

National Association of County Office Employees  
Midwest Area Rally  
April 28, 2023, Grand Rapids, Michigan

The Midwest Area (MWA) Rally was held in Grand Rapids, Michigan on Friday, April 28<sup>th</sup> at the Holiday Inn Grand Rapids – Airport. Opening comments and introduction began the meeting. Christie Salenbien, Acting State Executive Director (SED), provided opening remarks for the Rally. She provided a little background on her career with the Farm Service Agency (FSA). She began 13 years ago as a County Operations Trainee (COT) and is currently a District Director. As a County Office employee, she was involved in MASCOE and built relationships. She stated that MASCOE invested in her and continues to do so.

The meeting continued with speakers who addressed the convention emphasizing that there is real value in connecting with each other and investing in each other as we serve American agriculture and our producers.

Dr. Tim Boring, Director of Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development, addressed the convention first. He stated it is the government's responsibility to be engaged in preservation of the environment and to provide a healthy environment to grow up in. Having a healthy environment will allow our Nation to have a diverse agricultural system with a wide variety of agricultural products available to our population. He stressed the interrelatedness of rural agriculture with urban agriculture. Both types of "farming" establish a relationship between consumer and farmer – a mindfulness that leads to protection of the environment, a diverse rural economy and food security in urban areas.



*Dr. Tim Boring, Director of MI Dept. of Ag & RD.*

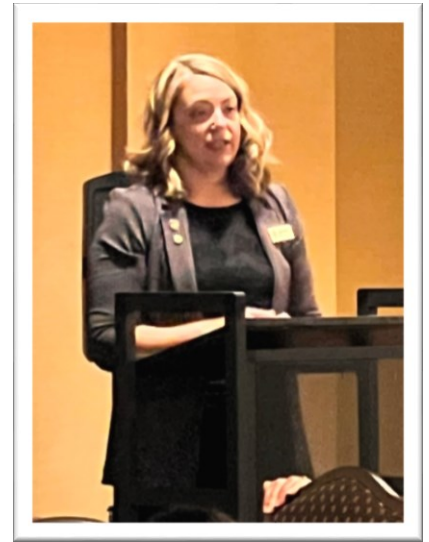
Dr. Boring pointed out that the corporate structure of food production does not keep money in the local economy. For instance, when wheat is harvested, it may be sent to China instead of being taken to the local flour mill to be used in the American food supply. Covid-19 showed us how fragile the food chain has become. This type of food production does not promote economic diversity in rural communities and upward mobility for the next generation.

Dr. Boring maintains resilience in the rural economy is achieved when leadership reaches out to the bigger vision of how food is produced and who benefits from food production. The Farm Service Agency is an example of good governance. We implements programs stressing conservation to keep water on the landscape and build up soil viability which may in the long run lower crop insurance payments. The agency distributes money to a diverse population who spends their money in the local economy.

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He stated we suffer from economic mobility. There is a lack of diverse local businesses in rural communities and we need to set economic parameters to allow for economic upward mobility. Investing in basic infrastructure for rural communities such as broadband internet helps tie everything together to have a stronger agricultural system. He has heard the comments that the government is too big and spends too much money. He stated our investments need to be purposeful and have thought behind them, not just spending money.

Zach Ducheneaux, FSA Administrator, addressed the convention via Microsoft Teams. He thanked us for our work on the frontline of democracy as we represent all our stakeholders and defend our membership in public service. He noted our salary schedule is not competitive, and a work group has been assembled to study the problem to develop solutions to present to Congress. For the time being, we can let them know what can be done to make our jobs easier.



*Kayla Mattson, MWA Executive*

Administrator Ducheneaux took the time to field questions from the floor.

- 1) FSA is supposed to have access to the Rosetta Stone language software. The question was asked as to where we are with that access? The Administrator stated he will look into that, but we will have to use it as much as we do Receipt for Service. This was a nice way of saying that we need to do better on completing Receipt for Services.
- 2) The question was asked about our agency having a presence on social media platforms to promote job vacancies as well as program news and deadlines? Looking into this.
- 3) Questions were asked about the Emergency Grain Storage Facility Assistance Program (EGSFP) and if any clearer direction was going to be provided? Producers don't know what to do and don't want to complete the requirements with unclear requirements. The Administrator said there was a high demand for the program and that there are not enough resources. They need to make sure that the program is addressing the needs as authorized by the Secretary and determine parameters.
- 4) It was asked if there are thoughts of County Office's having a cell phone to assist with customer service? Sometimes with service outages, a cell phone would still make FSA available to customers. A cell phone would provide additional means to communicate with customers. The Administrator will look into the potential for cell phones as we need to be available for our customers. He also stated to let him know if we go two days without phone or internet service.

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- 5) The drawbacks of using USA Jobs were brought up and the question if there are other avenues being considered to help reach potential employees as well as if a better application process would be developed.

Next, Marcus Graham, Deputy Administrator of Field Operations (DAFO), addressed the group. Mr. Graham was also here to visit the Michigan State Office. He addressed that staffing is a big issue and also recognized the FSA salary table has not be updated since the 1990's and needs to reflect the skills needed to implement farm programs. He noted the agency is hiring a new generation of workers concerned about paying rent and not so much about health care and long-term retirement. Mr. Graham supports using incentives within fiscal authority to recruit and retain staff such as monetary hiring incentives and student loan forgiveness. He noted that the CED classification has moved from a grade 11 to a grade 12 for full performance. This bridges the gap for CED's to apply for District Director (GS 13) positions.



*Marcus Graham, DAFO*

Mr. Graham spoke about other factors that would help recruit and retain staff. Making the working environment attractive by offering awards and recognizing employees for their contributions if the money is available and refreshing outdated laptops and investing in modernizing our tools such as with the Kiosk pilot. Also, jump teams are an empowering tool for employees with extensive program knowledge.

An urban agriculture program is being funded through DAFO to provide food security in urban areas. This system will not divert funds from rural agriculture. The system will have CED's, PTs, and a COC system supporting food production in plots throughout a given urban area.

Kimberly Graham, Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs, provided a brief overview of the DAFP team. She also provided a brief update on some of the program activities happening. She stated that ERP Phase 1 went smoothly, largely due to the prefilled applications with RMA data. She said that 2022 ERP is ready to roll out. However, they do not like the low number of applicants ERP Phase 2. There is a little money left from ERP Phase 1 and they are deciding what to do with it, which is currently in clearance in Washington, D.C. She indicated there was a good increase in PARP applications, that Grasslands CRP signup began, and the General CRP signup ended and the offers are getting done in the next couple of weeks.

Finally, Kimberly Graham monitored the Question & Answer session between convention participants and Washington, D.C. staff. The following items were discussed.

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- 1) It was noted that the MWA staff ceilings were announced on Friday, April 21, 2023. Some MWA states lost staff, others gained staff. The question was asked when the unadjusted workload numbers would be released to determine staffing. It was said that the staff numbers are a concern because they are used to determine the amount of money appropriated to pay salaries and farm bill funding.
- 2) FSA continues to support NRCS participants in sign up activities. How are these activities accounted for in workload numbers? It was said that the NRCS activities are divided across all program areas.
- 3) There have been two notices posted describing how all records will be processed for retention in the future as the agency moves toward digital records. How will this record retention be completed? Will outside staff be hired to scan documents? Will office staff receive further training? It was said more information and training will be provided before the June 30, 2024, deadline.
- 4) The hiring process was discussed. It was announced that the question at the beginning of the job application that asks what the lowest grade level an applicant may apply for will be removed. Often candidates did not check 3-7 grade levels and their application would not make it out of the selection process. It was also said that supervisors may be able to promote an employee from grade 4 to 5 in 90 days instead of waiting a full year.
- 5) Employees are encouraged to use the new Employee Assistance Program called ESPRY, take part in Wellness Programs, and apply for the next Leadership training.
- 6) The struggles of the TERRA software was brought up. She explained that the TERRA platform is built upon the CITRIX software and that is the culprit with the issues in TERRA. She stated that they have been working on getting it on a different, cloud-based, portal. This was good news for County Offices!

Joel Foster, Vice President of NASCOE, spoke about the Equity Commission, which is a 15-member committee. NASCOE and NAFEC tried to get to get a seat on the committee, but were not successful. The committee was created to bring fair and equitable treatment to all. As far as the elimination of the County Committee

(COC) system, that was just a proposal. There were COC members that testified to the commission about the role of the COC. At the end of the day, Joel stated the February 2023



*Joel Foster, NASCOE Vice President*

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report was not as drastic as the media reports made it out to be. He encouraged membership to go to NASCOE website to view the Equity Commission's Equity report and note NASCOE's contribution to keeping the COC system in the next farm bill. He stated there is a recommendation to make the COC Advisor a voting member.

A common theme among many of the presenters was our pay scale. Joel commented that the department cannot ask Congress for more money. That must come through the President's budget. He stated we need to work with those that can get our funding increased. Joel, who is from South Dakota, stated that in South Dakota, 57% of employees have 10 years or less with the agency. He also stated that it would take \$25 million to make grade 7 employees a grade 8. He explained that GS employees are Title 5 positions which fall under the Executive Branch while CO employees are Title 7 positions which fall under the Secretary of Agriculture. CO employees have to ask for our benefits.

He remarked on the rollout of the NASCOE app, which is for members only. If you are a member and haven't gotten the emails about creating your account, please get a hold of someone. The member listing used when rolling out the app was an old list from December.

Joel provided an update on the Secretary of State merger that is in progress. Currently NASCOE is in the state of New York, which is not corporate friendly. NASCOE has hired an attorney to help with a merger to South Dakota, which is corporate friendly, to ensure NASCOE is current on everything needed so we can conduct our business through South Dakota. Every time our Secretary changes, there is paperwork that needs updating.

The merger must be voted on by the entire NASCOE membership. Each state will need to let Kayla know who their delegates to the NASCOE Convention in August as the voting will take place there. A vote by proxy will be used to ratify the merger as it was stated we won't get a quorum for voting. A proxy vote will allow one person to vote on behalf of Wisconsin. NASCOE is doing this to keep us legal and protect us as an association. More details will be forthcoming.



*Kayla promoting the NASCOE Convention*

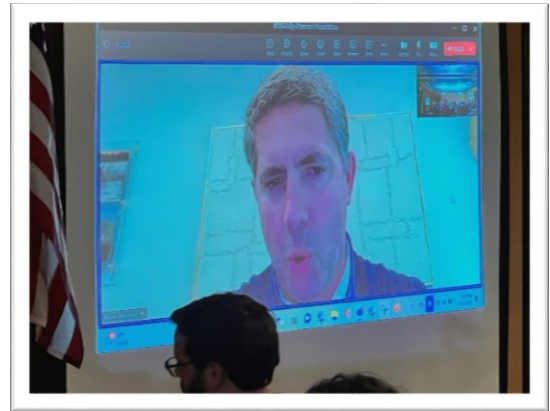
A Power Point was presented, promoting the 2023 NASCOE convention being held at the Texas A & M Conference Center in College Station, Texas on August 1-5, 2023. Registration, hotel accommodations, and transportation were discussed. Registration can be completed on the NASCOE app. The NASCOE Publicity Committee is accepting Convention Cash Club essays until May 14, 2023. A recipient from each area will be

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awarded a \$500 stipend to help offset the cost of attending the National Convention. It is available for first-time attendees.

We broke for a soup and salad luncheon held at the Holiday Inn. The Wisconsin delegates caught up with Justin Burchett. Justin was the CED in Eau Claire and Chippewa Counties before returning back to Michigan as a CED in the Allegan County Office.

After lunch, Hunter Moorhead, NASCOE Legislative Consultant, noted the lack of bipartisanship in Congress. He stated the debt limit will hit in June and appropriations are currently underway. There is an across-the-board 22% cut in spending for all of Congress. He anticipated the debt resolution will happen at the last-minute. The Farm Bill is in the hearing process, but until the budget is resolved, there is no clear pathway to set spending limits within the Farm Bill. This is why there is not a draft Farm Bill.



*Hunter Moorhead, NASCOE Legislative Consultant*

The Farm Bill will not be written until funding is appropriated. The House Resolution committee writes the Farm Bill legislation. It will be hard to get anything through Congress most like legislation will be attached to other bills. Diversity, equity inclusion, domestic conservation, and labor relations are the hot topics. Hunter said sometimes legislation is dependent on timing.

Hunter encouraged us to continue to support the legislative process by talking to your Congress people by using the NASCOE talking points and staying engaged with NASCOE. Hunter also stated the importance of membership as Congress notices when employees support our association. He stated any chance we get with legislative representatives and farm groups, we need to remind them of the pressures we are working under. He stated that there are many positive comments about NASCOE and what we do. The President of the Florida Farm Bureau stated the importance of staffing FSA office and supporting us.

Hunter made various points and comments such as Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture, is talking about a pay increase. He mentioned the importance of employee retention as there is value when a producer visits the office and there is experience in the office to assist them. He also mentioned in the President's budget request, they are looking at what would be needed to actually run the agency. He stated there are discussions on staffing and they realize retention is impossible with the current pay scale. Reclassification of PT's is being looked at also.

Randall Dufner, MWA National Association of District Directors (NADD) Director who works with DAFO and field offices, stated they support NASCOE negotiating to be able to promote grade 4

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and 5 employees without having to wait the current 52-week time-in-grade requirement. They are working on hiring and retention issues with ideas such as faster promotions.

Becky Zirpel, Vice President of National Association of Retired ASCS/FSA County Office Employees (RASCOE), stated that RASCOE is a great resource of people who lead the way. She informed the audience of the issues employees are facing going into retirement such as lengthy delays in the start of their annuities. It should take 90 days, but some are waiting over four months and some even longer than 14 months! When you visit your State Office to work on your retirement, you should get a complete copy of your retirement paperwork before leaving. She stated you should be getting 75%-80% of your annuity in the beginning. You should check everything before signing off on your paperwork. Some are only getting 16% of their annuity.

Tammy Eibey on behalf of the National Association of Farmer Elected Committees (NAFEC) stated that you should be aware of what NAFEC can do for you and that NAFEC can say things you as an employee cannot.

The Dillard Financial Solutions, Inc. team provided a retirement training presentation and lot of brochures and materials for retirement and their products. Blue Cross Blue Shield and the NASCOE emblems store showcased their products during the rally.

The following candidacy announcements for NASCOE positions were made:

- Joel Foster for NASCOE President
- Kayla Mattson for NASCOE Vice President
- Taylor Stucki for NASCOE Secretary
- Jessi Colgrove for NASCOE Treasurer
- Amy Morman for MWA Executive
- Janice Acree for MWA Alternate Executive

The afternoon continued with a team-building workshop with *The Comedy Project* from Grand Rapids (<http://www.thecomedyproject.com>). Joe and Kristin encouraged team-building and communication skills by demonstrating improvisational techniques.

Improvisation is an intuitive, coordinated, and spontaneous response to a dynamic environment. Improvisation gets people to:

- Generate ideas.
- Leverage the talent of others.
- Solve problems.
- Fosters support.
- Respond and adapt to change.



*The Comedy Project Team - Joe & Kristin*

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- Recognize success.
- Strengthen communication.

We had a rousing game of rock, paper, and scissors where the loser of each contest would have to then cheer on the winners with as much enthusiasm as possible as the contests continued until there was a grand champion, which was out of the comfort zone for many.

We practiced improvisation by using word games that made us think creatively. One such game was we all had to make a circle and then we would tell a story with each person saying only one word and building upon what just said. This forced everyone to have to pay attention and acknowledge others contributions to the story.

As the activities progressed, each of us in the group became more comfortable and that made it easier to take risks. If someone stumbled through an activity, Joe and Kristin were there supporting and acknowledging that it was ok and often related it to everyday situations.

We also played “Yes, and...” This is the basis of improvisation, the idea of saying yes to an idea and then building upon that idea. As we worked through the activity, we had to actively listen and focus. It was said that organizations that adopt this strategy are more inventive and have engaged employees who are better problem solvers. The best part of the whole experience taught was to have fun and incorporate play into the day.

At the end of the Rally, the scholarship auction was held. Due to the time constraints of a packed schedule, the hosts opted for a scholarship drawing than a typical auction. “Bids” were \$20 each. They would draw a winner for each item, but once that “bid” was drawn, it was removed so you couldn’t win more than one item per “bid.” The more “bids” one purchased, the more chances one had to win multiple items. All bids were entered for the ultimate prize which was the gift card basket which contained \$230 in gift cards. They estimated if each attendee purchased a “bid,” it was estimated they raised around \$800-\$1000 as there were approximately 40-50 attendees.

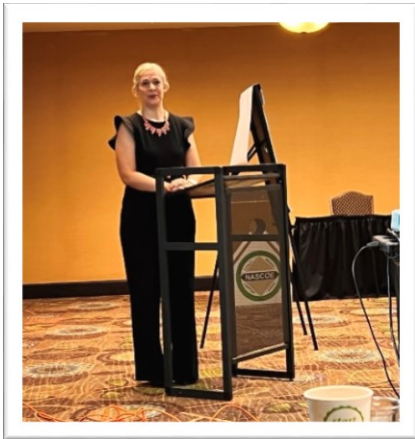
The hosts drew the winners of each item ahead of time and announced them at the end of the Rally. We figured the drawings were held in the order of most desirable prize as the first prize was your choice of one of four cornhole sets hand-made by Mitch Towne, CED of Genesee and Owasco Counties. The four cornhole games were very extremely well made. The first was designed with the USDA logo, the second with the FSA logo, the third with the NASCOE logo, and the fourth design featured the Great Lakes with the saying, “Unsalted and Shark Free!”

On Friday night, we met up with others at Broad Leaf Brewery! The evening activities continued with cornhole and Euchre tournaments.



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On Saturday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, Michigan held their state convention. Bob Thompson, President of the Michigan Farmers Union and former Michigan CED, spoke about his time as a CED and about what the Michigan Farmers Union has going on and their upcoming events.



Christie Salenbien, Acting SED

Christie Salenbien, Acting SED, spoke about topics that are also hot topics in Wisconsin such as hiring and retention. Last year they had a record 44 vacancies, some of which had no applicants. Michigan's employee ceiling is 163-CO, down from 167 and 64-GS, down from 65. She stated that award funding has been approved and adequate funding available. She spoke about the jump team opportunities available. Currently one employee is detailed to Oklahoma. The State Office supports and encourages individuals to take advantage of jump teams.



Friday night's cornhole tournament

She stated the **HERD** team mission, established within the last year or two has been very successful in its goals and mission. The **HERD** team mission is:

- **Harmonize** connections and foster a sense of community among all levels of Michigan FSA employees by organizing fun statewide events, sharing employee stories, and encouraging interaction.
- **Empower** employees through active engagement and collaboration to enhance the workplace environment and promote employee satisfaction.
- **Recognize** employee contributions and highlight workplace creativity to show appreciation, create awareness, and build rapport.
- **Develop** an environment of inclusion where employees feel passionate, energetic, and invested in their work.

Dale Allen, Conservation Chief, and Kelly Losey, Conservation Specialist, provided some updates. A NRCS Desktop will be coming. This will allow AD-1026 referrals and appeals to be uploaded and processed digitally. They also stated that 44 employees were provided HELC/WC training.

Ken Schapman, Price Support Chief, stated that \$125 million in MAL's were disbursed last year in Michigan! He spoke about teleworking and the digital records initiative supports it as employees have access to files.

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Kyle Knapp, Production Adjustment Chief, informed the crowd that between 2019 and 2023, over \$1 billion has been paid out by Production Adjustment programs in Michigan! Kyle talked about the direction their State Office team is going. They recently hired two new Program Specialists and together they have set goals and developed a vision of what they want to provide to the field. He spoke about continued employee training, even so much as having a training boot camp for new employees and annual refresher training sessions. Kyle piqued our interest by indicating a new disaster program may be coming this summer!

Everyone from the State Office made comments about their support of MASCOE and what MASCOE/NASCOE does for employees and what our County Office employees do for our producers and local communities and that we all are working towards a common goal.



*Dale Allen, Conservation Chief  
Kelly Losey, Conservation Specialist*



*Kyle Knapp, Production Adjustment Chief*



*Ken Schapman, Price Support Chief*

The committee reports presented, align with what our committees reported as well. Michigan is also looking for ideas and ways to reach their employees about the benefits of becoming a MASCOE/NASCOE member.

Thank you for supporting our trip to the Midwest Area Rally. It was great seeing old friends and making new ones! The networking is invaluable as we learn what issues other states are facing and how they approach resolutions to achieve positive results! We encourage you to participate next year in Minnesota!

Respectfully submitted,  
Shelby Niskanen and Jon Beam



*Jon & Shelby at the Mackinac Bridge!*