

In the Delta, federal farm aid widens disparity among races

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SHELBY, Miss. -- Over a recent five-year period, the federal government has spent nearly \$1.2 billion in agricultural subsidies to boost farmers' incomes and to invigorate local economies in this poverty-stricken region of the Mississippi Delta.

Most residents are black, but less than 5 percent of the money went to black farmers. They own relatively little land, and so they generally do not qualify for the payments. Ninety-five percent of the money went to large, commercial farms, virtually all of which have white owners.

In Bolivar County, where Shelby is located, farmers received a total of \$200 million in crop subsidies between 2001 and 2005, while \$11 million in Rural Development grants from the Agriculture Department went to replace the abandoned factories, decaying houses, and boarded-up downtowns in dozens of dirt-poor, majority-black Delta towns.

Many of these towns are trapped in a long, painful death spiral, suffering from poverty, crime, and high unemployment.

"It's just a sad situation," said Judy Hill, who leads a women's group that is trying to rescue what is left of the small town of Shelby, which has a cotton gin, two liquor stores, and not much else. "There's no industry, no factories, no hope for the future, nothing to keep the people here. And what the answer is, I don't know."

The farm bill Congress is crafting is a complex mosaic of competing goals, including income support for farmers, conservation incentives, and preserving rural communities by spurring economic growth. Farm subsidies are meant to tide growers over when prices fall or when disasters strike. The Rural Development grants, on the other hand, are supposed to help small, struggling communities such as Shelby. From 2001 to 2005, the Agriculture Department awarded \$1.18 billion in subsidies but \$54.8 million in Rural Development grants for housing, new businesses and water systems, and other projects, the Washington Post found.

The wide disparity between subsidies for farmers and Rural Development money for agriculture communities highlights one of the contradictions of federal farm policy, which favors big agriculture over small farms and poor rural towns. In the Delta, it has helped to preserve a two-tiered economy and a widening economic chasm between the races, according to residents and officials. Agriculture Department officials declined to comment for this article.

"You're in the Delta. Most of the real economy is controlled by large families. It has been that way for 200 to 300 years," said Ben Burkett, who is black and owns a small farm. "We'd like to break that cycle and create new businesses. But there's not much money for that."

Rogers Morris, 61, operates one of the few large black-owned farms in Bolivar County. "I maybe get \$8,000-\$9,000" a year. "It helps a little. But the subsidies basically go to white farmers." ■