



# TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF FSA COUNTY OFFICE EMPLOYEES

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## LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE REPORT

**April 18, 2009**

Committee Members:

Chance Fenoglio, Chairman  
Jay Hinojosa  
Kevin Humphrey  
Cody Hughes  
John Mark Kinnibrugh

The NASCOE Legislative Conference was held in Washington, D.C. on March 17-18, 2009.

The purpose of the NASCOE Legislative Conference is to present our issues to legislators regarding a variety of concerns NASCOE/TASCOE and FSA are facing. This is done through personally meeting with our representatives, senators and legislative aides to ensure our concerns are heard. The Legislative Conference is one of the most integral parts of what NASCOE/TASCOE does because it places representatives of our membership, almost 200 strong, at the doors of our representatives on the same day to help tell our story. Representing TASCOE at this year's conference was Daniel Lange, Darvin Collins, Jan Wanoreck, John Mark Kinnibrugh, Cody Hughes and I.

The TASCOE legislative delegation attended the opening sessions on Tuesday, March 17, in Washington, D.C. The meeting began at 2:00 pm where we were welcomed by NASCOE Legislative Co-Chairs Mike Mayfield and Loren Nelson. The position papers and talking point, which are the issues we take to the Hill, were then introduced by the Legislative Committee. Bob Redding, NASCOE Legislative consultant, then wrapped up the meeting with legislative training and tips. Mr. Redding informed us that states with key contacts on the Agriculture Committee (Texas has three- Mike Conaway, Randy Neugebauer, and Henry Cuellar) would be of vital importance in getting our non-benefits portion of the position papers into the hands and ears of key decision makers. States with no key contacts would be stressing the benefits portion of the position papers.

The following are a list of issues and concerns address in the position papers which were presented to our Congressional Representatives and Senators:

### **Conservation Programs**

FSA has a long and successful history of implementing and administering conservation at a low cost to the taxpayer. FSA has consistently been able to deliver programs with an average administrative cost of 6.2% of outlays, whereas NRCS has recently used as much as 24.2% of the conservation allocation for administrative expenses rather than focusing these dollars on

more conservation practice implementation for producers. Allowing FSA and NRCS to jointly administer conservation programs, FSA through administration and NRCS through technical services to producers, would result in a more efficient, cost effective, implementation of conservation programs, and provide better service to our customers. It would also be the most fiscally responsible method of providing conservation services to producers and taxpayers.

### **RMA Issues**

USDA is currently paying administrative funds to three different crop data collective agencies (FSA, RMA, and NASS). NASCOE supports the elimination of these duplicative duties within USDA through data sharing, which would provide a significant budget savings within the department. Government Accounting Office (GAO) audits have repeatedly recommended FSA be given responsibility of claims processing for RMA, dramatically reducing erroneous payments and significantly reducing government outlays.

### **Animal Identification Program**

Millions of dollars of taxpayer funds have already been spent on the current Animal Identification Systems without any measureable success. With recent disease outbreaks in the tomato, spinach, and peanut industries many millions of dollars were lost due to the inability to quickly and accurately trace disease outbreak. The livestock industry could suffer the same type of devastating loss without a successful program in place. If and when Congress implements such a program, FSA should be put in charge due to the expertise and local knowledge of staff, Common Land Unit/ArcGIS capabilities, local office sites throughout the Nation, and our ability to maintain constant contact with local producers providing consistent up to date information in the event of an outbreak.

### **Computer Systems**

USDA currently has many overlapping, outdated, and duplicate computer systems which are expensive to purchase and maintain. Some prime examples are toolkit and ArcGis, as well as programs that run off the AS400/Sys 36 and others that run off internet based programs which are required to communicate with each other. New age and complex programs such as ACRE and SURE require the investment in a new era of Information Technology to allow efficient implementation of these programs. Upgrading FSA IT systems will provide a cost saving in the long run through increased efficiency in the delivery of programs.

### **Employee Benefits**

-FERS Sick Leave Credit- Currently there is a disparity between CSRS and FERS employees' sick leave credit toward retirement. CSRS employees are allowed to use their sick leave credit toward retirement annuity computation, while FERS employees receive no credit for unused sick leave. It is projected that this disparity costs the government \$68 million per year through lost productivity and increased training costs. NASCOE urged the support of H.R. 958 which assured FERS employees would receive sick leave credit toward their retirement. At the writing of this report a bill similar to H.R. 958, H.R. 1804, has passed the House putting FERS employees one step closer to achieving this benefit.

-Health Insurance- Several changes in health insurance programs were proposed by NASCOE of which include: increasing the age of discontinuing coverage for dependants from 22 to 25 years of age, adding plans of self plus one to additional health insurance programs so employees don't have to pay additional premiums for a family plan, and allowing retirees the use of pre-tax dollars to pay health care premiums (H.R. 1203).

-Social Security Windfall Elimination Provision- Federal employees working under CSRS and under Social Security covered employment are subject to reduced Social

Security benefits in retirement. Federal employees that changed in mid-career from CSRS employment to Social Security based employment are disproportionately affected by this law. The formula for calculating a federal employee's retirement under this provision reduces the social security benefit by as much as 60%. NASCOE supports H.R. 235 which would repeal this unjust law.

-Government Pension Offset- The law requires two-thirds of a government annuity be offset from a spousal social security benefit. In most cases this eliminated the spousal social security benefit. Retirees receiving annuities in the private sector are not subject to this law. NASCOE supports H.R. 235 that would repeal this law that unfairly targets federal employees.

On Tuesday the TASCOE delegation was able to visit the South Office Building and meet with Candice Thompson-Acting Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs, Craig Trimm-Assistant Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs and Brad Karmen-Assistant Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs. The group was able to discuss various issues such as new pay limit forms, signature authority, SURE/LFP and other issues affecting county offices under the new Farm Bill. It was a great opportunity to visit with members of our administration and give them our input on issues from a county office level. We appreciate the time and hospitality extended to the group.

All meetings were conducted on Wednesday, March 18<sup>th</sup>. The day began with an early trek to Capitol Hill via the Metro (D.C. subway) with the rest of the D.C. locals. Needless to say it wasn't hard to pick out the Texas delegation the crowd. Thanks to the expertise of our fearless leader, Daniel (from one previous trip to D.C.), and constant supervision and regrouping by Jan (a.k.a. Mom), all of the newbies (Darvin, Cody, John Mark, and I) were able to make it to The Hill, together, on time, and in one piece. I had never even seen a subway first hand so this expertise and supervision proved invaluable to myself and the rest of the group. For someone that gets their sense of direction from the sun and surroundings, this was truly a humbling experience because the Metro provides no sunlight for direction and everything looks the same with the exception of the "line" you are riding on. (Good thing I'm not color blind.) If not for the rest of the group I would still be wandering the vast subway lines and would probably have just remitted to taking up permanent residence there by now. But I digress. We were able to meet personally with Senator John Cornyn and Congressmen Mike Conaway, Randy Neugebauer, Mac Thornberry, and Michael Burgess. In addition to these personal visits we were able to meet with aides or other representatives from a total of twenty one Congressional Offices. We were all very pleased with the results of our visits and the majority of the offices were very responsive to our issues and voiced support for our concerns.

I appreciate all the hard work Daniel, Darvin, Jan, John Mark, and Cody put into making this year's conference a success. I can't count the hours, of their own personal time, that were contributed to making contacts, scheduling meetings, studying issues and making visits to The Hill. There were some very sore brains, eyes, jaws and feet (you wouldn't believe the walking you have to do) at the end of the day, but not one complaint was voiced and only kind words and appreciation was voiced from members for the honor of making the trip. I was truly a privilege to work with such a positive and dedicated group.

I would like to remind every member to support our legislative efforts by becoming active in contacting your elected representatives. This process has been greatly simplified through the availability of CAPWIZ. If you have not signed up please do so. Our strength

is in our numbers and there's not an easier, more efficient, manner of contacting your representative than through CAPWIZ. We've all seen the attention that the "Tea Parties" have gained recently and it's through sheer numbers that make this a success. We have a large margin of improvement that we can gain in Texas if all TASCOE members take a few minutes to sign up. Thank you to all those who have signed up and for those that haven't there are step by step instructions to do so on TASCOE's website Legislative Page. ([www.tascoe.org](http://www.tascoe.org)). The NASCOE Political Action Committee (PAC) is also an integral part of making our voice heard. If you aren't contributing to the PAC I encourage you to do so. Any amount will help in acquiring the benefits and improvements we strive to obtain through NASCOE/TASCOE.

Thanks to all officers, directors, committee members and others who dedicate their personal time for the benefits of all FSA employees and TASCOE members. Your generous support makes this organization what it is and that does not go unnoticed.

Respectfully Submitted,

TASCOE Legislative Committee