



# National Association of Farmer Elected Committees

Representing Farm Service Agency County Committee Members since 1965

December 2023

Dear Honorable Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman, Honorable House Agriculture Committee Chairman, and all Agriculture Committee Members of the US Senate & US House of Representatives:

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 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 the Biden Administration's Equity Commission began reviewing issues within USDA that would prevent fair and equitable administration of USDA programs. Even though members of the Equity Commission has acknowledge that the Committee system works for 90% of all production agriculture (Equity Commission Public Meeting, September 21-22, 2023, page 30 of minutes, member Rainey comments) some members of the Equity Commission have focused on trying to discredit the locally elected system of County Committees, 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) would like to address some of these concerns and provide some suggestions as the next Farm Bill is being developed.

First and foremost, NAFEC supports the fair and equitable treatment of all farmers and ranchers, both men and women, of every race in the nation. We believe there is no room for favoritism, discrimination, or the "good ol boy" system in any USDA programs. We are committed to assist Congress and the Administration in ensuring fair and equitable treatment for all producers. However, we also believe that some of the concerns raised by the Equity Commission are an unfair misrepresentation of the facts that need to be revisited.

One of the primary issues at USDA over the past decades has been discrimination complaints under the agriculture lending programs. Most of these allegations and lawsuits made against USDA were found to be decisions made by the former Farmer Home Administration (FmHA) committees that were not democratically elected. (Noted in Pigford vs Glickman, Keepseagle vs Vilsack and Garcia vs Vilsack). We would also note that the current elected FSA County Committee members have no involvement in the Farm Loan Programs of the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The farm operating and ownership loans are received, reviewed, and approved by Farm Loan Teams of General Service (GS) staff. The ASCS Committees (formerly) and now FSA Committees which we represent, are and have always been, democratically elected committees. Moving back to a system of appointed committees, as existed under the old FmHA, would be a step backward to the very system in which most of the issues began.

On the contrary, we believe the success of the farm policy has been predicated upon a system mirroring our own democracy. Having local elections of committee members is as basic as Congress itself. As Henry Wallace wrote to FDR in 1934, "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)

Some of the individuals favoring appointed committees, have also suggested that local FSA County Executive Directors not be under the supervision of FSA County Committees, but rather be regular (GS) employees. Currently FSA employees are Federal employees who are under a County Office (CO) appointment rather than a (GS) appointment. This system allows both local accountabilities, as well as federal oversight at the state level by an appointed State Executive Director. We believe eliminating locally elected County Committees as the supervisor of FSA County Executive Directors would be a step backward. Currently the County Committee system is responsive to their clientele because they have local accountability. With no local control over supervisors, FSA would become like many of the other bureaucratic agencies that answer only to a federal employee. Having locally elected committees who supervise local FSA Executive Directors who in turn hire local staff, has been one of the primary reasons the Farm Service Agency has been considered the “Can Do Agency” within government. No other agency has the track record of delivering Federal programs like FSA. Much of this success is attributable to the unique system of legislated Farm policy by a Federal Agency but with local grassroots control. This system/partnership should be a model for all of government, rather than a model that needs to be dismantled.

Another of the concerns previously brought forth to USDA was the need for minority representation on the elected Committees. Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill gave the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to appoint voting members to County Committees that were not diversified. NAFEC worked with FSA and USDA to develop the regulations to implement the authority for the Secretary to appoint voting minority members to the committees, where needed. This year there were approximately 90 of these minority appointments made. However, there still remain over 200 minority advisors without voting rights serving one-year appointments on local committees. NAFEC would like to go on record in full support of a change in law to allow these minority appointed members of the local FSA County Committees the authority as full voting members. We also believe these appointments should be extended from one-year appointments to three-year appointments, thus mirroring the current three-year term of elected committee members.

NAFEC acknowledges that review is always needed for every system within government. However, some of the information being put forth and the recommendations being made are not within the mainline view of our agriculture communities of whom we represent every sector. 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 your committee, USDA and FSA as we move forward with the new farm bill.

Sincerely,

Jim Zumbrink  
NAFEC President

(1) 1934 Yearbook of Agriculture