

SERA 49: Heir Property In-person Meeting

Heirs' property—real property passed across generations without a probated will—creates clouded title that impedes wealth transfer, access to credit, property improvements, and participation in federal programs. Heirs' property is a rural and urban issue that is magnified in the Southern region and Appalachia, with an estimated 5.3 million acres valued at \$42 billion in 11 states. Fractionated ownership often involves dozens to hundreds of heirs, producing decision-making gridlock, diminished local tax bases, involuntary loss of land, and entrenched poverty—especially among disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Since 2018 the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) has convened a multidisciplinary network of researchers, Extension professionals, legal practitioners, USDA personnel, and community-based organizations to address heirs' property through research, education, and policy engagement. Activities to date include stakeholder convenings, formation of Research, Extension/Education, and Policy working groups, development and piloting of a “Understanding Heirs' Property at the Community Level” train-the-trainer curriculum, and collaborative grant-funded research (including a 5-year USDA NIFA AFRI award). These efforts have led to broader networking (50+ active participants; a listserv of 240 members), educational pilots in Atlanta and Washington, D.C., and a forthcoming special issue on heirs' property in the *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*.

This Southern Extension and Research Activity (SERA) 49, active since 2022, formalized and expanded the network to: (1) increase multidisciplinary collaboration among 1862 and 1890 Land-Grant Universities and partners; (2) identify emerging regional issues and data-driven research needs; (3) assess federal, state, and local policies and practices affecting heirs' property; and (4) support civil society organizations and heirs' property owners via culturally appropriate education and technical assistance. The in-person SERA 49 meeting will be held in conjunction with the 2026 Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) annual meeting in Louisville, KY on February 3, 2026. The meeting is open to stakeholders and practitioners in the heir property work. The expected impact includes strengthened regional capacity to prevent and mitigate heirs' property, increased numbers of owners securing clear title or estate plans, improved access to USDA and financial services, and evidence-based policy guidance—ultimately reducing involuntary land loss and improving economic resilience in vulnerable rural communities.

* SERAs are intended to bring together researchers and extension specialists sharing a common problem, issue, or disciplinary interest. The general objective is to provide a functionally integrated forum to coordinate joint activities to address stakeholder needs.