

STATEMENT
OF
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NASCOE
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE CHAIRMAN
PULASKI, TENNESSEE

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS, OVERSIGHT,
NUTRITION AND FORESTRY

MARCH 10, 2010

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, my name is Mike Mayfield. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your committee today. I have been involved with agriculture my entire life. I am part of a fourth-generation farm family. I have been active in 4-H Club, the Future Farmers of America, the Cattlemen's Association, Tennessee Farm Bureau and my local community. I have a Bachelor of Science Degree in Agriculture from the University of Tennessee. I have been an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency for twenty-four years. I am currently the County Director of the Farm Service Agency in Giles County, Tennessee. I am here today representing the National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees (NASCOE). I am pleased that our national President, Mr. Myron Stroup of Kansas, is also here today.

The National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees is an organization that represents the county level employees of the Farm Service Agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). NASCOE was originally chartered in 1959. FSA employees are in contact with virtually every producer in the United States, and NASCOE is proud to represent 85% of all county office employees.

In anticipation of today's hearing, NASCOE surveyed our membership with three pertinent questions:

1. Is the current IT FSA infrastructure meeting your professional needs as an employee? 76% said no.
2. Have you seen any improvement in the IT infrastructure in the last year? 61% said no.
3. Do the current software applications provide you with the ability to timely service producers? 81% said no.

In most cases when a producer walks through the door of a local FSA office, the employees of the office know them by name. However, even with that level of personal knowledge, the producer's detailed farm operation information must be accessed from our computer operating system. Depending on the reason for the producer's visit to our office, we will proceed to certain areas of a producer's farm information. Many times that may be a printout of their farm operation record or a copy of a producer's farm map. It may be to make a payment on a loan or apply for a loan. There is a wide range of program needs for each and every individual producer. I would like to discuss two main functions that our offices perform. According to reports from throughout the country, the use of maps for numerous reasons from irrigation installation, acreage determinations, crop planning, farm subdivision and acreage reporting to name a few is the most heavily used office process. We have a tremendous tool with ArcMap and our GIS Common land unit layer, and it can be an intricate part of a producer's farming operation. Unfortunately, this is one of our slowest processes taking 2 to 3 minutes to open. Next a search must be made of farm records to find the appropriate farm number or numbers, and then printing takes 5 to 6 minutes before the information is available to work with the producer. If any one of these software applications is not available or disrupted, the office will have to seek out the information manually, or if the server is down, we will not be able to provide this information to the customer. The manual process dramatically increases the amount of time necessary to perform the service for the farmer or rancher.

Enrollment in Direct and Counter Cyclical Program and Average Crop Revenue Election was determined to be the second business function widely used. This process is dependent on more interactive software processes to accomplish the enrollment task. First, a printout detailing all of the farms involved in a particular operation is necessary for review. If there are changes such as acres, owners, addresses, adding email addresses or changes in deposit information, it could take up to **FOUR** separate log-ins of username and password to access the necessary applications to service this one producer. A disruption, which still happens on a regular basis, in any one of these applications can prevent the office from efficiently handling this customer and may even require them to make subsequent visits to the office.

All 1.7 million participants in the DCP and ACRE programs will be required to certify and use maps. If we are conservative and assume a five minute ArcMAP startup on each map, we have a potential loss of productivity of 146,666.66 hours. This equates to a total loss of productivity of 68 full-time employees or a cost to the government of \$4.42 million.

The recent investments in our IT system have made some marked improvements and we want to thank you for those improvements. At least, gone are the days such as in 2007 when the eastern part of the country could access their computers before noon, and the western part of the country had to wait until after lunch. According to FSA employees, there are some functional and user-friendly applications that have allowed FSA to provide better service to producers. As USDA drives toward becoming paperless, the online FSA handbooks are an example of a success story. They make it much quicker to search through the 118 regulatory handbooks that are required to implement the federal farm programs. In addition, amending handbooks for policy changes and corrections used to take days. Now that process is instantaneous with the posting of the new amendment on the website.

The Direct and Countercyclical Program enrollment software and Average Crop Revenue Election software are examples of functional and user-friendly software applications. The producers especially like that they can sign up farms from other counties. It is nice to be able to access all of a producer's interests. These applications allow us to quickly enroll producers and get them back in the field where they need to be for profitability. The interaction of the DCP and ACRE software with the National Payment Service application for 2010 advance payments has work seamlessly so far this season.

The software to perform subsidiary file updates also is a user-friendly application. It is easy to move between the actively engaged and conservation compliance updates. The reports are easily attainable and can be adjusted for specific county office needs.

FSA needs your continued commitment to invest in infrastructure and software development to assure our IT systems are the best possible. Also, we would like to suggest that field-level input be at the forefront of any new software development, and those contributors need to be geographically diverse.

The largest IT problem that faces FSA today – Antiques. FSA offices across America start business everyday with a machine and process that by any definition is considered antiquated. For example, in my office we currently have a County Operations Trainee that is preparing to become a county director, and the 26 year-old technology that initiate's our IT start of the day is older than he. This problem must be solved before FSA can truly enter the modern Information Technology age.

I don't want to dwell today on those IT problems that have faced FSA in the last year such as the issuance of 2009 direct payments, CRP payments and the inability of our system to read appropriate eligibility flags. I want to concentrate on those issues that happened recently, impacting our ability to service the farmers and ranchers of this country.

The 2009 payment problems created numerous overpayments and receivables around the country. Producers have begun to request their 2010 advance DCP payments, and these will be offset against those receivables. However, the system is so slow that offsets made on February 22, 2010, had not cleared as of March 4, 2010, effectively eliminating our ability to release the remainder of a producer's advance payments without them being offset unnecessarily.

On March 2, 2010, county offices were informed of a national internal processing error. County offices were operating blindly not realizing there were producers that had not been paid or had problems that needed correcting before they could be paid.

Also on March 2, 2010, we were told of the challenge of maintaining and operating our old computer systems. This concerns the 3000 servers that were installed in 2002 and "have long since reached the end of their useful life." This leads to continual connectivity and slow application problems directly impacting the availability of our computer systems when your constituents come into our office for service.

On March 3, 2010, county offices were informed that an application deployment issue resulted in the unavailability of the National Receipts and Receivables System. For a majority of the day, all processes in this system had to be completed manually.

On March 5, 2010, we were informed that the Direct Loan Making application was experiencing performance issues. Customers may not be able to access the DLM application or may receive errors in the application.

These are not abnormal occurrences and only represent a snapshot of what FSA employees deal with constantly in an effort to provide service to the American farmer and rancher.

Last but not least is the current implementation of the SURE program. This is one of the most complicated programs we have implemented in years. There is no integrated software available, and the program is being implemented with a complicated Excel workbook, still to be updated. Large volumes of data are being transferred from an interim report and keyed into the workbook. This is a perfect situation for overpayments, underpayments and mistakes. The most disheartening consequence for the county office employees is the loss of integrity and producer trust in our programs.

NASCOE's motto is Loyalty, Service, Courtesy, and Effort. We take our profession very seriously. Many of our employees grew up on a farm or ranch, still farm or have family members involved in agriculture. These are our friends, family and neighbors. We want them to respect our profession and what we contribute to our local communities. There are serious issues before this committee today. NASCOE asks that you continue to conduct oversight of the Department's efforts to assure that programs passed by the Congress are delivered in a timely, effective manner.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today.