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During the James Hill Memorial Plenary Session at the 74th Professional Agricultural Workers Conference (PAWC) on December 5, 2016, the State Executive Directors of the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) in four southern states, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia, were asked to share their experiences. The theme of the PAWC was "Cultivating a Culture of Success through Innovation in Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resources." It was thus, fitting to hear from these individuals because of their unique place in history.

Collectively they represented the largest number of African Americans who have simultaneously held the position of State Executive Director. Each had distinguished careers, and his or her paths to State Executive Director were diverse, including program specialist in FSA, soil conservationist in the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Executive Director of the Center of Agriculture Research, Engagement and Outreach; and University Dean, Extension Administrator, and Research Director and Farmer/Rancher retiree. They all have made significant contributions to student and program development at land-grant universities.

The goal of the panel was to capture their individual and collective thoughts at this time in history. They were each asked to address the following three questions during the James Hill Memorial Plenary Session:

- (1) What successes have you noted during your tenure with FSA? Include related successes with other USDA agencies, as appropriate;
- (2) What have been some of the most significant challenges? Please select one or two examples of how the challenges were addressed and what results occurred; and
- (3) What are your projections for the future of FSA?

The invited panelists were:

- Jewel Hairston, State Executive Director, Virginia Farm Service Agency (2015 to 2017) formerly served as Dean and Extension Administrator at Virginia State University. An emergency family situation at the last minute prevented her participation; however, she charged her colleagues to "hold it down" in her absence.
- Fred Harrison, State Executive Director, Georgia Farm Service Agency, served as Dean and Extension Administrator at Fort Valley State University for 22 years and became a rancher prior to serving as FSA State Director (2014-2017).
- Daniel Robinson, State Executive Director, Alabama Farm Service Agency served as an FSA employee for 30+ years, and State Executive Director (1998 to 2001) before retirement and then was re-appointed as Executive Director for the second time (2009 to 2017).
- Wilfred Pace served as Soil Conservationist for South Carolina Natural Resources Conservation Service for 37 years before serving as FSA State Director (2016 to 2017).