

Growers briefed on farm bill

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ALBANY — Encouraging younger Americans to take up farming as growers' average age rises is a priority in pending farm legislation, U.S. Department of Agriculture Undersecretary Dr. Gale Buchanan said Friday during the first day of a conference of black farmers.

The former dean of the University of Georgia's College of Agriculture, Buchanan said the 2008 Farm Bill was the product of many public forums held around the South and that its various titles were about 90 percent decided, though final passage was a few months away.

With the average American farmer now at 59.9 years, "encouraging the next generation of farmers is vital to our nation," along with increasing conservation stewardship programs, is a Farm Bill priority, Buchanan said.

But the bill faces limitations on subsidies for farmers "not needing them" and individuals not engaged in production, as well as World Trade Organization objections, he said.

Hosting the Albany conference is the 40-year-old Federation of Southern Cooperatives and Land Assistance Fund, which has assisted about 2,000 individuals in filing claims in a 1999 class-action discrimination suit against USDA, *Pigford v. Glickman*, according to reports.

The suit, naming former Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, contends black farmers were denied access to USDA-administered farm loans from 1986-96. The USDA has settled claims with more than 15,000 black farmers, reports said.

Both branches of Congress have crafted 2008 Farm Bill proposals containing \$100 million in additional restitution for black farmers who missed a Sept. 2000 deadline for claiming discrimination by USDA, reports said.

Buchanan's comments followed a morning of presentations on vegetable production, disease control and irrigation, a new Georgia food markets database and the Women, Infants and Children farmers' market nutrition program during the first day of the 25th annual farmers' conference.

Several speakers are expected to update the group on *Pigford's* status when the Federation conference resumes at Albany's Hilton Garden Inn today, including attorneys from the *Pigford* Monitor's Office.

Farmers such as Ben Burkett return to the conference each year for useful information and to visit with old friends, Burkett said.

The Mississippi fruit and vegetable farmer grows eggplant, squash, melons and 13 others as well 2,000 square feet of organic herbs, he said.

"I always get a lot (of information) on the production side, that's why I come," Burkett said.

He and 33 others formed a farm cooperative in 1981 in Mississippi, he said.

"The federation helped us build a grading and packing facility," Burkett said.

Worth County farmer Sam Lee thought he'd never return to the farm, but after a 36-year career in lawn maintenance, he did.

A newer Federation member, Lee returned to his Worth County home near the Shingler community from New York in 2001 and has since started raising sweet potatoes, squash, cucumbers, greens, turnips, peaches, blackberries and other crops, he said.

About 70 participants Friday were encouraged to register their farms and their products — with USDA's 2007 Census of Agriculture and on a new Georgia Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development Web site, ga.marketmaker.uiuc.edu.

By registering their products on the Georgia Market Maker site, farmers' markets and other entities that seek to buy locally can find the products, Kent Wolfe of UGA Extension said.

Another program that brings locally grown foods to needy families is threatened by budget cuts, its director said.

The Women, Infants and Children Farmers Market program has grown from 6,681 to more than 40,000 participants during its 6-year history, its director, Doris Evan-Gates, said.

Some 177 farmers have earned up to \$128,000 a season by bringing their food products to a WIC farmers' market, Evan-Gates said.

"We put almost \$1 million in small farmers' pockets last year," she said.

But budget cuts and other changes to WIC, such as the inclusion of grocery store fruits and vegetables, threaten the program, she said.

The Federation and members of Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative have led an effort to organize a downtown Albany farmers' market

The 10-state Federation's Georgia Director, Shirley Sherrod, said recently that an unsuitable site downtown and shortage of Albany community support led organizers to suspend the market until March.

Farmer John Green brought his family's product, Green Family Sugar Cane Syrup, to sell at the conference.

Made from sugar cane grown from Mississippi seed on his Worth County farm near the Red Rock community, the syrup is sweeter than most, he said.

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