



County employee group makes last-minute push for FSA offices

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 23, 2014 - The National Association of FSA County Office Employees (NASCOE) wrote to Senate farm bill conferees today to urge them to accept a House provision that aims to make it more difficult for the USDA to close Farm Service Agency county offices.



The provision, offered by Rep. Rick Crawford, R-Ark., is included in the House-approved bill, but not in the Senate. The provision would require USDA to conduct and complete an evaluation of workload assessments for FSA county offices that were open and operational as of Jan. 1, 2012. The evaluations would be required in relation to closure or relocation decisions. NASCOE wrote a letter to Senate conferees today asking them to accept the House provision. "Congress must maintain an active role in this process so that production agriculture has local access to FSA's programs," the letter said. "The House-passed language requires workload assessments and ensures future plans to restructure or close FSA's county offices will be transparent and based on merit."

A congressional aide said there have been around 10 FSA county office closures in Arkansas since 2011. "The criteria [for closure] was abstract. We thought the offices were highly proficient," the aide said. "We need some level of criteria for offices being proficient, but this has seemed arbitrary."

NASCOE said the 2008 farm bill prohibited closures for two years and included related limitations.

In 2012, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack launched the Blueprint for Stronger Service, directing USDA agencies to take steps to cut costs and modernize operations. As part of that plan, Vilsack [proposed](#) consolidating 131 FSA county offices in 32 states. At that time, more than 2,100 FSA offices remained throughout the United States. In many cases, USDA said, offices that were recommended for closure were either not staffed or staffed with just one or two employees and within 20 miles of other offices.

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