

NASCOE'S RESPONSE TO SECRETARY'S OFFICE STRUCTURE PROPOSAL

By Mark VanHoose, NASCOE President

Your NASCOE leadership team was in Washington, DC, March 25-26 to negotiate on your behalf. We learned the latest on plans by USDA to change the “footprint” of FSA for the future. The Secretary was testifying before the Senate Agriculture appropriations committee and shared the basics of what his team thinks FSA should look like in the near future. To paraphrase, it appears the plan is to have a central office with a CED and 3 PT's or more, this same manager would oversee a branch office with three PT's. Also this same office manager and PT's from the central or branch office could potentially also have a satellite office open a few days by appointment only. The Secretary proposes closing 250 offices after the election this fall. Since no additional employees are planned to be hired, it is easy to deduce that many more offices will need to close to have at least 3 PT's in each central and branch office in many parts of the country.

So what are the positions and questions that NASCOE has concerning this proposal? They are as follows:

- Why are we determining the future FSA footprint now when we have so many new programs to launch with this new Farm Bill? This seems to be the worst possible time. Over 60 percent of our workforce is eligible to retire within 5 years. There is plenty of time to consider staffing reductions other than at the launch of the Farm Bill.
- Why would we reduce the FSA office structure before the online tools are developed so that producers can file applications online. Rather than looking to the future and working back, why not maintain the infrastructure until it's no longer the main delivery option?
- Why can't NASCOE be at the table while the plan is being developed so we can provide expertise on the needs of our clientele as well as making sure that memberships concerns can be considered?
- How will the county committee system be utilized in this vision for the future, and how will all programs, including FLP, be integrated in each office?

There may very well be some positive things in these proposals that should be considered right now. Do we have some offices that membership thinks should be closed? Possibly. But when management does not include employee associations in the planning and does not update NASCOE as proposals are developed it is difficult to trust their decisions. Since 1996 we have heard the mantra that offices need reduced and producers want to do FSA business online. Here we are in 2014 and we still don't have a good online tool for producers to communicate and file applications on the simplest of programs (okay there are no simple programs). For NASCOE the largest issue is the reduction in permanent staffing as we are preparing to deliver a very complicated Farm Bill. The timing couldn't be worse. So what is NASCOE doing on your behalf concerning this proposal?

- I hope you see our legislative thrust to make sure Congress is aware of the potential damaging effects of this proposal as we ramp up program delivery. In each agricultural news article I think you see a piece of our education process to make sure they understand that staffing cuts and indiscriminate office closures are harmful to those we serve.

- We are reaching out to farm organizations to gauge their concern about these changes and how it affects their members who rely on FSA for program delivery.
- We are preparing our “must haves” that members expect before we could support any changes to the current delivery model. As I say, there might be things that would be beneficial for our members. It is important that membership let NASCOE leadership know what concerns they have for the future. CO supervision of GS employees, relocation expenses, and PT grade increases are a few things that come to mind. Why don’t we get a vision of where FSA wants to be in 10 years so employees can see where jobs will be so transitions can begin in the least painful manner? Why online tools that work aren’t developed first before we dismantle the FSA county office system that has served American agriculture so well?

Rest assured that your association is working to make sure a reasonable plan that best serves both producers and our members is the end result. We know that a plan that meets both groups’ needs is attainable.