



National Association of Farmer Elected Committees

Representing Farm Service Agency County Committee Members since 1965

Dear Legislators & Agriculture Organizations:

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. With Abraham Lincoln's establishment of USDA and FDR's establishment of the Agriculture Adjustment Administration, bipartisan farm policy supported by our Agriculture organizations and legislated by Congress, have made the success of American Agriculture one of the greatest success stories in our country's history. The method of delivery with locally elected County Control associations, (now called County Committees) have also been vital in providing grass roots control and accountability at the local level.

Two years ago the Biden Administration's Equity Commission began reviewing issues within USDA that would prevent fair and equitable administration of USDA programs. According to the FSA Administrator (1) the FSA County Committees have been the "Elephant in the Room" for the Equity Commission hearings. Much of the focus of the Commission has been to undermine the locally elected system of committees as a system of corruption and favoritism. As the Association that has represented over 9,000 committee members and advisors since 1965, the National Association of Farmer Elected Committees (NAFEC) would like to go on record and address some of these issues and concerns as the next Farm Bill is under development.

Before addressing the Equity Commission concerns, NAFEC would like to assert our concern for fair and equitable treatment of all farmer 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 commission and USDA employees regarding the committee system is unfair misrepresentation of the facts. These are addressed below.

One of the primary issues over the past decades has been discrimination in the lending practices within USDA. A high percentage of past lawsuit claims made against USDA were found to be decisions made by the former FMHA committees that were not democratically elected. (Noted in *Pigford vs Glickman*, *Keepseagle vs Vilsack* and *Garcia vs Vilsack*)

Another issue brought up by the commission involves the inability of many small farmers and ranchers to participate in many of the FSA programs. As many of these programs are legislated by Congress with guidelines established in law, FSA has no ability to add producers to the programs if they do not meet the eligibility criteria for the program.

In addition to general FSA programs discussed above, the commission has been very critical of county committees establishing crop bases that are inequitable, omitting many small and minority producers in such establishment. As you are aware the establishment of crop bases is established by law under farm bill policy. While the County Committees have had review authority to ensure producers wishing to establish bases have in fact met the requirements of the law, the local FSA Committees have no ability to arbitrarily establish bases under local criteria nor to deny the establishment of crop bases when the criteria as established by law, are met. If there is an issue with crop bases we suggest that Agriculture organizations work with the House and Senate Ag Committee to present a plan to address the concerns of the commission in establishing bases for the upcoming farm bill.

The County Committee System of FSA:
True Democracy at the grassroots level in the People's Department



The commission has also been very critical of locally elected committees. Several presentations and discussions have been made to establish committees that are appointed rather than elected. NAFEC believes 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 FDA 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.” (2) Some of the individuals favoring appointed committees, have also suggested that local FSA directors not be under the supervision of local elected committees but rather be regular GS employees. We believe eliminating local committees as the supervisor of FSA directors would be huge step backward. Currently the county committee system is responsive to their clientele because they have local accountability to committees. With no local control over supervisors, we believe FSA could become like many of the other bureaucratic agencies that answer to no one. Having local elected committees who supervise local FSA directors who in turn hire local staffs has been 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 grass roots control. We believe this system/partnership should be a model for all of government, rather than a model that needs to be dismantled.

Finally, NAFEC would like to point out that the FSA Administration has indicated during the hearings of the commission that additional training of committees is needed. NAFEC has repeatedly ask the Administration to provide more face to face training of committees. We have also offered to assist in this training if funding were provided. However, many of these request have either denied or ignored. Over the past twenty years County Committee training has gone from statewide meetings (sometimes multiple days of meetings) where committees were educated, trained and provided case studies to review, to currently having a short conference call where a District Director might provide a very limited amount of training. NAFEC believes good, face to face education and training is the best way to ensure fair and equitable programs in every county across the nation and stands ready and willing to assist in this endeavor or to discuss what this might look like. As the next Farm Bill is being considered NAFEC would encourage all of the agriculture organizations and Congress to find ways to make ensure FSA committees have a large role in delivering farm programs locally. We stand committed to assist and would be more than willing to provide testimony or suggestions on any of these issues we have examined in this letter. Thank you for your support of American Agriculture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jim Zumbund".

(1) – Equity Commission hearings 6/27/2023

(2) – 1934 Yearbook of Agriculture