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A FEDERAL COMMISSION FOR THE BLACK BELT SOUTH

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Abstract

Recent legislation by the U.S. Congress authorized a federal regional commission for the Black Belt South. Three southern social scientists first proposed the commission at Tuskegee University's Professional Agricultural Workers Conference in 1990. Following congressional seminars on the Black Belt by Ronald Wimberley and Libby Morris, the first legislation for the commission was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994. After a succession of 12 U.S. House and Senate Bills, Congress finally authorized "the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission" in 2008 with support by various, and sometimes competing, groups. This paper traces and updates the chronology of sociological research, university initiatives, grassroots support, and policy efforts involved in establishing the Commission. Suggestions are offered for improving the Commission and the types of programs the Commission may use to improve the historic and contemporary poor quality of life in the Southern Black Belt.

Keywords: Black Belt, South, Economic Development, Rural Development

Introduction

The "Southeast Crescent Regional Commission" was authorized as a federal commission in the 2008 Farm Bill, Public Law 110-246, as referenced in Section 15731 and other sections to establish a Federal Commission for the Black Belt South region. Currently, there is little awareness of this development among social scientific, agency, and nongovernment interest groups. This article briefly summarizes the research and outreach efforts to get the Bill authorized and traces some of the chronology of research, university initiatives, grassroots activities, and policy efforts involved in establishing the Commission. Suggestions are offered for improving the Commission as authorized. The types of programs the Commission may provide to improve the historic and contemporary poor quality of life in the Southern Black Belt are also examined.

The South is the largest demographic region of the United States with over one-third of the nation's population and nearly half of the country's rural and nonmetropolitan populations (e.g., Wimberley and Morris, 1997; Wimberley, 2008). The South also contains nearly one-half of the nation's poverty as well as adults who have not graduated from high school. Most of the South's poor quality-of-life conditions are concentrated in the historic and enduring Black Belt region - an expanse of over 600 counties that stretch across the 11 Old South states from Virginia down through East Texas and bordered by Tennessee to the north.

Steps toward the Commission

With the South and Black Belt's disproportionate demographic and socioeconomic factors in mind, Ron Wimberley, North Carolina State University, Raleigh; Libby Morris, University of Georgia, Athens; and Doug Bachtel, University of Georgia, Athens, presented a statistical and graphic case for creating a federal regional commission for the Black Belt South that would roughly follow the model of the Appalachian Regional Commission, that had been established for the Upper South and impoverished rural Appalachian counties ranging from Mississippi to New York. That presentation, as published later (Wimberley et al., 1991), was made at Tuskegee University's Annual Professional Agricultural Worker's Conference for 1890 and 1862 Land-Grant Universities; federal, state, and local agencies; and community groups in December 1990. At the conclusion of the presentation, the authors proposed that such a commission be developed for the Black Belt South that held far more of the nation's poor rural people and places than Appalachia (Wimberley and Morris, 1996).

The research team continued to make further presentations about the neglected conditions of the Black Belt to various types of audiences. Wimberley and Morris also contacted the offices of several southern members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate who might have particular interest in the research findings. Significant among these initial contacts were those with former Congressman Charlie Rose of North Carolina, a member of the House Agriculture Committee, and his staff. The following first person account by Ron Wimberley details the chronology of interactions and events in relation to discussions with members of the House Agriculture Committee in 1991. This account is followed by a summary of subsequent activities to establish a Black Belt regional commission when the 1994 legislation resulting from these early efforts was not passed.

Our Day on the Hill

I scheduled an appointment to see one of the staffers. He was Keith Pitts who worked on farm and rural issues for Representative Rose. I sat in Pitts' office for hours waiting for him to return from urgent business in the Capitol where Mr. Rose had an office as Chair of the House Facilities Committee. As I waited, I talked with a woman in the office about the Black Belt research findings. Later, I would learn that she was Rose's former wife. Meanwhile, Keith kept calling and apologizing for the delays. Finally, he called and asked if I could meet briefly with him in the Capitol office. The office was located high in the House wing and beyond where I could have strayed when I was a staffer myself.

When I arrived, Pitts quickly told me that he had only about six or seven minutes, and asked me to explain what we had found and to offer any ideas for him to consider. Then, he asked me to sit at the head of the Committee conference table with my back close against the Capitol Dome, and I introduced the Black Belt and its various socioeconomic conditions using several of our maps. I then quickly offered that we would like to share these findings with other Agricultural Committee members and their staffs. Suddenly, our time was up, but Keith simply said, "we would like to do that and we want to do something about the region." Within months, he had arranged for Libby Morris and me to give congressional seminars on the Black Belt, one on May 5, 1992 and the other on April 2, 1993.

Near the end of the seminar in 1993, we purposefully showed a map of the Appalachian Regional Commission counties along with a Black Belt map. Immediately, Stephan Bell, a young aide to Representative Earl Hilliard from Alabama, stood and said to us, “you are doing what you should be doing.” Then, he turned to the audience and added, “but we’re not doing what we should be doing.” That afternoon, we met with Mr. Hilliard and his staff and began planning legislation for a Southern Black Belt Commission. Within a year H.R. 3901 was introduced through the House Agriculture Committee on February 24, 1994 (U.S. Congress, House of representatives, 1994). This was the first attempt to authorize a federal commission focused on pressing issues within the Southern Black Belt. Although H.R. 3901 was not passed it set precedent for the development of future legislation focused on establishing such a commission.

Subsequent Attempts to Create a Southern Black Belt Commission

Later, Representatives Eva Clayton of North Carolina; Cynthia McKinney of Georgia; Hilliard’s successor, Artur Davis of Alabama; and Mike McIntyre of North Carolina as well as Senator Zell Miller of Georgia would pick up the cause along with various other Representatives and Senators. Many versions of the Bill were to follow over the next fourteen years. Meanwhile, many other people joined the quest. We did not know many of those supporters, nor did they really know us. However, as the quest for a commission and other efforts for improving Black Belt conditions grew, there were often competing ideas as to the details of legislation for a commission.

Despite the lack of success with the various versions of the basic Bill, the effort continued. Among other attempts, the University of Georgia, subsequently working with Tuskegee University and other southern Land-Grant schools, community-based organizations and other interest groups launched “The Black Belt Initiative” at the Carter Center in Atlanta in 2001. Support grew and expanded to include many interest groups from the Black Belt states. The University of Georgia obtained private and public external funding for the Initiative and along with the other collaborators, studied the feasibility of establishing a Black Belt commission. Following the findings of the Black Belt Initiative in reports produced by a team of university researchers, Congressman Artur Davis, the successor to Earl Hilliard in Alabama, introduced H.R. 678 to the House of Representatives in 2003, and Senator Zell Miller introduced S. 527 in the Senate. Meanwhile in 2002, Congressman Mike McIntyre of North Carolina had introduced H.R. 3618. Again, none of these Bills succeeded. Appendix A provides a list and chronology of the series of Bills introduced.

Still, the effort continued. In all, twelve House and Senate Bills were introduced to establish a commission. Finally, portions of the respective Bills were included in the 2008 Farm Bill that provided for the authorization of the Commission. As authorized in Sections 15101, 15301, and 15731 of the June 14, “Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008,” the Commission is titled,

“The Southeast Crescent Regional Commission” (U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, 2008). Some improvements are needed in the substance of the Bill, but at least, it is now on the books.

Also, while these Black Belt commission efforts were in progress, the Delta Regional Authority – that was first formulated while former President Bill Clinton was the Governor of Arkansas – was

enacted by federal legislation in 2001. That Authority – a commission – covered places along both sides of the Mississippi River from Louisiana to Illinois and consequently many, but by no means all, Black Belt counties of the Old South States. The federal approval of the Authority had not been anticipated when the early Black Belt commission Bills were introduced. However, once the Delta Regional Authority was in place, one of the competing bills for a Black Belt commission recommended merging the Southeast Crescent portion of the Black Belt South with the Delta Regional Authority.

What the Commission Is to Do

As defined in Section 15731 of the 2008 Farm Bill, the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission includes all the counties of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida except for counties previously designated for the Appalachian Regional Commission or the Delta Regional Authority. The Appalachian Regional Commission already serves some of the counties bordering Appalachia in all of these states but Florida. The Delta Regional Authority serves many Mississippi Delta counties plus several from Alabama that, of course, are not a part of the river delta.

The Commission consists of a federal co-chairperson, and alternate federal co-chairperson, a state co-chairperson who is a governor of one of the participating states, the governors of the participating states or their designees, and an executive director (Section 15301). Decisions of the Commission will be made by votes of the federal co-chair and a majority of the state members (Section 15302).

The functions of the Commission (Section 15303) are:

- (1) to assess the needs and assets of the region;
- (2) to develop economic and infrastructure development strategies as a basis for priorities and approving grants;
- (3) establish development priorities including 5-year outcome targets;
- (4) enhance the capacity and provide support for local development districts in the region and foster the creation of such districts if none exist;
- (5) encourage private investments in the region's development projects;
- (6) assist states in preparing economic and infrastructure development plans;
- (7) formulate and recommend forms for interstate cooperation and appropriate international cooperation; and
- (8) work with states and localities to develop model legislation to enhance local and regional economic development.

Other provisions include a 50-50 split in administrative expenses (Section 15304); Commission meetings (Section 15305); reporting (Section 15307); economic and infrastructure development planning and consultation with colleges and universities, and public participation (Section 15502); approval processes for assistance (Section 15504 and 15505); and other operating provisions (e.g., Section 15702) including funding for distressed counties and areas.

Also, grants to the states, local governments, Indian tribes, and public and nonprofit organizations are to be awarded (Section 15501) for projects to develop:

- (1) transportation infrastructure;
- (2) basic public infrastructure;
- (3) telecommunications infrastructure;
- (4) job skills training, employment education, technology, and business development;
- (5) assistance for severely distressed areas needing resources for health care and public services;
- (6) to promote conservation, tourism, and open space;
- (7) to promote renewable and alternative energy sources; and
- (8) other purposes of the Bill.

The Commission was initially authorized for \$30 million in annual appropriations for years 2008 through 2012 (Section 15751). Although authorized, no appropriations were enacted for 2008. For the 2009 to 2010 fiscal year, funding of \$250,000 was authorized in H.R. 3183 to begin planning for the Commission (U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, 2009). Congress provided \$250,000 in fiscal years 2011 and 2012 under the Energy and Water Appropriation bill to support the start-up of the Commission. However, in fiscal year 2013 Congress voted to eliminate funding. The Senate passed a bill through the Appropriations Committee to fund the Commission at \$250,000. However, the final 2013 funding level has not been determined and the President still needs to appoint the Federal Co-Chair for the start-up phase of the Commission to begin. Therefore, the actual, working Southeast Crescent Regional Commission has not yet been appropriated and formed. Interestingly, H.R. 3183 also appropriated \$1.5 million in initial planning funding for the Northern Border Regional Commission that covers a far smaller population than does the Southeast Crescent's Commission.

Section 14218 of the 2008 Farm Bill also authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to establish a Coordinator for Chronically Underserved Rural Areas for coordinating rural economic development resources of states, localities, and nonprofits, and community development organizations. This is to be funded by the Department of Agriculture.

Conclusion

From 1990 to 2008, it took 18 years of efforts to get a “black belt commission” authorized. Again, even now, it has not been fully appropriated. These 18-year efforts have involved many people, organizations, and congressional supporters since the original concept of a Black Belt commission and the initial H.R. 3901 Bill was introduced. Many who have worked on the more recent versions of the Bills are unaware of the long background of the work. Along the way, there have been competing efforts for input into what the Commission would do. Those efforts and further ideas suggest how the presently authorized Southeast Crescent Regional Commission may be improved.

First, and in addition to a full appropriation, the funding for the Commission needs to be authorized to a level commensurate with the needs of the region. For example, a competing bill introduced by Congressman Artur Davis of Alabama, H.R. 2403 on May 21, 2007, recommended funding of \$500 million per year from 2008 through 2038 for a more comprehensive commission that would combine the southeastern Black Belt with the Delta Regional Authority. While this would be a substantially higher funding level, such an appropriation would appear more suitable for the historic and persistent disparity of the Black Belt as shown by the research justifying such a commission.

Second, the final authorization for the Commission in the 2008 Farm Bill emphasizes infrastructure and economic development in a manner similar to that of the Appalachian Regional Commission. The Southeast Crescent Regional Commission, as authorized, gives much emphasis to transportation, telecommunications, and public infrastructure that are, of course, inadequate in the neglected places throughout the region. However, the bill does not adequately emphasize the human and community resource development that is needed in direct response to the extensive impoverishment and low educational levels of the Black Belt South and many other rural counties of the region (Section 15501).

In the series of Bills introduced by U.S. Representatives Earl Hilliard and later by Artur Davis, human and community development were emphasized. For example, the purpose of the most recent of these Bills, H.R. 2403 of May 21, 2007, was “to provide for comprehensive community and economic development in the distressed southern Black Belt and Mississippi Delta region while leveraging existing efforts, entities, and resources.” It would fund projects and programs for “Educational improvement including adult and remedial education,” “Access to affordable, quality health care,” and “The elimination of sub-standard housing facilities.” Roads, bridges, and business development do not directly and immediately serve to help the children and adults of the Black Belt to read, write, and learn basic skills to compete in the high tech and global workforce or to improve their health to make them viable students and workers. The disproportionate emphasis on business and infrastructure development does not appear likely to satisfy the socioeconomic and health disadvantages of the region and to provide broader and more comprehensive human and community development needs including local transportation systems, housing services, and other community services.

Perhaps the infrastructure and economic development language was helpful in getting the majority of committee and congressional support needed to pass the authorizing legislation. However, future

revisions of the Commission's authorizing legislation are still needed to help bring the people and places of the Black Belt up to the standards enjoyed in the more prosperous New South's urban areas or other major regions of the U.S. in a timely manner to be realized by the current generations of children and adults.

Third, the Commission as authorized includes all counties in the seven-state area to be served. Many of these places are heavily urban, metropolitan counties known for their New South prosperity. In contrast to the quality of life afforded by those counties, many more spatially rural, nonmetropolitan counties are not so socioeconomically blessed. These counties stand in distant disparity. The latter, typically more rural Black Belt counties are the ones on which a reformulated commission would need to focus. Otherwise, this new Commission – like many preceding efforts – might yet again operate to the detriment of places left behind by previous policies and New South prosperity.

Fourth, to help ensure a comprehensive strategy for all of the Black Belt South, future legislation might also join the activities of the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission and the Delta Regional Authority as well as some of the southern counties of the Appalachian Regional Commission. This was recommended in an alternative bill, H.R. 2403 in 2007. In the process, a more comprehensive commission should also cover the Black Belt counties of East Texas that are not included by either the Southeast or Delta Commissions. As it stands, separate commissions for the same social and historic region no doubt weakens the political coalition behind the efforts to improve the common socioeconomic region and may lead to competition between them, with each vying for the lion's share of the funding and services needed by all. In such a manner, several good regional policies become the enemy of the best regional policy.

In the same legislation that established the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission, two other new commissions were likewise authorized to operate in certain other U.S. regions in the same manner. Neither is in the South. One of these is the Southwest Border Regional Commission consisting of counties near the Mexican border with California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. In fact, the large majority of these counties are in Texas. The other is the Northern Border Regional Commission with counties from Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York. While there is less population and impoverishment in these other two regional commissions than is covered by the Southeast Crescent Region, there is extensive rural impoverishment in them nevertheless. No doubt, the political strategy of having three new commissions involving more states was effective in getting a larger number of congressional supporters. Regardless of its limitations in purposes and scope and the lack of funding to activate the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission, it is at least federally authorized and officially in place. Immediate steps to properly fund the Commission are now required to put it into action. To improve the socioeconomic and physical quality of life in the Black Belt South would be a long awaited stimulus to this long-neglected area and, in turn, would improve the overall well-being of the nation as a whole. However, further attempts are needed to add improvements to the legislation. However, House Report 113-135 for the 113th Congress (U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, 2014), documents that to date, these improvements have not been added. The only recommendation in the report was that \$250,000 should be provided for the operations of the Commission.

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Appendix A

Bills Introduced for a Regional Black Belt Commission

1994

- Feb. 24 H.R. 3901, Bill introduced into US House to establish the Southern Rural Development Commission for the Black Belt by Earl Hilliard (AL). Also sponsored by Cynthia McKinney (GA) and Eva Clayton (NC)

2002

- Jan. 23 H.R. 3618, SouthEast Crescent Authority (SECA), introduced by Congressman Mike McIntyre (NC)

2003

- Jan. 3 H.R. 141 for Southeast Crescent Authority (SECA) introduced in House of Representatives by Congressman Mike McIntyre (NC)
- Feb. 11 Rep. Artur Davis (AL) introduces H.R. 678 for commission on, "...Comprehensive Community and Economic Development in the Distressed Southern Black Belt..." as alternative to SECA

Mar. 5 S. 527 for a Southeast Black Belt Commission introduced in Senate by Senator Zell Miller (GA)

2005

Jan. 4 H.R. 20 for Southeast Crescent Authority (SECA) introduced in House of Representatives by Congressman Mike McIntyre (NC)

Oct. 7 S. 1865 for Southeast Crescent Authority (SECA) introduced in Senate by Senator Elizabeth Dole (NC)

2006

Apr. 4 H.R. 5082 introduced in House of Representatives by Congressman Artur Davis (AL) to authorize the Delta/Black Belt Regional Authority

2007

Jan. 4 H.R. 66 for Southeast Crescent Authority (SECA) introduced in House of Representatives by Congressman Mike McIntyre (NC)

Feb. 6 S. 503 for Southeast Crescent Authority (SECA) introduced in Senate by Senator Elizabeth Dole (NC)

May 21 H.R. 2403 for Delta/Black Belt Regional Authority introduced in House of Representatives by Congressman Artur Davis (AL)

2008

Jun. 18 Southeast Crescent Regional Commission passed by the Congress and signed into law in the 2008 Farm Bill, as Section 15731 and other sections of Public Law 110-246, the “Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008”