

Management Intensive Grazing Project For Limited Resource Farmers

Final Report

Submitted By:

The United Christian Community Association (TUCCA)

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The United Christian Community Association (TUCCA) entered into a grant agreement with NRCS on September 22, 2004. This agreement was the result of a CIG proposal that was submitted entitled “Management Intensive Grazing (MIG) Project for Limited Resource Farmers”.

The primary project objective were:

- I.** Develop three demonstration farms that will model MIG practices in conjunction with other alternative agricultural enterprises.
- II.** Provide hands on training for NRCS field staff and Limited Resource Farmers to increase awareness of best management practices specific to small farmers
- III.** Collect data on the effects of MIG multi-species grazing systems especially as it relates to financial profits and parasites management on small farms

Project areas and Producer Participation

The demonstration farms were managed by the:

- *The United Christian Community Association (TUCCA)
- *The Wiregrass Farmers Cooperative
- *The United Farmers Organization (Tenn-Tom Community Development Corp.)

These organizations serve sections of central, west and southeast Alabama representing primary small scale African American limited resource farmers and ranchers.

Summary of work performed during project period

During the project period the above farmer organizations developed demonstrations to introduce the rotational/Management Intensive Grazing concept to other small limited

resource farmers in their areas. NRCS and Extension personnel were directly involved in the training workshops relating to Management Intensive Grazing and other alternative agricultural crops.

The project process was started by bringing the three groups together to discuss the planning process in terms of how the project would be carried out in the three sections of the state. These groups were familiar with each other because NRCS in Alabama provided them with computer systems in an effort to assist small farmers in their communities to have access to the internet to apply for USDA/NRCS programs. After the logistics were completed the following project steps were implemented:

- **A two-day workshop** was held in the blackbelt section of the state of Alabama. These workshops were hosted by TUCCA and United Farmers Organizations. The first day of the workshop NRCS and Extension personnel were invited to receive training in Management Intensive Grazing (MIG) and grass fed beef as it relates to small and Limited Resource Farmers. Bill Hodge, A County Agent from the state of Georgia and a (MIG) practitioner spent the weekend with farmers representing the three groups discussing the process. Both indoor instruction and field visits were completed during these workshops.
- **Three Demonstration Site were established** by the three farmers organizations in the area where they serve in the state. This concept provided a basic opportunity for small farmers to observe Management Intensive/Rotational Grazing from a 'hands on' perspective. Each system was managed differently at various levels of alternative agricultural production methods.
- During this project period **Existing Barriers** were discussed concerning the EQIP ranking system as it relates to small Limited Resource Farmers. The ranking system did not allow flexibility for small farmers that operated small acreages who only needed to install few conservation practices. A solution was presented to the NRCS program manager that indicated a portion of the EQIP funds at the state level needed to be set aside and used in separate ranking systems where Limited Resource Farmers would compete with each other instead of larger farmers. This concept was adapted in the state and over \$1.2 million was set a side in this manner for FY 2005.
- **Innovative Conservation Practices** that fit small and Limited Resource Farmers were demonstrated and the result presented during workshops. These practices included:
 - * Pastured Poultry
 - * Woodland Grazing for Small Ruminant
 - * Plastic mulch and drip irrigation

As a result of this effort in the project process NRCS in Alabama adopted these practices as cost shareable items under the small-scale farmer initiative of EQIP (see the Alabama NRCS home page).

- **Grassroot community outreach** efforts resulted from the project process because Limited Resource Farmers were exposed to NRCS program participation systems and a greater awareness of how the process worked was established. One of the organization that participated in this project utilized knowledge learn from this to sub-contract with one of the RC&D councils in the state to provide outreach assistance to Limited Resource Producers that have not been participating in USDA programs. This system was used in the recent EQIP sign up period and over 50 new farmers that never participated were assisted with the sign up process.
- Another barrier that was discovered in this project was many Limited Resource Producers couldn't participate in EQIP because of the reimbursement factor involved in the program. Therefore, one of the farmers group established a relationship with a revolving loan fund that is operated by one of the RC&D councils as a pilot method to bridge this gap.

This was a very good project to create awareness of NRCS programs among Limited Resource Farmers in the state of Alabama. The following recommendations are needed to take this concept to the next level:

*NRCS needs to develop a cooperative agreement with grass root community-based farmer organizations and hire them to conduct outreach among Limited Resource Farmers. These organizations with limited training can provide hand holding assistance in getting Limited Resource Farmers to the USDA service center to sign up for NRCS programs. These groups should be paid as contractors to perform this work not NRCS employees, maybe as Technical Service Providers.

*NRCS should look at alternative Conservation Systems that work well for Limited Resource Farmers and adjust the program rules to these concepts, and let it become a part of EQIP fabric. A pilot state is needed to work out the details.

*NRCS should embrace a revolving loan fund through RC&D that will enhance the abilities of Limited Resource Farmers to participate in EQIP.

*NRCS needs to use this concept as a model to revise the EQIP program so that it will work for small scale farmers.