

# Farm Service Agency County Committees

## Valuable Input from Actual Producers

The USDA Equity Commission is considering restructuring the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) county office committee (COC) make-up and its current authorities. For production agriculture, this decision could negatively impact local producers and the timely delivery of farm programs.

FSA's county committee system was established in 1935 for the purpose of overseeing farm programs and providing consideration of administrative appeals. In 1994, Congress reorganized the Department of Agriculture and established today's Farm Service Agency. The 2002 Farm Bill included provisions increasing transparency and accountability of county committee elections and requiring participation from socially disadvantaged (SDA) farmers in county committees and USDA programs. The 2018 Farm Bill established a pilot program to operate county committees in urban and suburban areas.

County committees are responsible for production and price support as well as certain conservation and livestock programs. The elected county committee men and women are responsible for informing FSA state committees and other FSA officials regarding improvements to farm programs based on local growing conditions. County committees must ensure that County Office operations remain farmer-focused while providing quality customer service.

County committee nominees may be nominated by eligible voters or community-based organizations representing socially disadvantaged farmers. The 2002 Farm Bill also authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to appoint one additional SDA committee member to achieve fair representation in a county committee jurisdiction.

### **Duties of the County Committee:**

- ✓ Serve under general supervision of the FSA State Committee;
- ✓ Employ a qualified County Executive Director (CED);
- ✓ Meet regularly to make policy decisions and act on cases involving individual farmers;
- ✓ Carry out an effective outreach plan reaching all stakeholders;
- ✓ Make program policy and administration recommendations to FSA state committees; and
- ✓ Conduct hearings and reviews as requested by the state committees.

**What is an FSA county committee?** Every FSA office in the country is required by law to have an advisory board consisting of local farmers and ranchers. Members of the board (called a county committee) are elected by their peers (local farmers and landowners) in the fall of every year. County committees impact the administration of the Farm Service Agency (FSA) within a community. They help make determinations on programs such as disaster assistance, and assist with hiring decisions and outreach. County committees also ensure the fair and equitable administration of FSA farm programs in their counties and are accountable to the Secretary of Agriculture.

**What kind of voice does a member have?** County committee decisions are made by consensus and committee members represent the priorities and voices of the diverse producers and all production types.

**What issues can they speak to?** County committees conduct hearings and reviews as requested by the state committee, ensure socially disadvantaged (SDA) farmers and ranchers are fairly represented, make recommendations to the state committee on existing programs, monitor changes in farm programs, and inform farmers of the purpose and provisions of FSA programs.

**What positions are there within a county committee?** Committees have a chair, vice chair, voting member, minority non-voting advisor, and if applicable, an appointed voting SDA member. The positions are voted on among the current COC members at the organizational meeting held each January.

**What is the history of county committees?** Congress authorized the county committees in the 1930s to allow for grassroots input and local administration of “Agricultural Adjustment Administration” programs.

**What is the time commitment?** Committees hold meetings monthly and last approximately two to three hours, depending on the number of materials that need to be reviewed. Meetings will not be held if there is not sufficient business to address on any given month. If impromptu work or pressing issues arise between meetings, a conference call can be held instead of a physical meeting.

**How long are the terms?** Three years – A limit of three terms for a total of nine consecutive years.

**What are the differences between elected and appointed COC members?** Both positions require a nomination form, but the elected member is voted in by the winning number of votes tallied in their county. An appointed member is selected by the Secretary of Agriculture to represent the underserved in that county. Both positions are voting members.

**What is the incentive? What kind of benefits or compensation do COC members receive?** Committee members get reimbursed for travel to and from committee meetings. Committee members also receive a stipend for their time.

**What types of rules must they follow?** Although COC members are not federal employees, they are still required to obey some of the same rules that apply to federal and county employees. For example, COC members complete security and ethics training. They are also subject to some of the guidelines outlined in FSA Handbook 22-PM, which can be accessed online at: [https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/22-pm.pdf](https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/22-pm.pdf)

**How do COC’s affect decisions for Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) or Rural Development (RD)?** COCs approve cost-share rates used in conservation programs in conjunction with NRCS. COCs also approve eligibility, which may affect NRCS program payments and producer eligibility.

## MYTH VS FACT

**Myth** – FSA’s county committees have farm program loan approval.

**Fact** – FSA’s county committees do not have farm program loan approval. Farm ownership, operating, and conservation loans are available under the Guaranteed Loan Program. Farm ownership, operating, emergency, and conservation loans are available under the Direct Loan Program.

**Myth** – The county committee determines base acre calculations.

**Fact** – A farm’s base acreage represents the tract of land’s historical planted acreage of the covered commodity and is used to calculate certain government payments. The Farm Bill, over multiple years, has directed the Department of Agriculture to allow individual farmers the opportunity to update base acres and add oilseed crops.

**Myth** – County committee men and women are only elected by local farmers and ranchers.

**Fact** – The Secretary of Agriculture has the authority to appoint county committee men and women to represent local farmers and ranchers. It is important for local producers to be represented and help ensure accountability and transparency for farm programs.

## Farm Service Agency Organizational Structure

