

STATEMENT
OF
MR. JOHN LOHR
NASCOE
VICE PRESIDENT
NORVELT, PENNSYLVANIA
BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, CREDIT, ENERGY AND
RESEARCH

JULY 1, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is John Lohr, and I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your committee today.

I was born and raised on our family's dairy farm in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. I have worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency and its predecessor the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) for my entire adult life, beginning as a part-time ASCS field assistant after high school in 1968. Since 1978, I have been the Farm Service Agency County Executive Director in my home county and today also cover Fayette County from a consolidated office in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. I am here today representing the National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees (NASCOE). I am pleased that our national President, Mr. Myron Stroup of Kansas, is also here today.

The National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees (NASCOE) is an organization that represents the county level employees of the Farm Service Agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). NASCOE was originally chartered in 1959. FSA employees are in contact with virtually every producer in the United States, and NASCOE is proud to represent all county office employees, 85% of whom are association members.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, we are here today because we believe that the USDA can administer and deliver conservation programs in a more effective and efficient manner. With today's federal budget situation, federal employees will continue to be required to do more with less for the near future. Natural Resource and Conservation

Service employees in the field serve American agriculture well, but what has become increasingly evident to Farm Service Agency (FSA) county office employees is that there are many workload duplications by FSA and NRCS field staff. NASCOE members at the field office level regularly relate to us that NRCS employees indicate they prefer to work at what they do best, the technical field work, and that FSA is better equipped and ready to handle conservation program administration.

Please recall that before the USDA reorganization in the mid 1990's, FSA's predecessor, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), administered all USDA's conservation programs. In fact, the root of the county committee system is centered on the administration of conservation programs created by the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. Today FSA staff and locally elected county committees are still responsible for the largest USDA conservation initiatives, the Conservation Reserve Program and the Emergency Conservation Program.

This morning I will explain just a few of the reasons why having FSA administer conservation programs makes sense for producers and ranchers as well as the American taxpayer.

With regard to program eligibility, both FSA and NRCS use the same forms. It is redundant to have both agencies gather the eligibility information. FSA is required to load all the data and maintain the forms. FSA already keeps farm and producer eligibility records for both agencies. FSA field office personnel have experience and training in completing eligibility forms so it is more cost-effective for FSA to be the office to initiate the application and

determine eligibility. In addition, it is much more efficient to have eligibility completed prior to the applicant's discussion with NRCS on the technical practice determinations.

As for processing the application, FSA maintains all records pertaining to the farm or ranch. FSA county office staff creates and updates farm records, the Common Land Unit, acreage reports, etc. If FSA has the responsibility for conservation administration, producers would visit the FSA office to initiate the conservation program application and have access to their farm's data. At present, either the producer or an NRCS employee makes numerous visits and inquiries to the FSA county office to gather and/or update the data to complete the application. Allowing the FSA office to handle the application process would save time and eliminate confusion for both the producer and the office staff.

FSA has extensive experience issuing payments and has the software training to make the payments in a timely manner. The availability of all eligibility, producer and farm records in one location allows for faster and easier resolutions when payment issuance problems arise.

Since it is necessary for the NRCS staff to make frequent farm or ranch visits, their office is unattended on many occasions. Each business day, every FSA office is continuously staffed to serve program applicants. Allowing the FSA to administer conservation programs would eliminate frustration when producers make trips or initiate phone calls to the NRCS office only to find no one available to assist them.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) currently allows the FSA office to take the application, determine payment eligibility, generate and approve the contract, and make cost share and annual rental payments with NRCS making technical determinations. The success of

the CRP demonstrates that NRCS and FSA can work well together with FSA handling the program administration and with NRCS responsible for the technical aspects of programs.

Our proposal, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, allows USDA to do more work without additional resources. If FSA is responsible for conservation administration, NRCS staff will have more time to spend with farmers and ranchers educating them about conservation programs and assuring the programs work as Congress intended.

Under the NASCOE proposal today, all phases of conservation programs defined as administrative, applications, contract maintenance, payments, etc., would be the responsibility of FSA. NRCS would be responsible for all phases of conservation programs defined as technical, i.e., conservation plan development, on-site determinations and contract compliance.

These assignments allow each agency to utilize their abilities and resources in the most efficient and productive manner. FSA has consistently been able to deliver farm programs with a low average administrative cost. FSA would bring this same level of delivery cost and efficiency to conservation program administration.

Both FSA and NRCS are in the process of upgrading their technology and business processes, FSA through the Modernize and Innovate the Delivery of Agricultural Systems (MIDAS) project and NRCS through the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative. Having FSA administer conservation programs would go a long way towards assisting NRCS in reaching its Streamlining Initiative goals of reducing field staff administrative workloads by 80%. It would also enable their field staff to reach the goal of spending 75% of their time in the field

providing conservation assistance to farmers and ranchers. NRCS has indicated concern with the administrative burden on field office technical staff from expanded roles for contract development and management. NRCS's Streamlining Initiative encourages a move to a "natural resource centric view" concentrating on identifying and solving resource problems and moving away from a "financial assistance centric view."

The NRCS Streamlining Initiative highlighted as one of its top objectives the implementation of programs through alternative staffing and delivery approaches designed around more efficient business processes to minimize the non-technical workload on field staff.

Now is the time to make the IT changes to enhance FSA's administrative and NRCS's technical capabilities .For example, FSA and NRCS use different GIS software programs, ArcGIS and Toolkit, respectively. This is not practical. It is extremely inefficient to develop and maintain two USDA systems to administer farm and conservation programs. We can no longer afford these inefficiencies.

In summary, NASCOE supports FSA being responsible for all conservation program administration. We believe that allowing NRCS field personnel more time for producer technical assistance and program education will assure that federal agricultural programs will be more cost efficient and provide a better USDA service to our farmers and ranchers. Finally, with our current budget situation, allowing FSA to administer these programs assures the American taxpayer that USDA is being the best steward possible with the funds we have been entrusted.

Thank you for allowing me to present testimony today.

Biographical Sketch
Of
John R. Lohr
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- **Representing the National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees (NASCOE). Currently serving as NASCOE's Vice President.**
- **As the Farm Service Agency (FSA) County Executive Director in the Greensburg, Pennsylvania, Service Center since 1978, I have been responsible for the administration and delivery of all USDA conservation programs assigned to FSA.**
- **Have received extensive in-service training in both conservation program administration and conservation plan development.**
- **As NASCOE Vice President, I am in a position to represent all FSA county office employees and solicit their input on conservation program administration.**
- **Born and raised on a dairy farm in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.**
- **In 2008, enrolled our family's farm in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.**

Committee on Agriculture

U.S. House of Representatives

Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2006.

Name: John R. Lohr

Address: PO Box 59, Norvelt, Pennsylvania 15674

Telephone: 724-423-5834

Organization you represent (if any): _____

National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2006, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: None Amount: _____

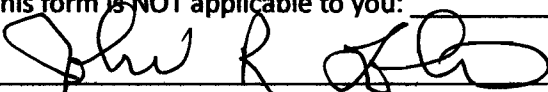
Source: _____ Amount: _____

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2006, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: None Amount: _____

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: _____

Signature: 

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.