

# **CORNELIUS BLANDING – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR Federation of Southern Cooperatives/ Land Assistance Fund**

**FIRST REMARKS AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR BEFORE MEMBERSHIP  
August 15, 2015 – Rural Training & Research Center, Epes, Alabama**

Let me start by saying Thank you!

To those who persevered through the many challenges before and during the 1960s and began organizing to help themselves.....Thank You!

To those visionaries who came together in 1966 in Mt. Beulah, Mississippi to discuss their common challenges, what could be and the idea of an organization like the Federation.....Thank You!



To those 22 cooperatives, their representatives and radical partners who nurtured that idea and traveled to Atlanta, GA to birth and charter what they called the Federation of Southern Cooperatives.....Thank You!

To those many cooperatives, farmers, landowners, staff and partners (past & current) who struggled over the past 48 years to build this organization to what it is today..... Thank You!

To the Board of Directors - elected by the membership - who have entrusted me with the sacred responsibility and opportunity to serve this organization.....Thank You!

To Charles Prejean who accepted the first responsibility to serve as the Executive Director in 1967.....Thank You!

To Ralph Paige, my mentor and friend, who served as the Executive Director for the past 30 years and led this organization through some of its most challenging times..... Thank You!

To my wife and family for their patience and understanding over the past 5 months...Thank You!

And finally, to ALL of YOU who come here to celebrate with us today.....Thank You!

As you all know, this has been a time of transition for the organization.....and transition means change.

Change is always hard, but we must always change or perish.

It was Ben Franklin who said “When we are finished changing, we are finished”

We must constantly change. We must constantly change as an organization, as cooperative businesses, as farmers and landowners, as staff and servants.

As your servant, I embrace this change and ask that you – the membership, staff and partners – embrace this challenge with me.....as we continue to build this organization...your organization to what it was envisioned to be in 1966, what it was chartered to do in 1967 and what it has evolved to after strategically merging with the Emergency Land Fund in 1985.....The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund.

Our vision, our mission and our focus have always been and continue to be centered around three critical areas: COOPERATIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, LAND RETENTION and ADVOCACY.

Our covenant...your covenant with each other also included building an endowment and a regional marketing system to sustain the organization as well as developing an effective Rural Training Center.....This Rural Training Center – which is at the center of much of our work.

We must recommit ourselves to the vision; our mission; our covenant as a Federation and the work around cooperative economic development, land retention and advocacy.

We will recommit to building an endowment and developing & maintaining this training center as a place of education, training and demonstrations.....and a place of celebration.

This organization...your organization...our federation...is a non-profit cooperative association that grew out of the civil rights movement....that grew out of a need; the needs of many.....an organization that withstood many challenges (externally and internally); that built and maintained an infrastructure - an infrastructure that was and is crucial to its survival; that is owned and controlled by the membership – the farmers, landowners, coops and communities it serves.

This is an organization that IS because of its partnerships – partners of the past and present.

Our theme this year is “GROWING SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS”

We celebrated two on Thursday in Birmingham, Charles & Shirley Sherrod, a couple that embodies a sustainable partnership.

“GROWING SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS”

So let's do just that.....grow sustainable partnerships!

Let's recommit to our partnerships.

Let's recommit to our partnerships with each other as a Federation...a collective of farmers, landowners and cooperatives.

Let's revitalize our collective marketing efforts as cooperatives and as a regional, national and international marketing system.

Let's double our land retention efforts; our efforts to save black owned land.....because it matters.

**BLACK OWNED LAND MATTERS!**

...It matters to our families and communities.

BLACK OWNED LAND MATTERS!

...It matters to the South and the growing demand to feed a growing population.

BLACK OWNED LAND MATTERS!

...It matters to the country and its conservation efforts to protect soil, water and air.

BLACK OWNED LAND MATTERS!

...It matters to the world as we ALL work together to understand the value of LAND and AGRICULTURE and its importance to economies and fighting poverty.

Let's realize the value of this membership and our collective ability to make change; to make change thru advocacy.

Let's continue to work with our many partners – as they support us to continue to build the infrastructure of this organization and to “help ourselves”.

...for these are the partnerships that are the FEDERATION.

...the partnerships that will grow with us and enable us to endure change.

...the partnerships that will move us closer to our vision.

“A vision of sustainable rural communities that are supported by a network of farmers, landowners, cooperatives and credit unions - which are based on local control and leadership....and centered around land based economic development and wealth creation.”

So, I say to you today, we must continue together - COOPERATIVELY - down the path of building this Federation into all that it was intended to be

...and we must do this by “Growing Sustainable Partnerships”

Again, Thank You!