has built a hugely productive agricultural sector, it has also meant that research, education, technological support and direct government payments have been directed toward large-scale, industrialized agricultural production rather than to small farms. Small farmers, who comprise about 80 percent of North Carolina’s agriculture sector and include most of the state’s African American farmers, were not the target of “big agriculture.”

The realities of the 21st century – including the needs to sustain environmental quality and operate more efficiently – have resulted in renewed interest in small-scale farming and the role of smaller, often family-based farms in ensuring the vitality of rural communities. Small farms occupy a unique niche in our society and our rural communities. Because small farmers control the bulk of U.S. farmland (Clark, 2006),

they play a major role in how we use our land resources. Small farmers assure food security and through farmers markets and community-supported agriculture programs, they provide healthy, locally grown food for many communities that are considered food deserts.

Still, small farmers, especially farmers of color, have less access to the resources they need to succeed. A USDA report shows that 86 percent of its microloans went to white farmers between 2013 and 2015 (USDA ERS, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, limited resource African American farmers have had less access to credit and are more at risk of failure (Riley, 2020).

The College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES) at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and its outreach arm, Cooperative Extension at N.C. A&T, are committed to helping small farmers and offering programs across North Carolina that share the research and knowledge of the CAES in ways that sustain small farms and rural communities. However, as we enter the third decade of the 21st century, a newer, bolder, more integrated model is needed to overcome past inequities, improve access to research information, and provide small farmers with the tools and resources they need for success.



Fig 1. SFRIC Aligns closely with NC A&T's College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences' interconnected work with education, research, and extension. To address these challenges and support a statewide up thrust in small-scale agriculture reform, we created the Small Farms Resource and Innovation Center

(SFRIC). SFRIC will utilize the talents of diverse faculty members, research scientists, and Extension specialists and agents to offer a “one-stop shop” for small-scale and underserved farmers that supports their needs and interests through innovative initiatives, new funding models and Extension outreach programs.

Purpose and Methodologies

In the current agriculture system, small farmers and ranchers and their communities do not equitably benefit from investments in farming systems and technologies, even though they play a major role in local food economies, providing more than \$8.7 billion per year in commodity crops (USDA-NASS, 2019; USDA-NASS, 2015) and comprising about half of fresh market vegetable producers and one-third of all berry fruit producers (USDA-NASS, 2019). SFRIC will be a clearinghouse for education, resources and news to serve North Carolina’s small farmers, with a special emphasis on limited resource and socially disadvantaged farmers in underserved communities. It will take advantage of the long-established expertise of NC A&T, one of the nation’s foremost 1890 land-grant institutions and largest HBCUs.

The work of SFRIC will include:

- Disseminating information on farming best practices, farm management and the use of technology in farming.
- Offering help and advice to small farmers in securing loans and developing new microloan funding models.
- Establishing a small farms database to implement data-driven decision-making and the wide use of agriculture technologies.
- Assisting small farmers in deciphering the “alphabet soup” of USDA agencies so they have better access to the assets that USDA provides.
- Building bridges to community resources and stakeholders to ensure that small farmers have a role in their local business ecosystems.
- Fostering new interdisciplinary collaborations between the CAES, Extension at A&T, and other A&T colleges and departments to create programs that emphasize sustainability, profitability, stewardship of land resources, and cutting-edge production and marketing techniques.

One of the key activities of SFRIC is a Small Farmers Leadership Academy, which will build the capacity of small, limited resource, veteran, beginning, retirement and minority farmers. The Academy is a chance for Extension and CAES researchers to engage directly with small farmers and emphasizes problem-solving approaches to help farmers address ongoing challenges, overcome production setbacks, and implement best practices for sustainable, high-impact production. The Academy offers in-depth training sessions on topics that could include: 1) farm enterprise leadership; 2) developing/revising business plans; 3) understanding financial documents, including loans and contracts; 4) farm health and safety; 5) accessing new markets and developing marketing plans; 6) policy and advocacy; 7) heir property and succession planning; and 8) access to and usage of USDA resources.

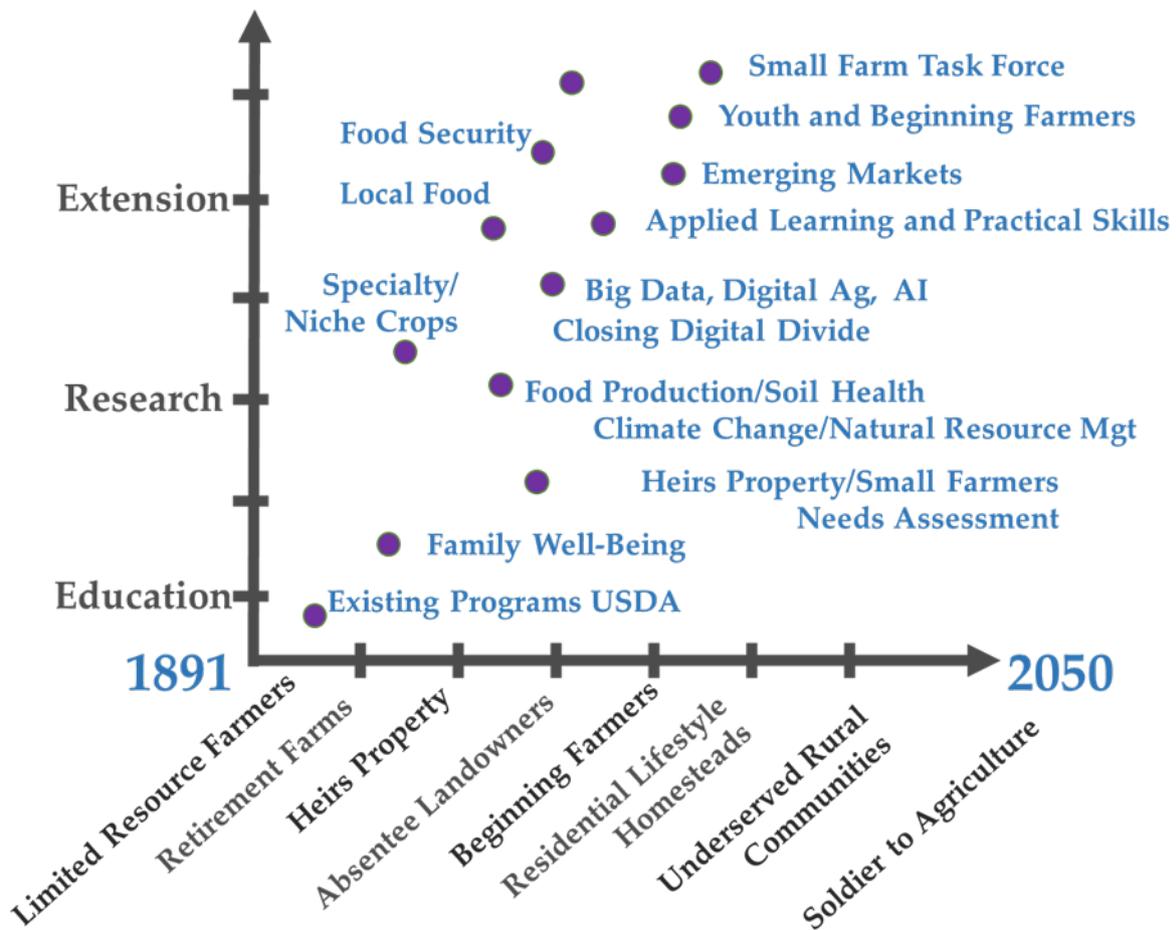


Fig 2. Farmers face many challenges and success depends on many dynamic and interconnected variables. The pace of innovation is such that knowledge rapidly reaches the farmers who can put education, research, and extension resources and guidance into practice.

An overarching goal of SFRIC is to develop a cadre of small farmers who are motivated to integrate new technologies and innovative techniques into their businesses to build more robust farms and farming communities. SFRIC leverages the expertise of CAES faculty, Extension staff and the nationwide Extension outreach system to offer online and in-person programs and a library of online resources. The Center will draw on CAES students and the statewide 4-H youth program to teach young people about 21st[1]century agriculture through internships and career interest programs, with the goal of bringing more youth and young people of color into farming and agriculture careers. The Center will work to build relationships with agribusinesses locally, statewide, and nationally to ensure that their products and technologies reach small farmers, underserved farmers and African American farmers and to provide a pipeline of minority students into agribusiness.

Target Audience

SFRIC will focus its work on lower-income and limited resource farmers as well as beginning farmers and youth interested in farming. According to USDA standards, a limited resource farmer is a person with direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than \$221,200 (for FY2023) in each of the previous two years, and whose household income also meets certain criteria, (https://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/LRP_Definition.aspx). Beginning farmers can be young or second-career/retiree farmers, who often need help purchasing affordable land, securing equitable loans, and determining the best crops to grow. Other audiences likely to benefit from SFRIC include residential farmers who generate most of their income through another occupation, and farm widows and heirs, who often take control of farmland but have incomplete knowledge of how to implement a succession plan or how to manage a farm.

Opportunities and Expected Outcomes

SFRIC is a means by which NC A&T can address the historical inequities that have hindered small farmers and African American farmers in particular. Much work must be done to break down the barriers and outdated policies that give large industrial producers an advantage over small growers. With SFRIC in place and easily accessible through in-person visits, phone consultations, educational programs, online tutorials and digital resources, small farmers will be able to easily find the information they need about business and marketing practices, grant opportunities, local food networks and farmers markets, and new approaches that can increase their productivity at minimal cost. By emphasizing stewardship and sustainable practices, SFRIC will highlight the important niche occupied by small farmers and demonstrate how small farmers can adopt sustainable practices more easily and economically than industrial-size farms. By tapping into the students and 4-H members available through the CAES and Extension, the Center will give diverse students hands-on opportunities in agriculture and help to diversify the agriculture sector of the future. SFRIC can also educate policymakers and community leaders on the importance of sustainable local food systems and how these systems lead to better health and the elimination of food deserts.

Metrics for Success

SFRIC seeks to achieve the following short-term objectives that meet overarching goals above.

- Conduct a small farmers' needs assessment. Metric for success: Successful completion of the assessment with a published report on findings.
- Establish, house and maintain a small farmers' database or registry. This database will provide a framework and baseline data for measuring small farm success, tracking and addressing issues, deploying new technologies, and more. Metric for success: Development of an easily accessible and searchable database.
- Launch the Small Farmers Leadership Academy for farmers who want to expand their business acumen and serve as leaders and mentors to other small farmers and new

farmers. Metric for success: Create the framework, guiding principles, and value proposition for the Academy.

- Develop and deploy effective outreach to small farmers. Metric for success: Develop an SFRIC website that offers information and resources.
- Establish educational programs to be conducted in communities (at local Extension centers) and virtually. Metric for success: Launch of programs that address the needs of small-scale, limited resource farmers.
- Expand programs and its impact through new initiatives, such as trainings, seminars, workshops and conferences that address the changing needs of small farmers and evolving economic realities.
- Recruit farmers for the Small Farms Leadership Academy and begin to offer programs.
- Develop a microgrant program that provides small farmers with funding to adopt new technologies and practices.
- Begin youth programs, including programs that connect 4-H members to small farmers in their communities and student internships.
- Conduct Industry outreach programs that connect experts in agribusiness and ag industry leaders to small farmers, ensuring that innovative ag products and technologies are accessible to this traditionally underserved and overlooked audience.

Summary

We envision the SFRIC as a “home” for small farmers and a catalyst for agriculture innovation, where experts from the CAES and Extension, agricultural service providers, conservation organizations, lenders, students, and farmers and their families work together to create fair and equitable agriculture policies, productive small farms that utilize new technologies, and vibrant, sustainable local food systems and rural communities.

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