

# National Association of FSA County Office Employees

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## NASCOE PROPOSALS FOR INCREASED EFFICIENCY IN USDA AND FSA

NASCOE feels there are substantial budget savings available within USDA by eliminating duplicative services. Following are situations identified by NASCOE as major program areas where substantial savings and or efficiencies may be obtained. They involve both the Farm Service Agency and other USDA agencies.

- USDA is funding the collection of acreage and yield information in at least three separate agencies. These agencies include the Risk Management Agency (RMA), the National Agricultural Statistical Service (NASS), and the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Consolidating the collection of this information into one agency will save millions of dollars within USDA. NASS and private insurers already rely on FSA for a large percentage of their data; however, RMA and NASS are still receiving budget dollars to collect this information. Why should USDA pay for the same information three times? FSA has the local presence to easily collect this information and share it within USDA.
- Data management is rapidly becoming a major challenge for USDA. Once again, why should USDA finance these tasks multiple times? FSA, through its GIS/Common Land Unit layer and extensive farm record system, can manage this information for Homeland Security, APHIS, and all of USDA. FSA is the only agency with an extensive field level structure that currently maintains datasets in real time. The GIS/GPS abilities within each FSA field office are one of the most under-utilized resources within USDA. The Homeland Security Agency could utilize this system to identify points of vulnerability including, but not limited to, nuclear power plants, nitrate storage, food storage, and shipping ports. The local FSA field office could be assigned essential needs as identified by the Department of Homeland Security and act as an effective response station for natural disasters or terrorist attacks. A program known by the acronym STORM currently exists. The Systematic Tracking of Optimal Risk Management program has been completed conceptually and is essentially completed as a software package for local FSA offices. FSA personnel nationwide received initial training on STORM in March of 2002, yet it has languished since that time. Never has an unused program been more appropriate than this program at this time. It holds the potential to provide a *real time* threat assessment mechanism for the government that could be a tremendous tool in combating domestic and foreign terrorist threats. FSA stands ready to put this program online.
- FSA and NRCS are both confronting severe budget restrictions. A more efficient use of USDA administrative dollars would be to allow FSA to spread the administrative costs over *all* USDA programs by allowing agencies to concentrate on their areas of expertise. There is no need for both

FSA and NRCS to be involved in the administration of programs. FSA has historically proven to be very efficient and accountable in the administrative area and FSA should continue to handle all administrative functions for all programs whether they are conservation or commodity titled. Administrative functions are defined as application processing, contract development, contract maintenance and compliance. NRCS employees are trained and efficient in the area of technical determinations and should be allowed to concentrate exclusively on their area of expertise. NRCS is currently utilizing funds that were designated by Congress for producers to fund their administrative program costs. The same “mistakes made and lessons learned” over the years by FSA in developing an efficient administrative program are now being duplicated by NRCS at a great expense to the taxpayer. Savings would be achieved if there were one administrative agency within USDA. Taxpayers should not have to bear the burden of reinventing a new administrative system to implement additional conservation programs when a proven administrative system is already in place within FSA.

- NRCS is charging FSA approximately \$1400.00 per Conservation Reserve Program contract for writing the conservation plan. The development of components is technical in nature. For example, when to seed, seeding rates, seed variety combinations, fertilize by soil test and tillage requirements. However, once these technical determinations are made they do not vary from contract to contract. The conservation plan is a replication of the appropriate components into a document that the producer signs agreeing to complete the components of the CRP practice they have chosen. Since, no further technical determinations are made this becomes purely an administrative function. FSA can accomplish this task for a minimal cost to the taxpayer versus the current \$1400 per contract charged by NRCS. Also, this would allow NRCS the ability to use their limited staff to complete technical services the producers requested during the hearings held across the country.
- The removal of IT control from each agency’s budget has not resulted in budget savings. The lumping of IT funds into one entity has created a ripe target for budget cuts. A redistribution of these funds back to the respective agencies will eliminate this target and make it harder to cut essential funds.
- The quest for funds to support any program is becoming increasingly more difficult and ad hoc disaster programs are divisive and slow to respond. A permanent disaster program is an extremely important safety net for our specialty crop and livestock producers. For many years, a permanent livestock program existed to expedite response time in the event of natural disasters. The FSA County Committee (COC) was the authority set up to request implementation based on stringent eligibility requirements. These types of programs can be successful, responsive, and efficient if managed by the COC and implemented by FSA. If a permanent disaster program becomes a reality, all un-obligated fiscal year funds should be carried over into the next year. Without having to wait for ad hoc legislative program passage, a permanent disaster program would allow disaster funds to be distributed in a timely manner with minimal or no late payment interest being paid.
- Programs administered by FSA are vital to American agriculture, family farms, and the rural economies of the communities in which we serve. To protect our infrastructure and program delivery, FSA must be staffed at a minimum of 9800 permanent county office employees. Temporary employees should be used at peak operation times to help fill the gaps when workload dictates additional help is needed. It is also important to maintain this level of employees to ensure

required program checks and balances are properly executed at the county level. In addition, this staffing level will not require all new funds only an assurance that budget dollars are spent according to the intent of congress and not on other departmental initiatives. The suggestions included in this document should be more than enough budget savings to fund the necessary staff positions.

- A re-evaluation of the FSA E-Gov initiative should take place. Has FSA achieved its goals pertaining to E-Gov and have the dollars spent on the FSA E-Gov initiative shown results accordingly and are the expenditures cost efficient? Should additional dollars be spent on this program with the current participation rate? Do the current and projected benefits justify the expenditures?
- An expanded Noninsured Assistance Program (NAP) could ensure better crop protection tools for those not covered by traditional crop insurance programs. Specialty crop growers would have the protection they require without creating a new subsidy program and also be WTO-compliant. If a decision is made that more federal resources should flow to specialty crop producers, an excellent tool to deliver that increased support would be to lower the eligibility thresholds for NAP. This could be accomplished, and effectively budgeted, by adjusting the loss thresholds and payment rate percentages currently used in the program; thus making the program more “user friendly”.
- NASCOE supports the increased utilization of the locally elected FSA County Committees. Increased training and authority should be given to the county committees to help stop fraud and abuse of all USDA programs, whether through payment limitations or program abuse. The farmer-elected county committee is the only direct link from the local government to the department and congress. With effective training, the County Committees will be even more successful at helping to eliminate government waste and abuse.
- The EQIP Program as it is currently administered seems to exist for a very small group of producers. A review needs to be completed on how the funds are distributed and who is receiving them. Monies paid out generally flow to large farming operations, leaving the smaller operations and limited resource producers without assistance. The expired Agriculture Conservation Program (ACP) gave benefits to a much larger number of producers and was a broader and more comprehensive conservation program. Similar to CSP, it effectively reached the smaller operations. ACP was a true partnership between the federal government and the producer; but like all programs, it would need to be fully funded to be effective. As previously stated, FSA should be the administrative agency for all conservation programs (i.e. CRP, CSP, EQIP, WRP), leaving NRCS to complete the highly technical work.
- Agencies within USDA are wasting valuable resources by completing redundant business processes. We need to draw on the expertise of each agency to effectively and efficiently deliver farm bill programs. Any business or organization’s structure needs to be constantly evaluated; this is necessary to meet the changing needs of the customer and the business environment. However, any evaluation needs to include all layers of the organization and its partners. Efficient changes at the field level should never involve just one of the USDA agencies in that county or area. All USDA agencies should be evaluated when reorganization is being considered. Anytime considerations are given to the reduction in the number of field level operations, a comparable number of mid-management positions should be eliminated (e.g. District Directors). NASCOE could support an all-

inclusive evaluation system that looks at the National Office, State Office, and Field Office structure. But in order to be effective and meaningful, this evaluation must include stakeholders such as state and county committees, producer groups, local governments, and employee association representatives. Also, the evaluation must be objective and based on employee numbers, workload, the rural nature of the service area, and other measurable means.

We ask that you consider the proposals provided to you with this paper. We hope you look for the positives in each USDA agency and consider what FSA has to offer for the future. FSA has an amazing infrastructure with highly trained personnel who have an excellent record of service delivery with low administrative costs. NASCOE leadership from across the country has helped to provide input and regional ideas to compile this information. As always, NASCOE, through FSA, stands ready and able to implement any and all federal agricultural programs and serve the government in any other way deemed necessary. FSA simply needs the tools and infrastructure support to be successful. If you have any questions or concerns about the contents of this letter, please do not hesitate to contact us. NASCOE stands ready to assist American Agriculture in any way possible.