



# National Association of Farmer Elected Committees

Representing Farm Service Agency County Committee Members since 1965

## NAFEC's Farm Bill Recommendations

The National Association of Farmer Elected Committees (NAFEC) represents locally elected committee members in every state and county in the nation. Since the 1930's, the Farm Service Agency and its forerunners (AAA, ASC, ASCS, etc.) have worked tirelessly to deliver farm programs at the local level to support American farmers and ranchers. Beginning with Abraham Lincoln's establishment of the USDA in the 1860's, and continuing with FDR's establishment of the Agriculture Adjustment Administration in the 1930's, bipartisan farm policy supported by our Agriculture organizations and legislated by Congress, have made American Agriculture one of the greatest success stories in our country's history.

A couple of years ago, Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, established the Equity Commission which began reviewing issues within USDA that would prevent fair and equitable administration of USDA programs. Even though members of the Equity Commission have acknowledged that the Committee system works for almost all production agriculture (Equity Commission Public Meeting, September 21-22, 2023, page 30 of minutes), some members of the Equity Commission have focused on trying to discredit the locally elected system of County Committees (COC's), by describing it as a system of corruption and favoritism. As the Association that represents all committee members since 1965, members of whom serve on every type of agriculture commodity group, livestock association, and agricultural cooperatives across the nation, the National Association of Farmer Elected Committees (NAFEC) is seriously concerned about these allegations and would like to address some of these concerns and provide suggestions as the next Farm Bill is being developed.

**Accountability:** NAFEC does not support a change in law giving the District Director (DD) the ability to do the hiring and/or be the direct supervisor of the County Executive Director (CED). NAFEC believes that the hiring of the CED by the DD, who is supervised by a politically appointed State Executive Director (SED), could interject politics into our local FSA offices. NAFEC feels this will lead to a potential situation as previously existed under the former FmHA structure. The COC should remain as the hiring authority for the CED in the county, and continue to supervise the CED. The DD should remain as the liaison between the State Committee (STC) and the COC, while acting as a resource to the CED and COC, but not as supervisor. NAFEC asserts that the CED and his/her staff is more accountable under the current system, since they have oversight at the local level by the COC, and also accountability to the Federal government as employees of a unique class of Federal employees (County Office or CO). One of the primary reasons the Farm Service Agency has been considered the "Can Do Agency" within USDA is this unique system, which provides the best of both the federal government and local agriculture, with local input and control. Moving away from this democratic system would be the worst thing that could be done for the sake of equity and oversight.

NAFEC believes that USDA has already established rules and procedures that work to monitor and ensure that there is a diverse minority representation on COC's. NAFEC stands ready to work with FSA and the Secretary of Agriculture to address any future issues, where this is not adequate. NAFEC supports transparent release of election reports and contact information to the public. The reports should include demographic information of the county and the members of the county farm population.

NAFEC recommends that the FSA Administrator be made available to all members of the COC's to encourage open dialog on issues that the COC's are facing. If all COC members have access to the FSA Administrator, this may increase the sense of pride and knowledge regarding the importance of participating in such an important grass roots agriculture system within Government. NAFEC also recommends an appeal process be established within FSA, to be used when disputes occur between local COC's and STC's.

NAFEC believes that reviews with the COC's and assessments may be necessary, but we are concerned about who would conduct the assessment, and how the metrics would be determined. The report of the Commission states that they believe that the current role of the COC already creates disparities for women and black,



indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) farmers and reform of the system is needed. This view is concerning for NAFEC, as many of the claims related to past were issues from the former Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), not the current FSA elected COC's. There needs to be an educational process to go through which explains the actual rights and responsibilities of the COC. NAFEC does not support creating a reporting system that establishes metrics or reports that ultimately creates quotas on decisions and program policy. The programs should be equitable and available for all producers.

Currently the CED is prohibited by regulations from providing any financial records to the COC in regard to any FSA loans. NAFEC is on record with written comments provided to the Equity Commission that dispel this misunderstanding of the Equity Commission. However, some programs do require the submission of sensitive documentation for program participation and eligibility requirements. NAFEC supports this structure and the approval process by local COC's to maintain program integrity. NAFEC does not believe their only role and focus should be as an advisory committee on local community needs. NAFEC believes that the COC role is to help maintain the integrity of farm programs and to do so in an equitable manner as the representative for all farmers and ranchers in the county.

**Representation:** NAFEC has long supported and suggested that the COC Minority Advisors be full voting members and appointed to a 3-year term. NAFEC recommends one minority advisor be appointed for each unique minority population in the county. Advisors would only be appointed if the county population consists of minority farmers and ranchers that are not already represented as a regular member on the COC.

NAFEC believes that changes could be made to increase awareness of the COC election process. Tribal Governments, Community Based Organizations, 1890 and 1994 Land Grant Institutions, Hispanic Serving Agricultural College or Universities, Ag Organizations, media and other stakeholders should be involved with the outreach process to help educate, notify, and nominate farmers and ranchers of a county, during the COC nomination and election period. However, NAFEC does not support any changes to the eligibility of the COC election process.

**Training:** On several occasions NAFEC has asked FSA Administrations for annual training, with appeals process and diversity training included for all newly elected COC members and Minority Advisors. However, this training has not been provided as requested. It is recommended that this annual type of training be included in Farm Bill Legislation. State Executive Directors (SED's) should be held accountable to the FSA Administrator and a report provided annually to the Secretary of Agriculture to ensure actual training has occurred. Training should be a nationally approved mandatory training that is uniform for all states.

**Summary:** NAFEC acknowledges that periodic review is always needed for every system within government. However, some of the information that has been put forth, and the recommendations being made, are not within the mainline view of the agriculture communities COC's live in and represent. Locally elected committees have a viable role in oversight of farm programs to ensure local practices, customs, and methods are considered. Locally elected committees also provide an extra level of accountability to both taxpayers, regarding the payment of federal dollars, and for employees of USDA to ensure programs are offered in every county, in every state of the nation. Your support in ensuring the continuation of locally elected, diverse FSA County Committees, with full authority under current law, is the desire among an overwhelming majority of agriculture producers and stakeholders all across the nation. NAFEC looks forward to working with Congress, USDA, and FSA as we move forward with the new farm bill.