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USDA awards \$400,000 grants to ASU Flint River Water Planning & Policy Center, Federation of Southern Cooperatives

During a visit to Albany State University's Flint River Water Planning and Policy Center, Krysta Harden, USDA Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, announced two \$400,000 USDA grants to benefit socially and economically disadvantaged farmers in Southwest Georgia.

"I cannot tell you how great it is to see these dollars come to Southwest Georgia," said Harden, a native of Camilla.

Harden, who assumed her position in 2009, said the grants will help provide farmers with training about natural resources and technological resources.

"These grants are funded by provisions in the 2008 Farm Bill to look out for minority and socially disadvantaged farmers," she said. "We want to keep farmers on the land."

Congressman Sanford Bishop, who played a critical role in securing the grants for Southwest Georgia, participated in the announcement along with Doug Wilson, executive director of the Georgia Water Planning & Policy Consortium; Ralph Paige, executive director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives; and ASU President Dr. Everette J. Freeman.

The first grant goes to the Flint River Water Planning and Policy Center for a one-year project with the goal of assisting socially disadvantaged farmers in accessing support and resources. According to the project abstract, the project aims to increase participation by socially disadvantaged farmers in USDA programs in the Golden Triangle Resource Conservation and Development Council area. Through this project, socially disadvantaged farmers will learn how to improve environmental resource management and improve farm profitability. Mark Masters, executive director of the Flint River Water Planning and Policy Center, will serve as the primary investigator for the grant.

"This will help minority farmers and socially disadvantaged farmers who need some answers," Harden said. "It's hard to farm in Southwest Georgia without water."

Wilson said, "This grant and the work that we do has been helpful in telling the story Southwest Georgia needs to tell about water. The agricultural industry in Southwest Georgia is the largest consumer of water in the area."

"We need to push technology out to folks not able to avail themselves of technology," he continued. "We're really excited about it."

The second grant Harden announced goes to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which represents more than 75 cooperatives, credit union and community-based economic development groups across the South. With the grant funds, the Federation will

continue working with farmers in Baker, Brooks, Calhoun, Dooly, Dougherty, Early, Grady, Lee, Macon, Marion, Mitchell, Seminole, Sumter, Terrell, Thomas and Worth counties in Southwest Georgia.

“This is the most important grant for us,” said Ralph Paige, executive director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, who referred to the grant as a “contract.”

Paige said the Federation will use the funds to continue providing technical assistance to farmers, helping farmers market their crops, sell produce to local school systems as well as provide loans and grants for farmers.

“This is a huge win for Southwest Georgia,” Paige said. “This will have a profound effect on the economy in terms of bringing in new dollars and new opportunities.”

Funds for both grants were part of the 2008 Farm Bill.

“These are your federal tax dollars,” Congressman Bishop said. “These are the dollars we in Southwest Georgia send to Washington, D.C. I’m just happy that together we’ve been able to work to bring these dollars back to Southwest Georgia. These two grants will make real the opportunities for economically disadvantaged and socially disadvantaged farmers in this area to have access to resources, particularly water.”

Photo caption: Krysta Harden (second from right), assistant secretary for congressional relations with the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced two major grant awards on Monday morning during a press conference held at the Flint River Water Planning & Policy Center on Pine Avenue. Participating in the press conference are (from left) Doug Wilson, executive director of the Georgia Water Planning & Policy Center Consortium; Ralph Paige, executive director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives; Congressman Sanford Bishop; Harden; and ASU President Dr. Everette J. Freeman.

