

Minority Landowner

A close-up photograph of a woman with short, curly hair, wearing sunglasses and a red shirt. She is smiling broadly and holding a newspaper. The background is a bright, outdoor setting with a body of water and trees.

CATHER WOODS

MINORITY LANDOWNER'S

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Helping Landowners Claim Their Future in South Carolina



Photo courtesy of Jennie Stephens, CHPP

Through the partnership between the Center and NRCS, seminars targeting historically underserved landowners were conducted to educate landowners on their rights and responsibilities as heirs' property owners, and to increase their knowledge on the benefits of NRCS program and services.

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Heritage. A strong word. A word that implies pride and history. It's also something that many people want to hold fast to, while others fear losing their heritage. But, for many African Americans in South Carolina's Lowcountry, the fear of losing their heritage, particularly the land of their ancestors, is very real indeed.

For the past three years, the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation (the Center) and the South Carolina Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) have established a strong partnership based on the mutual interest to identify historically underserved landowners, and link them with programs and services that can help them keep their land and preserve their heritage. Many of these landowners have what is known as *heirs' property*. This is land that has been passed down through families for several generations, yet has no clear title of ownership because landowners died without a will, or intestate. All descendants of the owners on the deed are entitled to a percentage of the land, which can create problems if a landowner is farming heirs' property and their relatives want to sell. It also limits heirs' property owners from participating in NRCS programs because eligibility can require clear title to the property.

The Center, which is a non-profit organization, specializes in helping heirs' property owners get clear title to their property. "Clearing or resolving a family's title to their heirs' property unlocks the economic potential in the property and it becomes an unencumbered asset," stated Jennie Stephens, executive director for the Center. "Families with heirs' property cannot obtain a mortgage, and have limited access to state and federal housing rehabilitation programs and to USDA conservation cost-share programs. By resolving title issues, families can apply for funds to rehabilitate their homes, implement conservation practices and obtain easements, thus generating income for themselves and for generations to come."

The partnership between the Center and NRCS was born in 2012 through a one-year agreement, which enabled the Center to conduct Legal Education and Land Use seminars targeted to historically underserved landowners in Beaufort, Berkeley, Charleston, Colleton, Dorchester and Georgetown counties. "The Center has opened doors to new relationships with landowners that NRCS otherwise would not have known," stated Kellee Melton, SC NRCS assistant state conservationist for programs. "Through their educational workshops, NRCS has been able to spread the word about our conservation programs and the opportunities available to historically underserved landowners. Working closely with the Center has helped us earn the trust of these landowners and to develop relationships that have led to success."

The Center was awarded two Conservation Innovation Grants through NRCS in September 2013 and September 2014. These grants allowed the Center to continue the effective conservation outreach to educate underserved landowners, as well as increasing the ability of these landowners to become certified forest owners.

In June 2013, the Center launched the Sustainable Forestry African American Land Retention Pilot Program (SFP), funded through a \$425,000 grant from U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, NRCS and the Forest Service. This 30-month pilot project mainly focuses on addressing the need to restore and conserve African American forested acres, while educating landowners on how to increase their land value and productivity for a greater economic benefit. Forester Sam Cook was hired by the Center as the director of this Sustainable Forestry Program in 2013. He provides landowners with guidance through educational workshops and one-on-one meetings about their rights as landowners and how they can implement forest management practices to make their land more sustainable. "I hope that the Sustainable Forestry Program can be replicated throughout the South, so more landowners can learn what the Center is doing to educate black landowners on resolving land tenure issues, utilizing sustainable conservation practices, properly managing their forestland, and most importantly, understanding the true value of their properties," stated Cook.

The Center has worked with 40 families through the Sustainable Forestry Program – both heirs' property owners and non-heirs' property owners – who have a total of over 4,103 acres of rural land. NRCS works closely with the Center and SFP participants to help them qualify for cost-share program assistance. Currently, 40 families have developed a forest management plan with NRCS or the Forest Service, and 71 families have applied for cost-share reimbursement through NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The economic benefits of implementing sustainable forestry practices has had a huge impact on several families. Currently, two families that participated in the SFP are finalizing easements estimated at a total \$2.2 million. Eleven other families are finalizing harvest sales estimated at a total of \$1.1 million dollars in income for the 2015-2016 year.

On April 11, 2015, the Center held a graduation ceremony for over 60 families who had completed the required training



On April 11, 2015, the Center held a graduation ceremony for participants who completed the Sustainable Forestry Program. USDA Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment Robert Bonnie and SC NRCS State Conservationist Ann English, presented the graduates with certificates.



Through strong partnerships, South Carolina landowners are preserving their land and heritage for generations to come. (L to R) Alan McGregor, U.S. Endowment, Kellee Melton, USDA-NRCS, Ann English, USDA-NRCS, Sam Cook, the Center, Robert Bonnie, USDA, Jacqueline Davis Slay, USDA-NRCS, Jennie Stephens, the Center.

for the Sustainable Forestry Program. USDA Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment Robert Bonnie was the keynote speaker at the ceremony, and he, along with South Carolina NRCS State Conservationist Ann English, presented the graduates with certificates. Twenty-six of these landowners were honored as "Woodlands Advocates." They received additional training and will serve as the Center's "evangelists," in an effort to instill the economic importance of properly managing forested and agricultural land to others in their community.

"The partnership between NRCS and the Center for Heirs' Property has been instrumental in helping NRCS reach historically underserved landowners in the Lowcountry," stated English. "NRCS is committed to helping these landowners access the financial and technical assistance they need to become good stewards of the land, and our partnership with the Center has proven to be a success in helping us put more conservation on the ground in South Carolina."

Helping landowners understand and reach the full potential of land ownership is at the center of this partnership, and through cooperation, the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation and NRCS are helping families retain their heritage, while preserving for their future.