

8-10-2018

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*Farm Service Agency*

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### Recommended Citation

Pace, Wilfred L. (2018) "Successes, Challenges, and Future: Farm Service Agency in South Carolina," *Professional Agricultural Workers Journal*: Vol. 6: No. 1, 4.  
Available at: <https://tupubs.tuskegee.edu/pawj/vol6/iss1/4>

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**PRESENTED AT THE 74<sup>TH</sup> PROFESSIONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS CONFERENCE,  
2016, THE JAMES HILL MEMORIAL PLENARY SESSION**

**SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE: FARM SERVICE AGENCY  
IN SOUTH CAROLINA**

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Wow, is all I can say! Let me just tell you that I am Wilfred Pace, the first African American to serve as the Farm Service Agency Director (FSA) for the State of South Carolina and I stand here privileged to just sit between wisdom and knowledge. Now you say, “why does Wilfred Pace stand between wisdom and knowledge?” I must then admit that I am justice, so three in the saddle makes it complete, but there is a fourth that is not here whom I wish you would have had the opportunity to meet. Jewel (Bronaugh) brings remarkable experience and resourcefulness to the Farm Service Agency. I stand here between wisdom and knowledge in awe of the opportunity to serve in this capacity minorities and all farmers, ranchers, and citizens of South Carolina. I could not have gotten here if it was not for the foundation that was laid by gentlemen such as wisdom and knowledge. It has been almost four years ago since I became South Carolina State Executive Director of FSA. Well, somebody said, “it couldn’t be done” but I with a chuckle replied, “that maybe it couldn’t, but I would not be the one who would say so until I had tried.” So how did I try? I googled first, and the first name that came up was Mr. Daniel Robinson. I say this because to the young people who are in the audience today, sometimes you need a role model. You need to have a vision in front of you as to how you are going to achieve what you know has already been predestined and ordained for you. All you need to do is to walk out on that path that will lead you to those destinies. As I was saying, I googled, and Mr. Robinson came up, and I could not believe it, and I said, “this gentleman has almost my identical background in Agricultural Education and how he had matriculated through the FSA, and then rose through the ranks to be the State Executive Director of Alabama.”

Now let me tell you a little thing about Alabama, I almost came to Alabama as an intern with Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) from Fort Valley State University, but I had heard some horrible things about Alabama, and as a Georgian, I did not want it to get any worse. I looked north and as far as I could get north was South Carolina, and I took an internship there. Before that though, when I set in motion my future plan I said, “I wanted to be an educator,” and Fort Valley State put me on the path. I actually did an internship at D.F. Douglas High School in Montezuma, Georgia and laid that foundation. However, I was not totally sure at the time that that was what I wanted to do; I remember my grandmother always saying, “a bird in the hand is better than one in the bush” but I was not so sure if I wanted to be an educator. I decided I wanted to look at a different venture. So I looked at the NRCS and their internship program and found employment as an intern student with the Soil Conservation Service that time; most of us know it now as the NRCS. So when I graduated, I had two options or plans either pursue a career in education or pursue a career in educating adult farmers. Well, the internship showed me I had the best of two worlds with the Soil Conservation Service. I could continue in agriculture, and I could continue educating those underserved individuals or those persons who were not astute or educated enough to know about the different programs that the NRCS and the USDA at large offered to assist farmers and ranchers all over this country. So I was motivated by wanting to help. I have to be pleased with myself before I can inspire, encourage, guide, and recommend how you should handle

your life, your finances, and your stewardship of the natural resources. So, I had to be passionate about what I was saying, I had to be committed to learning more, committed to being open to listen and also committed to utilizing the resources that were already there. One of the speakers yesterday, State Representative Miller of Iowa, and I talked about the clientele that she serves which is primarily White. That encounter was great, and this was an opportunity for me to see that no matter what color you are you have the responsibility as a citizen and as a public servant of the USDA to serve all the citizens of this great country.

I just want to share with you what we are doing in South Carolina in the Farm Service Agency. I have support from various persons because of my integrity. That is to say, what I do is going to be between the goal posts, it is going to be moral, ethical and it will not be illegal, that is what I bring to this position. Now I am going to let you know that I look at everything based on the merit of the information that is provided and put in front of me. Also, I use my grandmother's upbringing to do what is right. I have that instilled in my heart; I brought passion, commitment and dedication to do my job.

Now I can say what I want to say because I had already served in the NRCS for 37 years, so what did I have to lose? Dean, I hope this is okay because I want to talk a little bit about the NRCS because I think and I know that NRCS is doing some things right, doing some things that are sound in putting the small farmer's limited resources and veterans on a path of success with their operations. The NRCS is becoming inclusive by broadening small and veteran farmer participation in USDA programs across the board. As the small farmer liaison for 13 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, we were charged in 2005 with how we could increase participation in USDA programs across the board. That was the top mission that I was given when the State Conservationist of South Carolina tapped me on the shoulder and said, "I want you to serve as the small farmer liaison for the small farmer initiative." Some good things that came out of that initiative that gave farmers access to many different programs within NRCS and FSA.

What I wanted us to do with that program was to dispel the idea that small farmers and farmers with limited resources were just hobby farmers. I think we have successfully done that because we realize now that those small or hobby farmers contribute significantly to the agriculture economic viability of many of the states in the southeast. Not only do they contribute to the economic stability of agriculture, but also to the stability of many small minority families across this nation. We had to examine the issue of how to serve these farmers' and address their needs, especially giving them access to capital, putting conservation practices on the land, and giving them access to programs to grow their farming operation to a level of success that we are now seeing all across this nation.

Why did I want to dispel that idea of hobby farmers? Because it has a connotation that they were in farming just for the enjoyment and were not concerned about financial gain, and if they are not concerned about financial gain, then why should the federal government be concerned about implementing or using its dollars to assist them. I am glad that these small enterprises, goat enterprises, farm-raised chickens, range chickens, which I had on my yard when I was growing up as a little boy bring top dollars to these small niche farmers. The type of practices that NRCS was recommending with the small farm initiative was included in the 2008 Farm Bill.

What I would like to see from the FSA perspective is that every small farmer has a plan in front of him ready to take advantage of whatever program that becomes available. You say why do I say that? When you go to the office as Dr. Harrison has suggested that we do, you need to come with the ownership of what you want. What am I saying? If you are paying taxes and you are farming

or operating an enterprise, you ought to have your soils data. Let me back up; first of all, you ought to have a GIS or tax map based on what you are paying taxes on, on top of that you ought to have your soils map, which shows you what that land is capable of producing and on top of that you ought to have your map from your county which tells you what are the utility structures that are there. Once you have these things, you also have to bring your commitment, your passion for carrying through a plan. I am going to have to ask that the 1890 universities help us with the fourth thing. Now when you come in that office, you should have stopped by one of the 1890 or 1862 institutions and said, “this is my idea, can you help me or guide me in laying a business plan?” I am going somewhere; you have your resource information, you have your utility information; you have what you have researched as to what you want to do with that land, and then you have a sound business plan.

I think that is what will create your success on your terms with participating in all of the programs. I am not going to guarantee anything 100%, but I will give you close to 99%. If you have these things when you go in for programs with FSA come with deadlines. You ought to be putting this together before you get ready to do something. You ought to know what utilities are there because we want to know before we invest dollars from the FSA. We want to know what the environmental impacts are; what the historical impacts are, and what barriers are going to prevent us from acting? All of these things are online if you have children just tell them to google and put these things together for you, and then be ready to move that niche farm to a viable business operation. The stigma that is attached to unpreparedness is that you are coming here playing and you are not ready for business. Your attentiveness to details and to laying the roadmap for your own success gets you the attention you are looking for.

I just want to tell you why agriculture is important in South Carolina. Agribusiness in South Carolina is our number one industry. Agriculture and Forestry combined has a 41.7 million-dollar impact on the economy of South Carolina. I just want to emphasize what the two presenters who preceded me said, “that access to capital is quite important for continuing to be viable and sustainable financially on the land.” FSA has a superb reputation with keeping farmers on the land, not necessarily those of color, but I say that times have changed, and in South Carolina, it is changed so much that it is the second of my key points I want to mention. I do thank Dr. Harrison for reaching out to me, being a new State Executive Director and offering help. You may remember that flood in South Carolina, it created financial problems for many farmers; they were hurting. The other problem was our farm loan department had a very small staff and was really struggling with restructuring loans, getting new loans out of the door. However, help came from my neighbor to the south, Dr. Harrison, called me up and said, “I know what your struggles are and I will help. I am going to send you some help.” He sent me the chief of farm loan staff out of Athens Georgia; that was remarkable. This demonstrated that even though we are in these positions, we cannot do things alone; we need each other. So we have to look at how we can form relationships across the board working together to help farmers, and small farmers, in particular, to stay viable and relevant in a fast growing, ever-changing business environment. In the year that Dr. Harrison sent the help, South Carolina, with its small staff had a banner year, the largest year ever in delivering loans in South Carolina to the tune of 137 million dollars. A lot of those that we were having problems getting out of the door were people of color.

This gave me another challenge in South Carolina. How do I get my staff to employ the same passion, commitment, and willingness to serve across the board and to go beyond and sometimes give a 110% when you are not getting paid for it? That was a challenge! I called all of my loan

team to Columbia, and we sat down, and I told them that as Executive Director, because my mission, my personal and professional goals align with the mission of this agency; that is, to adequately serve every producer that is going to be our format. We are going to send help when a neighboring county needs help, or neighboring state needs help; we are going to send out the request for volunteers. Now if I do not get a timely response when I ask for volunteers, then my next step will be to temporarily assign staff to areas that need help to carry out the mission of adequately and equitably serving all clients. I have already spoken with the administrator about that. I told him that we are not getting dollars out of the door, so the dollars need to go out so the farmers can buy seeds, fertilizers, and chemicals when they actually need them to use them to be most effective. We have to really work on this because access to capital was the leading concern among small farmers. Small farmers need timely access to capital to do what needs to be done in the optimum time frame for maximum production output. So, in South Carolina we are going to give a voluntary call, and if that does not work, we are going to mandate that some of the employees be placed temporarily in different locations. I also let the staff understand that the state leadership team was going to support them and do all it can when there is a disaster, to prioritize getting the monies out the door, and assist those clients who come in with a concern in a timely manner. Thank you.