

A Grassroots Government Success Story - FSA County Committees

With the size of government spending seemingly out of control and a backlash brewing across the country, more Americans are daily asking Uncle Sam to reign in the arm of the Federal Government. More and more we see government agencies issuing arbitrary rules without local input. The ability for the common taxpayer to get in touch with layers and layers of bureaucracy has become next to impossible. As a result, distrust, suspicion, and even anger is growing among a large number of taxpayers who would like to see the Fed's decentralize and put the power back where they think it belongs - in the hands of the people.

Most American's probably aren't aware that the government has an agency that could be the perfect model for the future of Federal government agencies, and it has been around since the early 1930's. This little known system of grass roots government with local control is the County Committee system of the USDA's Farm Service Agency.

The County Committee system and forerunner of the current Farm Service Agency (FSA) was formed back in 1933 with the passage of Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and the creation of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, or AAA. Local control associations or committees were formed to oversee the Federal farm programs implemented by the Roosevelt "New Deal". Writing to President Roosevelt in 1934, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace described this new innovative form of grass roots government. "Farmers themselves largely administer the adjustment programs through county control associations. These bodies help to make as well as to administer adjustment policy. Thoroughly democratic in form and spirit, the associations are effective instruments in economic self-government..... In thus decentralizing administrative work, and at the same time creating new channels through which farmer opinion may find expression, the Agricultural Adjustment Act promotes true democracy." (1)

This unique system of government now classified as the County Committee system has been around for almost 80 years. Featuring a Federal, State, and County partnership with local control, the County Committee system was modeled along the lines of private industry. Just like S&P 500 Corporations, Banks, Rural

Cooperatives, and even School Boards, all containing local board of directors, the FSA County Committee functions as a local board of directors. These boards are in place to ensure the integrity of the agriculture programs and to provide local control for the Federal bureaucracy. This system is also modeled after our own U.S. system of representation by general election. Each county or area is subdivided to ensure adequate representation of the agriculture community and three to five elected members serve on these locally elected committees.

Included in their responsibility of accountability and oversight, the committee's also are responsible for hiring FSA Executive Directors at the county level. These directors in turn hire local office program technicians who work in the county offices. Each county office staff is responsible for issuing millions of dollars in Federal funds for over 30 different agriculture related programs. However, unlike other government agencies administered out of Washington D.C., these FSA County Committees provide local input and control, to ensure taxpayers their dollars are wisely spent, while also insuring the integrity of the programs among the local farming community. In addition, they provide a forum for hearing the needs of the local agricultural communities, serve as the first level of review authority for appeals, and provide Washington D.C. a continued stream of information and experience in the delivery of farm programs.

As a result, the agency for which this unique system was developed, (AAA, ASC, ASCS and now the FSA) have been known for many, many years as the "Can do Agency". Their ability to implement Federal programs quickly and efficiently via the County Committee and County office system of government is somewhat of an anomaly when it comes to Federal programs. Just as Henry Wallace said when this system of government was formed in 1933, it has been a true example of grassroots democracy which is defined by Webster as: a tendency towards designing political processes where as much decision-making authority as practical is shifted to the organization's lowest geographic level of organization. (2) This example was also a perfect fit for what Abraham Lincoln envisioned when the USDA was formed back in 1862. Lincoln referred to the agency as the "People's Department" (3) and has been credited with coining the phrase, Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

In spite of the success of the FSA County Committee system, there appears to be a growing number of critics within the Federal bureaucracy and even a small but very vocal number of groups in the private sector who are calling for the watering down or possibly elimination of this system. Why would a government system that appears to be a perfect model for government be under attack when so many Americans seem to want more systems like the County Committee system? Could it be an issue of control?

Over the past few years class action lawsuits and settlements have abounded against the USDA. These have included the Pigford lawsuit, the Pigford II lawsuit, the Hispanic and Women's lawsuit and the Keepseagle lawsuits. In each of these lawsuits USDA has admitted wrong doing and discrimination. In many cases the locally elected committees were blamed for discrimination. However, over 95% of all allegations brought forth in these lawsuits involved the former Farmers Home Administration and discrimination cases resulting from farm loans. Since the FSA County Committee system has never had authority over farm loans, it is evident misrepresentation of the facts has resulted in unfair criticism of the system of government which provides the most local control.

(see exhibit 1 for a more detailed explanation of this issue).

In addition to these lawsuits, a recent USDA study (the Jackson Lewis study) which cost the Department \$6 million in taxpayers' funds has brought forth recommendations that the FSA County Committee's should be stripped of their local control and become figure head committee's without direct supervision and authority. According to this study the control of these county elected committee's should be put back in the hands of the bureaucracy which they assert would eliminate unfair discrimination. This report also recommends these committees be retained, but be appointed rather than elected. This recommendation makes the assumption honest, hard working, American farmers and ranchers are incapable of nominating and electing their peers to lead local farm policy. Moving from a democratically elected committee system into an appointed system of bureaucrats is exactly what some would like to see within the Federal departments. However, if these recommendations are followed one of the last forms of local Federal control and true democracy would be eliminated within USDA.

As the Administration and our Congress move forward with many proposed changes, the American people would be well served if the FSA County Committee model of grassroots control of the Federal bureaucracy were put forth as a model for all future government agencies. Rather than trying to find ways to eliminate a system such as this, USDA should be trying to find ways to model this system among all Federal agencies. Just imagine a Federal government with a goal of decentralization of administrative work, becoming thoroughly democratic in form and spirit, and promoting true democracy. The Farm Service Agency County Committee system is one such system of government.

(1) – 1934 Year Book of Agriculture

(2) – Webster Online Dictionary

(3) – USDA website

Exhibit 1 to “A Grassroots Government Success Story - FSA County Committees”

In the mid 1990’s USDA reorganized. The Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) and the Agriculture Stabilization Conservation Service were both eliminated and merged into a single agency, the Farm Service Agency (FSA). However, the employees of the former ASCS were under the county office system with local control while the employees of FmHA were under the Federal employment system with no local control. Under the Federal system employees are responsible for loan making. The line of authority moves down from Washington D.C. through state offices, district directors and county farm loan managers and the locally elected FSA committees have no oversight or control over these employees. Conversely the County office system is responsible for all of the farm programs. The County office employees are responsible for all program functions of the FSA and serve under the locally elected County Committees who have supervisory review and program review responsibilities. The line of authority moves downward from Washington D.C. to State offices and upward from County Committee’s with local hiring authority and program oversight. District Directors

serve as liaisons between the locally elected committee's and the Federal bureaucracy

Shortly after reorganization of FmHA and ASCS into the Farm Service Agency, discrimination lawsuits were filed against the new FSA for alleged discriminatory lending practices of the former FmHA. False allegations have tied these discrimination cases to the locally elected FSA committee's when in fact these FSA farmer elected County Committees had nothing to do with loan making.

In recent years, there have been 3 major class action lawsuits settlement actions: Pigford II, Keepseagle, and the Women and Hispanic farmers and ranchers lawsuit. All three were based on the same issue of discriminatory lending from the former FmHA. How absurd it is to make a recommendation to return to the same old system of the former FmHA in which the County Boards were appointed and the County Office personnel were selected by the State FmHA Director. This is the same system that led to the discriminatory lending practices that the class action lawsuit settlements came from.

To conclude, the farmer elected County Committees system has worked very well for almost 80 years. This system has played a major role in the stability of the nation's agriculture sector. Instead of trying to end or change it, maybe the rest of government should look more like it. The County Committee system is grass roots common sense government at its best.