



# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FARMER ELECTED COMMITTEES

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## TESTIMONY PRESENTED

*BY*

## NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FARMER ELECTED COMMITTEES

BEFORE THE

### HOUSE AGRICULTURE SUBCOMMITTEE

*ON*

### DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS, OVERSIGHT, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY

THE HONORABLE JOE BACA, CHAIRMAN

MARCH 10, 2010

*BY*

CRAIG TURNER  
PRESIDENT

## **Introduction**

Chairman Baca, Ranking Member Fortenberry, and members of the Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry, I am Craig Turner, President of the National Association of Farmer Elected Committees (NAFEC), as well as a farmer and rancher from Matador, Texas. My family raises cotton, grain sorghum, wheat, forage, cattle and kids. We farm in four counties and work with four separate Farm Service Agency (FSA) county offices.

NAFEC is pleased and honored to have been extended the invitation and opportunity to appear before this committee today to discuss issues relating to information technology (IT) as it relates to delivery of FSA programs.

## **Overview of the FSA County Committees**

NAFEC is a forty-five year old organization of farmers and ranchers that serve the Secretary of Agriculture in delivering many of the FSA programs. We represent many farmers and ranchers that are nominated and elected to serve on the County Committees (CoC) as well as many of the farmers and ranchers that are appointed to represent minority and socially disadvantaged producers and act as advisors to the CoC.

County Committee members, including our advisors, serve as the eyes and ears for the Secretary, as well as this committee, in helping curb fraud and abuse in farm program delivery. We know the producers in our county; we help document the weather conditions during the crop year; and we know the appropriate agricultural practices required in our areas. All of this information is critical in assisting in the fair and equitable delivery of farm, conservation and emergency programs in every county of the nation.

County Committee members also assist in outreach to the farmers and ranchers in the areas we serve. We take the critical program information we learn in our capacity as members and advisors back to the producers we represent. Any CoC member or advisor will tell you that on any given day, be it at the coffee shop, sale barn, implement dealer, high school football game, farm meeting, service club meeting, church, grocery store or wherever else we may be, it is very common for farmers to ask: “what is new at FSA; when are the signup deadlines; when will benefits be available;” and many other crucially important questions that need informed answers. This collateral duty of outreach is especially important for our CoC advisors because they often have the ability to do targeted outreach to the minority and socially disadvantaged producers in the area.

County Committees also assists in approval of applications for most programs (except farm loan programs), as well as reconsiderations and appeals by producers on program eligibility, providing local expertise to the Secretary in the delivery of programs. County Committees are also tasked to hire and help supervise the County Executive Director (CED), who in turn hires and manages the day-to-day county FSA office operations.

We take all of the aforementioned FSA County Committee responsibilities very seriously, provide our time and expertise and are bound by mandatory confidentiality restrictions and a code of conduct -- all for about \$50 a month. We may not rank up there with Roosevelt’s “Dollar a Year Men,” Mr. Chairman, but I think you would be hard pressed to find a better deal for the money anywhere else in today’s government.

And by the way, that \$50 per month is also about what the National Finance Center charges FSA to pay us, a possible side topic for your committee’s oversight of department operations.

### **Program Delivery Overview**

I have in my hand, and have attached to my written testimony, an eight-page Fact Sheet from FSA detailing almost fifty programs currently administered by FSA. If I had a list of FSA programs from before 1986, it would be much, much shorter than the one I hold today because, since passage of the 1985 farm bill and subsequent farm bills, we have added the majority of the programs on this list.

CoC members do not have any authority in FSA lending programs, and with the exception of a very short window of time immediately following the reorganization of the Department of Agriculture in 1995, never have. But we are involved in assisting with the delivery of most other programs on this list.

More importantly, our local county offices deliver most, if not all, of the programs on this list and the proliferation of new and more complex programs administered by our county offices has been a mixed blessing. Prior to the mid 1980s, most of our programs were directed toward the seven major, strategic, storable crops (keep in mind that even soybeans were not a “program crop” until recently) and the programs we had for those major crops were much simpler to understand and deliver. There were few, if any, programs for dairy and other livestock, fruit and vegetable, aquaculture, biomass or producers of other crops and products.

In these modern times, FSA’s programs cover a much larger sector of production agriculture. These additional programs are critically important to the economic viability of a much larger customer base and that is a very good thing – not only for dairy producers, cow-calf operations and conservation minded producers – but also for minority producers engaged in the production of highly specialized and high value crops very small acreages. These new programs are even more critical to farmers in an area like your home state of California Mr. Chairman, where until recently most of your farmers had no programs authorized by Congress to turn to. California’s FSA now serves a very large, diverse customer base that raise a huge array of crops and livestock.

But on the other hand, our county FSA offices have many more programs to deliver to many more producers, many of whom had never been to an FSA office before. Contemporary FSA programs are also much more complex for the farmers to understand and for FSA to deliver.

Using California as an example again, that state’s FSA now delivers services to a very large and diverse customer base which raises a huge array of crops and livestock with an organization of people, offices and infrastructure, based on delivering programs to only producers of those seven major crops of the legacy farm programs. California’s FSA customer base may be three to four times what it was just a decade ago, and the number of programs they are delivering has grown three to five fold –they are doing the job with only 30 county offices and less than 200 employees statewide, including the state office. They are to be commended, but more importantly, they deserve a modern system to deliver our modern programs.

### **Information Technology and its Relation to Program Delivery**

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. 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.

In December of 2008, NAFEC submitted the following statement to President-Elect Obama's Presidential Transition Team – *“Since farm programs continue to become more bureaucratic and complicated with each new farm bill, there should be no more closings of county Farm Service Agency offices, no reductions in FSA staff and no reductions in FSA staff compensation until such time that farm programs are greatly simplified. FSA's ageing and antiquated computer and communications systems should be replaced and updated to meet the current challenges faced by FSA staff in the delivery of farm, conservation, credit and disaster programs.”*

In that same spirit, we offer these critical points:

- NAFEC appreciates the work of the U.S. Congress in providing the authority for delivery of more programs to more farmers;
- NAFEC urges that Congress consider reducing the complexities of future farm programs so that we can deliver more programs to more farms, more efficiently, but anyone that follows the current trends in that regard cannot realistically expect any real change;
- NAFEC urges more staffing at the state and county level in order to deliver more programs to more farmers, but again anyone that follows the current trends in that regard cannot realistically expect any real change;
- NAFEC urges that no more county FSA offices be closed so that we can deliver more programs to more farmers, but once more, anyone that follows the current trends in that regard cannot realistically expect any real change;
- NAFEC therefore demands an investment into a modern IT platform to allow FSA and the other field delivery agencies of the USDA, deliver more programs to more farmers and rural Americans;

The investment in a modern IT platform must be dedicated toward that objective. We commend Secretary Vilsack for his commitment and leadership on this issue and we commend Congress and the leadership in this room for helping dedicate additional IT funds in the FY 2010 federal budget and the Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, but the Secretary needs more help from Congress to fully fund and fully dedicate those resources toward that objective.

Many of you know the unwritten challenges faced by Secretary Vilsack, Administrator Coppess and their predecessors. They know very well the intended mandates of the House and Senate agriculture committees when it comes to farm programs and their delivery. In prior years the agency requested adequate resources to comply with those mandates, but once those requests are diced and sliced at the Office of Management and Budget, the official request presented to Congress was well short of the need. Hopefully you understand this challenge and can better assist the Secretary in the future.

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. 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.

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 LAN-WAN system, 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 farmer and ranch families.

Some newer technology is being deployed using the internet as a platform. Using Electronic Authorization (e-auth), some producers have the ability to sign up for some programs using their home or office computers. Many producers do not have computers or if they do, they do not have a comfort level or the expertise to use the online process. But an even larger obstacle may be that many, if not most, rural areas still do not have broadband internet service. Internet based program delivery is a very good supplemental platform, but is in no way an acceptable replacement for "over-the-counter" service at the county FSA office.

In closing, we wish to reemphasize these points:

- There are more FSA programs available today than ever before;
- There are more farmers qualifying for FSA programs than ever before;
- Farm programs are more complex than ever before;
- There are few FSA employees and fewer FSA offices than in any time in modern history; and
- The FSA IT platform is in dire need of modernization.

This hearing focused only on the final point in this list, but the other points cannot be easily addressed by either Congress or the Administration. Therefore let me restate that 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.

NAFEC and I appreciate your invitation to address this committee today, we commend your leadership and initiative in addressing these issues and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you Mr. Chairman.