

HELPING TO SAVE



Frank Taylor, left, with Omeria and Dee Dotson.

Frank Taylor is on a mission to save rural America, and he's starting right here at home.

Taylor is president of the Winston County Self Help Cooperative (WCSHC), a group of 35 small and limited resource farmers who receive the educational, informational and networking opportunities necessary to build successful farming operations. Taylor believes that efforts to help these farmers will also help the economies of local small towns.

"Our farmers purchase their supplies locally and maintain their land, which adds to the county's tax rolls," he said. "When small farmers succeed, rural towns and communities benefit."

Most of the co-op's 35 members are cattle farmers. Some are in forestry and a small percentage are non-farm members.

"Our members are taught to care for their land, their animals and their trees. They also learn how to manage a business," Taylor said. "Our aim is to

provide them the opportunity to harness an economical return from their natural resources."

Cooperative members build relationships with groups such as the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives; Alcorn State University Cooperative Extension Service; Mississippi State University Extension Service; Mississippi State University College of Veterinary Medicine; Heifer Project International; the United States Department of Agriculture and all related agencies; the Mississippi Forestry Commission; and the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation.

"Through these relationships, landowners know which agencies to contact for help with their farms and other endeavors," said Taylor, a longtime Winston County Farm Bureau member. "It is a process that teaches people to go through the process of contacting people. Sustainability is key."

Additionally, the cooperative has begun targeting young people, getting

them involved in programs that increase their understanding and appreciation of farming, forestry and the preservation of our state's natural resources.

HEIFER PROJECT

In 2001, the Winston County Self Help Cooperative submitted a proposal to Heifer Project International. The proposal was funded in 2002.

"We used the funds to purchase 40 bred heifers," Taylor said. "We gave five heifers to each of eight cooperative members, and they signed a Letter of Agreement to maintain the health of the animals as well as their membership in the cooperative. They also agreed to each give back five heifers to other cooperative members."

Co-op members are required to maintain their membership for one year before they can receive animals. Members must also attend 75 percent of the meetings each month.

Willie Matthews received five

RURAL AMERICA

By Glynda Phillips

heifers and his wife received four heifers through the Winston County Self Help Cooperative's Heifer Project.

"I was one of the first to get mine," he said. "My wife got hers two weeks ago. It's a nice program, and it's something we've needed. It helps people who've always dreamed of farming to get started, and it gives a boost to those of us who have always farmed. Farming's not easy in today's economy. This program helps us continue to farm well into our retirement years."

Longtime Winston County Farm Bureau members Dee and Omeria Dotson agree. Between them they have more than 140 years of farming experience. They want to be able to farm the rest of their lives. Omeria, 77, is a charter member of the co-op, along with her friends and fellow farmers Mary Hannah and Bobby Harden.

"We've been farming since we were kids," said 83-year-old Dee. "I was plowing when I was seven years old. There's nothing like raising your own food and working outdoors."



Dee checks out the vegetable garden.

COOPERATIVE EFFORTS RECOGNIZED

In November 2003, the Winston County Self Help Cooperative won the Farmer of the Year award presented by the Louisville-Winston County Chamber of Commerce. It is the first time African American farmers have been so honored and the first time the award has been given to a farmer's association.

In March 2004, the Small Farmers and Women in Business Conference at Alcorn State University named the group Cooperative of the Year in recognition of the outstanding service the cooperative has provided to small farmers.

The group received the 2005 Co-op of the Year Award from the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the 2006 Heifer International South Central Project of the Year Award. The group has been recognized numerous times by Heifer International for its work.

Taylor says the accolades are great, but the knowledge that the cooperative helps small farmers is even better.



Dee and Omeria gather eggs from their laying hens.

"It is so gratifying to see individuals – some 70-plus years old – thrilled with the program, knowing they have a resource that will help them survive economically on the farm," he said. "It's also great to know we are doing our part to help keep rural America alive and well."

Taylor says he is indebted to the Winston County Extension Service for its help with the Winston County Self Help Cooperative and the Heifer Project. Co-op meetings are held at the county Extension office.

"Without Winston County Extension Director Mike Skipper's assistance, we would not have succeeded."

For more information, contact Frank Taylor at 601-346-9850 or FLTaylor@bellsouth.net.