

N A S C O E N O W

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Legislative Update

Rob Gallinger, NEA Legislative Chair

On Thursday, July 1st, NASCOE was asked to testify to members of the House Ag Committee regarding the administration of conservation programs. As most of our members know, this has been a legislative goal of NASCOE's for a couple of years now, so the request was met with excitement. NASCOE Vice President John Lohr was sent to the Hill to deliver approximately five minutes of testimony. During this testimony, John suggested to the Representatives that the USDA would find greater efficiency and better customer service if FSA served as the administrative agency for all conservation programs, and NRCS was made more available for field work and technical assistance. In the past five years, the number of producers that NRCS has to service has nearly doubled. With funding strained, the NASCOE testimony sought to provide an option for the House Ag Committee to consider.

In conjunction with this testimony, several NASCOE members assisted in the effort by reaching out to the Congressmen and Congresswomen involved as well as their offices just prior to the hearing. The goal was to give a quick "heads-up" to those offices and ask for their support on our position. By hearing about this idea ahead of time, our hope was that the Representatives would be more aware and involved during John's testimony.

A full transcript of John Lohr's testimony can be found on the NASCOE website. Recent news reports have also been seen on the web.

As we approach the National Convention, County Executive Directors are encouraged to educate their County Committees on the importance of NAFEC and seek to get additional COC members enrolled into this very important organization. As farmers, NAFEC members can carry a lot of weight when making visits with their elected officials. For just a few dollars dues per meeting, NAFEC is a very valuable resource for both the County Committee system and for NASCOE. Any NASCOE member that needs information on how to sign up their COC members into NAFEC can contact Dean Pendergast or Rob Gallinger in New York. Additionally, there is a link to the NAFEC website, which has the membership form, on the NASCOE web page.

ONE GROUP WANTS A CHANGE IN HOW CONSERVATION PROGRAMS ARE RUN

USDA conservation programs are administered by a couple of different USDA agencies, but some groups are suggesting a change to that arrangement. (Gary Crawford , Steve Robinson and John Lohr)
<http://audioarchives.oc.usda.gov/radnewsdetail.asp?ID=12813>

Subject: Press Release: Subcommittee Reviews Technical Assistance Capacity of USDA Conservation Programs

News from the House Agriculture Committee

<http://agriculture.house.gov>

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, July 1, 2010

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Subcommittee Reviews Technical Assistance Capacity of USDA Conservation Programs

WASHINGTON - Today, Congressman Tim Holden, D-Pa., Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee's Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research, held a hearing to review the administration and delivery of conservation programs.

"Technical assistance is a crucial component of conservation. Today's hearing provided an opportunity to hear from those on the front lines of this effort to make certain that the delivery mechanisms are in place to give land owners access to the expertise they need to make proper land management decisions and implement conservation practices," Chairman Holden said. "It is critical for the future of viable farms and forests that USDA implement the most efficient and effective policies available."

"The delivery system is the life-line to ensuring the success of conservation programs. If programs are not being administered effectively and our producers are not receiving the technical guidance they need then an increase in the number of programs and in the level of funding will not achieve improved conservation benefits," Subcommittee Ranking Member Bob Goodlatte, R-VA said. "Today's hearing helped us to understand where the deficiencies are in USDA administering these programs and systems, and what needs to be done so that farmers, ranchers, and foresters receive cost-efficient conservation on the ground."

The Subcommittee heard testimony from Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Chief Dave White and Farm Service Agency (FSA) Administrator Jonathan Coppess.

Producers participating in USDA conservation programs use technical assistance and Technical Service Providers (TSPs) to help plan and implement their conservation goals.

Written testimony provided by the witnesses is available on the Committee website:

<http://agriculture.house.gov/hearings/index.html>.

A full transcript of the hearing will be posted on the Committee website at a later date.

Witness List

Panel I

Mr. Dave White, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

Mr. Jonathan W. Coppess, Administrator, Farm Service Agency, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

Panel II

Mr. Steve Robinson, President, National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), Washington, D.C.

Mr. John Lohr, Vice President, National Association of FSA County Office Employees (NASCOE), Norvelt, Pennsylvania

Mr. Ron Leathers, Public Finance Director, Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, St. Paul, Minnesota

Dr. Scott Manley, Director of Conservation Programs, Ducks Unlimited, Ridgeland, Mississippi

Dr. Robert T. Burns, Assistant Dean for Agriculture, Natural Resources and Rural Development, The University of Tennessee Extension,

Knoxville, Tennessee

Mr. Steve Dlugosz, Certified Crop Adviser (CCA), Lead Agronomist, Harvestland Cooperative, on behalf of the International Certified

Crop Adviser (ICCA) Program and the American Society of Agronomy, Indianapolis, Indiana

Mr. William L. Braford, Consulting Forester, Bluechip Forestry, Natural Bridge Station, Virginia

STATEMENT
OF
MR. JOHN LOHR
NASCOE
VICE PRESIDENT
NORVELT, PENNSYLVANIA
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, CREDIT, ENERGY AND RESEARCH

JULY 1, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is John Lohr, and I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your committee today.

I was born and raised on our family's dairy farm in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. I have worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency and its predecessor the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) for my entire adult life, beginning as a part-time ASCS field assistant after high school in 1968. Since 1978, I have been the Farm

Service Agency County Executive Director in my home county and today also cover Fayette County from a consolidated office in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. I am here today representing the National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees (NASCOE). I am pleased that our national President, Mr. Myron Stroup of Kansas, is also here today.

The National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees (NASCOE) is an organization that represents the county level employees of the Farm Service Agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). NASCOE was originally chartered in 1959. FSA employees are in contact with virtually every producer in the United States, and NASCOE is proud to represent all county office employees, 85% of whom are association members.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, we are here today because we believe that the USDA can administer and deliver conservation programs in a more effective and efficient manner. With today's federal budget situation, federal employees will continue to be required to do more with less for the near future. Natural Resource and Conservation Service employees in the field serve American agriculture well, but what has become increasingly evident to Farm Service Agency (FSA) county office employees is that there are many workload duplications by FSA and NRCS field staff. NASCOE members at the field office level regularly relate to us that NRCS employees indicate they prefer to work at what they do best, the technical field work, and that FSA is better equipped and ready to handle conservation program administration.

Please recall that before the USDA reorganization in the mid 1990's, FSA's predecessor, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), administered all USDA's conservation programs. In fact, the root of the county committee system is centered on the administration of conservation programs created by the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. Today FSA staff and locally elected county committees are still responsible for the largest USDA conservation initiatives, the Conservation Reserve Program and the Emergency Conservation Program.

This morning I will explain just a few of the reasons why having FSA administer conservation programs makes sense for producers and ranchers as well as the American taxpayer.

With regard to program eligibility, both FSA and NRCS use the same forms. It is redundant to have both agencies gather the eligibility information. FSA is required to load all the data and maintain the forms. FSA already keeps farm and producer eligibility records for both agencies. FSA field office personnel have experience and training in completing eligibility forms so it is more cost-effective for FSA to be the office to initiate the application and determine eligibility. In addition, it is much more efficient to have eligibility completed prior to the applicant's discussion with NRCS on the technical practice determinations.

As for processing the application, FSA maintains all records pertaining to the farm or ranch. FSA county office staff creates and updates farm records, the Common Land Unit, acreage reports, etc. If FSA has the responsibility for conservation administration, producers would visit the FSA office to initiate the conservation program application and have access to

their farm's data. At present, either the producer or an NRCS employee makes numerous visits and inquiries to the FSA county office to gather and/or update the data to complete the application. Allowing the FSA office to handle the application process would save time and eliminate confusion for both the producer and the office staff.

FSA has extensive experience issuing payments and has the software training to make the payments in a timely manner. The availability of all eligibility, producer and farm records in one location allows for faster and easier resolutions when payment issuance problems arise.

Since it is necessary for the NRCS staff to make frequent farm or ranch visits, their office is unattended on many occasions. Each business day, every FSA office is continuously staffed to serve program applicants. Allowing the FSA to administer conservation programs would eliminate frustration when producers make trips or initiate phone calls to the NRCS office only to find no one available to assist them.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) currently allows the FSA office to take the application, determine payment eligibility, generate and approve the contract, and make cost share and annual rental payments with NRCS making technical determinations. The success of the CRP demonstrates that NRCS and FSA can work well together with FSA handling the program administration and with NRCS responsible for the technical aspects of programs.

Our proposal, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, allows USDA to do more work without additional resources. If FSA is responsible for conservation administration, NRCS staff will have more time to spend with farmers and ranchers educating them about conservation programs and assuring the programs work as Congress intended.

Under the NASCOE proposal today, all phases of conservation programs defined as administrative, applications, contract maintenance, payments, etc., would be the responsibility of FSA. NRCS would be responsible for all phases of conservation programs defined as technical, i.e., conservation plan development, on-site determinations and contract compliance.

These assignments allow each agency to utilize their abilities and resources in the most efficient and productive manner. FSA has consistently been able to deliver farm programs with a low average administrative cost. FSA would bring this same level of delivery cost and efficiency to conservation program administration.

Both FSA and NRCS are in the process of upgrading their technology and business processes, FSA through the Modernize and Innovate the Delivery of Agricultural Systems (MIDAS) project and NRCS through the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative. Having FSA administer conservation programs would go a long way towards assisting NRCS in reaching its Streamlining Initiative goals of reducing field staff administrative workloads by 80%. It would also enable their field staff to reach the goal of spending 75% of their time in the field providing conservation assistance to farmers and ranchers. NRCS has indicated concern with the administrative burden on field office technical staff from expanded roles for contract development and management. NRCS's Streamlining Initiative encourages a move to a "natural resource centric view" concentrating on identifying and solving resource problems and moving away from a "financial assistance centric view."

The NRCS Streamlining Initiative highlighted as one of its top objectives the implementation of programs through alternative staffing and delivery approaches designed around more efficient business processes to minimize the non-technical workload on field staff.

Now is the time to make the IT changes to enhance FSA's administrative and NRCS's technical capabilities. For example, FSA and NRCS use different GIS software programs, ArcGIS and Toolkit, respectively. This is not practical. It is extremely inefficient to develop and maintain two USDA systems to administer farm and conservation programs. We can no longer afford these inefficiencies.

In summary, NASCOE supports FSA being responsible for all conservation program administration. We believe that allowing NRCS field personnel more time for producer technical assistance and program education will assure that federal agricultural programs will be more cost efficient and provide a better USDA service to our farmers and ranchers. Finally, with our current budget situation, allowing FSA to administer these programs assures the American taxpayer that USDA is being the best steward possible with the funds we have been entrusted.

Thank you for allowing me to present testimony today.

Thanks to a suggestion by a member we have a new benefit to offer NASCOE membership!!

Working Advantage offers discounts for many venues!!

To take advantage of this benefit, contact your Area Benefits Chairperson. They will verify membership and provide the member ID needed to access the site. Please keep the benefit available to members only and do not share with the general public. The benefit will be revoked if the number is displayed or opened to non members by contract terms with Working Advantage.

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NASCOE Now, July 9th, 2010 - Awards, Scholarships and Emblems

Scholarship Auctions Needed!

IMPORTANT: If you have not done so already please start thinking about scholarship auction item(s) to bring from your State for Thursday night of the convention. From what I have been told, we will have a fantastic auctioneer and staff to make the auction a blast and hopefully break last year's record in sales for the Scholarship program! The Arlington Hotel has a secured room for you to ship your items to if you will be flying in. Please make arrangements with the parcel service of your choice to have your item(s) arrive at the hotel on August 2nd. The shipping address is:

Arlington Hotel
c/o NASCOE - Auction
239 Central Avenue
Hot Springs, AR 71901

The NASCOE Memorial Scholarship program relies solely on the generous donations received at the auction, JM Marketing donations (both cash and fantastic auction items!), persons/States/Areas making donations in the name of a loved one that has passed away, special State fund raisers and Area fund raisers. Thank you all so much for helping the NASCOE scholarship programs assist with the cost of higher education for our fellow members and their eligible family members!

If you have any questions about the NASCOE Memorial Scholarship program (i.e. how to make a donation in the name of a loved one that has passed away, what are the most desirable auction items, or just simply just wondering how to make a donation to the NASCOE Scholarship fund), please feel free to contact me at oasen@charter.net.

NASCOE Convention "First Timers" Heads up!

This program is designed to give members that are attending their first NASCOE National Convention an avenue to meet other NASCOE members. The program also allows those that have attended prior conventions the opportunity to meet and welcome our "First Timers" to the convention and to help ensure they partake in all of the activities during the convention! Hint: As we did last year (and it was a lot of fun!) there will be a bonus question with additional points for any "First Timer" who happens to find out the answer to my secret question that only one other anonymous NASCOE Member will know the answer to. Find that person in your hunt to obtain the most signatures and you may be the next "Biggest Winner"!

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

Any NASCOE member that is attending their "First" NASCOE Convention is eligible to participate. Packets to participate will be picked up at a time designated by the NASCOE Awards Chair at the Convention. Packets will be returned at a time designated by the NASCOE Chair during the convention.

AWARD

The award is a "Cash" award to be presented at the Awards Banquet during the convention for 1st, 2nd and 3rd places!

Thank you for all you do for NASCOE, and the Farmers and Ranchers we so proudly serve each and every day! I can't wait to meet all of you in Hot Springs!

Tom Oasen, NASCOE Awards, Scholarships, and Emblems (ASE) Committee Chairperson

TO: NASCOE Members and All FSA Employees

The long awaited Activity Reporting System, ARS, has finally arrived. I have heard from several members regarding the detail of the reporting, the time it takes to track activity data, the performance of the ARS system, etc. The County Office employees do so many things in such a short period of time it can become overwhelming. We are in the third pay period of ARS and by now some of you are settling into a method of tracking this activity that works best for you. Regardless of your method, that data is required and needed by the National Office.

We have all felt the effects of the budget limitations this year. Next year will be more challenging than this year. The ARS data is needed to help defend our FSA budgets to Congress and Office of Management and Budget. The data is needed to better project future budget needs and to project costs of administering and delivery of new programs. We all will be contributing and playing a part in the success and outcome of future budgets.

ARS is also part of the larger effort of modernizing the IT systems and business processes we depend on everyday to do our jobs and service our customers. As Administrator Coppess said in his all employee memo issued July 7, this effort is a top priority, if not the top priority of the agency. This will take some time and will not happen overnight. It will also take some time on our part to adjust our daily routine to the new business processes.

Is there a better way to accomplish the task of gathering the needed data? Maybe. Are there improvements needed in the new ARS system? Probably. It is hard to design a perfect system right out of the gate. The NASCOE Executive Committee will be gathering suggestions and ideas to these questions. All you have to do is communicate your ideas to your Executive Committee person. These will be compiled and communicated to persons in the National Office for consideration and discussion.

NASCOE recently received the second invitation to provide testimony before a House Agriculture Subcommittee. On July 1 NASCOE appeared before the Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research. A copy of the testimony can be found on the NASCOE website under the Legislative tab. Our position on Conservation Administration, which was developed by the membership and reaffirmed at each National Convention since, was the main message of the testimony. I encourage you to read to visit the site and read the testimony.

The national Convention will be here before we know it. I hope your plans to attend have been made and look forward to seeing you in Hot Springs Arkansas.

Myron Stroup

NASCOE President