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# *Ralph Paige, Champion of Black Farmers, Dies at 74*

By Daniel E. Slotnik

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Ralph Paige, a nationally prominent advocate for black farmers who fought to save their land and to win them financial compensation for what they contended were years of government discrimination, died on June 28 in Atlanta. He was 74.

The cause was congestive heart failure, said Cornelius Blanding, executive director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, an advocacy organization for African-American farmers that grew out of the civil rights movement and that Mr. Paige led for 30 years, beginning in 1985.

In that leadership role he helped organize black farmers and others in the Southeast into economic cooperatives, educated them on how best to retain their land and became their spokesman.

The life of a family farmer is never easy: Financial insecurity is the norm, smaller farms have to compete with deep-pocketed agribusiness giants, and months of toil can be wiped away by a crop blight or a freak weather event.

Moreover, many black farmers say racial discrimination makes it more difficult for them to maintain ownership of land and receive financial support from local institutions as well as the Department of Agriculture. The ranks of black farmers dwindled in the 20th century.

The federation sees cooperatives, in which farms join together to act as a single, stronger economic entity, as an effective way for black farms to compete as self-sufficient businesses with little need for help from outside institutions, which can be biased or even predatory.

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During Mr. Paige's 46 years with the federation — he joined it in 1969 — he helped organize dozens of cooperatives and 18 community development credit unions across the Southeast. The federation now represents about 75 cooperatives, made up of some 20,000 families.

He also helped educate farmers on how to retain their land through legal means, like the drafting wills — measures he considered critical to defending rural black communities.

“This isn’t just another black farmer going out of business,” he was quoted as saying in The New York Times in 1992, referring to the disappearance of black farms. “It is our community losing a piece of the country.”

Mr. Paige challenged what he saw as a dearth of financial support offered to black farmers by the Department of Agriculture, which he contended had disproportionately denied loans, disaster relief and other monetary aid for black farmers. And the loans black farmers did receive, he said, were often smaller and took longer to process than those for white farmers.

“When President Abraham Lincoln created the United States Department of Agriculture in 1862, he referred to it as the People’s Department,” Mr. Paige wrote in 2010 in a column for The San Marcos Daily Record, a Texas newspaper. “The problem is that its services have never been available to all the people.”

To draw attention to the issue in 1992, Mr. Paige organized a caravan of farmers to descend on Washington for a protest rally. He later became instrumental in recruiting and preparing plaintiffs for a large class-action lawsuit filed against the Agriculture Department in 1997.

In the lawsuit, *Pigford v. Glickman*, the plaintiffs asserted that they faced foreclosure and financial ruin because the department had denied them timely loans and other financial assistance. They also argued that since the agency had closed its civil rights office during the Reagan administration, there was no productive way to address their complaints.

“He dedicated a lot of our resources and our organization and our staff’s time to actually working with plaintiffs, filing paperwork, educating them about the lawsuit,” Mr. Blanding said of Mr. Paige in a telephone interview.

In 1999, a federal district judge in Washington approved a settlement agreement that led to a government payout of more than \$2 billion to more than 15,000 claimants.

The case inspired similar litigation on behalf of female, Native American and Latino farmers who contended that the department had also discriminated against them.

Ralph McDaniel Paige was born on July 28, 1943, in LaGrange, Ga., to Edward and Dora Paige, maintenance workers at local businesses. He graduated from high school in LaGrange and attended Fort Valley State University, a historically black college in Fort Valley, Ga., where he played on the football team.

He earned a bachelor’s degree in physical education in 1967 and was a high school teacher and coach before joining the federation.

Mr. Paige first worked as a co-op organizer in Georgia before heading the federation's business development office.

In 1985, the federation merged with the Emergency Land Fund, an organization dedicated to protecting black-owned land, to become the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund. In becoming its second executive director that year, Mr. Paige succeeded Charles Prejean.

He retired in 2015, citing health issues, but Mr. Blanding said he had remained involved with the Federation.

Mr. Paige, who lived in Pine Mountain, Ga., is survived by his wife, Bernice (Jones) Paige, whom he married in 1965; a son, Bernard; a daughter, Kenyatta Carter; two brothers, Robert and Arnold; three sisters, Elizabeth Paige Thornton, Maxine Key and Emma Paige; and five grandchildren.

In 2001, at a hearing before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, Mr. Paige bemoaned the diminished number of black farmers in America, which he put at around 19,000.

That number has increased in recent years. According to a 2012 Agriculture Department census, the most recent available, there were 33,371 farms with an African-American principal operator, up from 30,599 in 2007.

**Correction:** July 7, 2018

*An earlier version of this obituary misstated the year of Mr. Paige's birth. He was born in 1943, not 1944.*

Follow Daniel E. Slotnik on Twitter: @dsloolik