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NAFEC President Testifies Before House Agriculture Subcommittee on FSA Information Technology System

"A modern IT platform is critical if we are to deliver all of the programs authorized by Congress to all of the farmers and ranchers mandated by Congress."

WASHINGTON (RuralWire), March 12, 2009 – Craig Turner, President of the National Association of Farmer Elected Committees (NAFEC) testified this week before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry to review the status of information technology (IT) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

"The challenge of delivering this multitude of highly complex programs to a much larger customer base has been, and continues to be, exacerbated with an ever-declining FSA workforce and an ever-shrinking number of county offices," declared Turner, a farmer and rancher from Matador, Texas. "FSA has, therefore, been forced to rely much more heavily on IT in an attempt to fill the service gap. Unfortunately, much of FSA's current IT structure is archaic and fragile. We fear that we are uncomfortably close to a total IT meltdown and that service to farmers by the FSA is in a perilous situation."

"For too many years, FSA has been forced to take funding away from salaries for staff and expense money for county and state offices to fund stop-gap measures to keep the old IT system up and running," added Turner. "FSA has bled all of the people and brick and mortar it can afford to keep the old IT system running. There must be a separate, dedicated, statutory funding stream for a modern IT platform -- authorized by Congress -- if we are to deliver all of the programs authorized by Congress to all of the farmers and ranchers mandated by Congress."

Turner also explained the importance of broadband deployment to farmers and FSA program delivery. "We commend President Obama and Secretary Vilsack for their bold initiatives on broadband deployment in rural America. We also suggest that county FSA offices and USDA Service Centers be prioritized as a high priority target for broadband deployment. If we can get broadband to our FSA county offices it would not only help negate the agency's antiquated and decaying IT structure, but we may also have a better chance of getting broadband deployment to the rest of the county and into the homes and offices of farm and ranch families.

County committee members are an important component of the operations of FSA and provide a link between the agricultural community and the USDA. Farmers and ranchers who serve on county committees help deliver FSA farm programs at the local level, applying their knowledge and judgment to make decisions on: commodity price support loans and payments; conservation programs; incentive indemnity and disaster payments for some commodities; emergency programs and payment eligibility. FSA committees operate within official regulations designed to carry out federal laws. The National Association of Farmer Elected Committees is a non-profit organization composed of and led by farmers, nominated and elected by farmers, and serving all farmers in each of their county USDA Farm Service Agency offices. To learn more about NAFEC or to join please go to <http://fsacountycommittees.org>