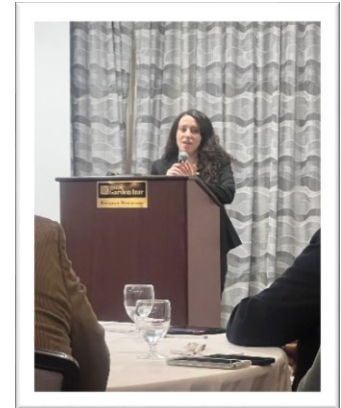


National Association of County Office Employees
Northeast Area and Midwest Area Rallies
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The Midwest Area (MWA) Rally was held jointly with the Northeast Area (NEA) in Freeport, Maine.

MEASCOE President, Laurie Thiboutot, opened the meeting by welcoming everyone. People from 21 different states were in attendance! There were eight State Executive Directors (SED) in attendance from DE, MA, MD, NH, NY, PA, RI, and VT.



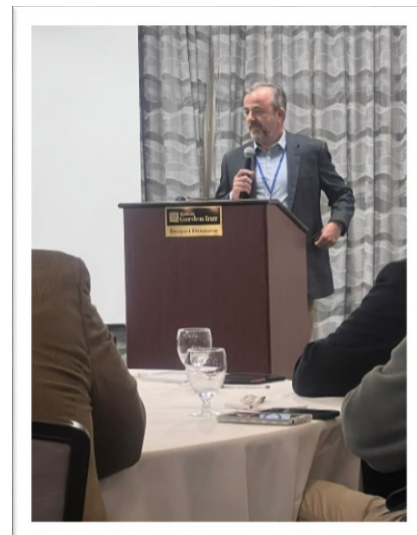
Laurie Thiboutot, MEASCOE President

Sherry Hammel, Maine SED, addressed the convention. She stated she has been with FSA for 32 years. She provided some fun facts about Maine. It is the 39th largest state, with 16 counties. The largest county, Aroostook, has 3 FSA County Offices located in it! There are 47 PT's and seven Temp PT's in Maine. Potatoes have the largest economic impact of any crop, Maine has the longest coastline of any state – 34,079 miles, and 90% of the nation's supply of wild blueberries comes from Maine and 50% of the state is uninhabited.

Joel Foster, NASCOE President, introduced our Washington D.C. guests. He thanked the SED's for their invaluable support and stated that we couldn't meet with our members without them.

Joel introduced John Berge, Acting Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs. Mr. Berge stated he is a member of NASCOE. He grew up on a farm, which his family lost during the 1980's farm crisis. He stated that he wanted to find ways to be impactful so others wouldn't have to go through what his family did. He explained that they continually look at ways to make programs more accessible for producers, while making them easier for staff to administer.

Mr. Berge stated that programs such as NAP, which means Not a Penny in the Farm Bill extension, remains stagnant, DMC was not administered correctly and they had to rewrite it, the cap of 27 million acres for CRP hasn't moved and there is not a lot of room to grow. These are things that they are trying to address in the new Farm Bill. There have been hundreds of engagements on Farm Bill policy, and they are neck-deep in an extension with no real deadline in the future. He is frustrated with this. He meets with farm groups and mentions the concerns of these groups are not being acted upon as they work on the Farm Bill. Progress is stagnant as Congress is evaluating the worth of "X's" and "Y's" and the priorities are far too competitive for Congress.



John Berge, Acting Deputy Administrator, DAFP

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He continued by saying they keep looking at ways to use existing authorities to move forward. He stated livestock programs offer tremendous flexibilities to growers. They have expanded livestock definitions, included aquaculture, and crustaceans. They are looking at ways to enhance the NAP program by expanding crop tables and building in farm revenue options. They have enhanced dairy programs by creating ODMAP and milk loss programs. He stated these ideas weren't just developed by his office, but they came from stakeholders and staff.

He mentioned he was tracking seven different disaster events concurrently. He has been dealing with record keeping and cause of loss issues and working to provide access to producers. He closed with, "Keep your eye on the prize of supporting our producers."

Marcus Graham, Deputy Administrator for Field Operations, stated that he likes to visit states to meet with personnel. There are 11,000 FSA employees and 7,000 COC members. He stated it's a rewarding position with the current supportive leadership.

When he started in 2021, no one was in the office due to COVID. There were discussions about what to do with staff. Telework? Bring into the office? These were the things they were dealing with and working to keep offices open. Some of the flexibilities have stayed though. There are hybrid approaches to meetings, where we can meet in person, but bring in others virtually with Teams.



Marcus Graham, DAFO

He asked the questions, "How do we attract employees? How do we make a customer-facing agency attractive to potential employees compared to other remote, and virtual working situations?" Marcus stated the employee ceiling is around 10,000 with 9,600 currently onboard. He stated we need to hire and maintain staffing as about 50% of FSA employees will be eligible to retire in the next one to three years. A lot of this is budget driven. They use the OPO model to determine where the workload is in every state and direct resources to where there are needs. Marcus mentioned the authorities have been flexed and that if states staffing needs change, about 90% of the time they can make it happen.

Marcus spoke about incentives for employees such as the 6% retention incentive, which cost \$20 million and was absorbed within the budget. This was focused on grade 4-9 employees. They are working to continue some form of a retention incentive moving forward. He mentioned the student loan repayment program was huge. They are using direct hire authorities to fill positions where hiring is difficult. They are also working on the PT reclassification and bumping up salaries.

He mentioned the IT issues and difficulties. The successful implementation of removing the PIV card requirement for MPS3 as there are contracts with departments, not just FSA.

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Next was a Question-and-Answer session with our National Office employees. You can read the questions by clicking [here](#). Many of the questions were not able to be answered on the spot.

There was a brief presentation on the 2024 National Convention. Registration is live on the App and website. The tours have capacity limits so register quickly if you want to participate. There will be waiting lists for attendees to get on in case of a cancellation. John Deere is offering tours by a special request as they normally do not allow tours!

Joel Foster, NASCOE President, addressed the audience. He stated the National Office is our biggest cheerleader and the budget is the biggest issue. The budget that was passed in March provided funding at the 2023 level, however, this wasn't as much as we would have liked. Legislative bulletins are delivered to membership via the NASCOE App. NASCOE has been working to keep the retention incentive, addressing the PT reclassification, and working to make our lives easier.

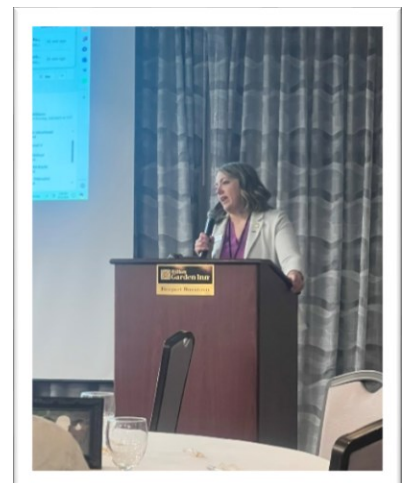
The Farm Bill is not a priority right now. The House is working on it, but the Senate is not. He stated that Long Island has more representatives than NE, MT, SD, and WY combined! They are more urban-oriented right now.

It is up to NASCOE to work to get the same benefits that GS employees have extended to us. The Negotiations and Programs committee worked to get the Paid Parental Leave extended to CO employees the year after it was granted to GS employees. NASCOE has been working to get caught up after COVID and is currently working on 2023 and 2024 negotiation items. These can be found on the NASCOE website. ([NASCOE Programs & Negotiations](#))

Joel seconded Marcus Graham's comment about 50% of FSA employees will be eligible to retire in the next one to three years and we need a strong membership to show National that we care. It looks better to say that NASCOE is representing an 80% membership vs. 50% membership. There is strength in numbers.

Joel briefly mentioned that dues have not increased since 2008. While NASCOE is not broke, they cannot keep deficit spending. Jessi Colgrove, NASCOE Treasurer, would elaborate more during her presentation.

Kayla Mattson, NASCOE Vice President, stated she works closely with the President to stay abreast with concerns. The final Equity Commission report is out. There are some concerning items within the report. They are looking to change the roll of the COC. Terminology in the report states that the recommendation is to have CED's hired and supervised by DD's. The COC would be an advisory role. They have



Kayla Mattson, NASCOE Vice President

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weekly meetings with Hunter Moorhead, NASCOE Legislative Consultant and he hasn't been hearing much at this time.

Kayla mentioned she oversees referrals to the NASCOE Attorney for members needing to use the service. Once you have your official determination letter, contact your Area Executive or the Vice President. They will also need the materials relied upon. Once the case is submitted to the NASCOE Attorney, they are out of the loop.

She concluded with a comment on the NASCOE App to reach out to leadership when in doubt about whether something on the app can be shared outside of the app on state websites, etc.

Jessi Colgrove, NASCOE Treasurer, presented to the audience. She stated this is her third year as treasurer. Some positive achievements during her terms. NASCOE changed their credit card company for the Executives, which has returned \$1,400 to NASCOE due to a cash back option. NASCOE also returned \$11,000 from a CD investment. She provided a training for state treasurers in February which was very well received.

She stated the number one challenge has been the budget. NASCOE creates a budget with the guaranteed income, which has been fairly accurate. However, expenses are more difficult to predict and has resulted in spending more than they take in. NASCOE has evaluated their expenses and changed their approach. This resulted in spending \$23,000 less in 2023 vs. 2022. They held their organizational meeting in Kansas City because it is much cheaper there. By holding the Pre-negotiations meetings virtually, they saved over \$25,000 annually by eliminating this one meeting. Other expenses such as the \$50 per month data reimbursement have been eliminated, saving NASCOE over \$8,000 annually.

She continued by saying that expenses such as food, hotel, and airfare have increased. Fewer employees mean fewer members. Dillard Financial Solutions, Inc. has increased their quarterly donations to NASCOE.

However, despite working to reduce expenses, NASCOE has proposed an increase in dues which will be voted on at the National Convention in the Quad Cities. The increase in dues will allow NASCOE to operate without being in a deficit annually. She stated that in 2008, the last time dues were increased, there were 7,200 members. Currently we have 4,700 members. If the proposal passes, the change will go into effect for January 2025. Dues for the first and second quarter would remain at \$55 per member. Dues would increase to \$75 per member for the third and fourth quarters and following fiscal years.

The increase would allow NASCOE to provide more benefits such as increase the number of leadership trainings and increase travel and state delegate stipends, as she mentioned that we all have higher costs. NASCOE is committed to their members, but they need financial help.

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Kevin Dale, National Association of Farmer Elected Committees (NAFEC), spoke about how NAFEC can carry the NASCOE banner in a different way. There are benefits to farmers that are only available here. He stated there are states without a State NAFEC Director, one of which is Wisconsin. He pushed that if we know farmers who may want to be a director, to have them reach out. Responsibilities include attending four quarterly calls and attend state conventions.

Hunter Moorhead, NASCOE Legislative Consultant, stated that having a Continuing Resolution has become common over the last decade. This year the discussions went longer and now we need to move very quickly as we are months into the fiscal year. He stated the President's budget is a forward-looking document that starts at the previous year and goes up and down from there. \$6 million was cut from FSA's Salaries and Expense Account, however, COC and County Office remained the same as last year, which is good that we didn't get cut. \$1 billion was provided for the WIC program, which resulted in FSA, NRCS, and RMA taking hits. Hunter stated that employee retention is a priority.

They are on to the next fiscal year. The House recently met with [Tom Vilsack](#), Secretary of Agriculture. He stated that [Scott Franklin](#), House of Representatives, Florida, is serious about FSA staffing and he's doing it respectfully to represent and help FSA.

As far as the Farm Bill goes, Hunter stated that House Ag Committee leader, [G.T. Thompson](#), House of Representatives, Pennsylvania, is gung-ho on getting a Farm Bill done. Hunter said a House draft of proposed items may be available towards the end of April, however, it is not the Farm Bill text. An approved draft of Farm Bill language could be ready by Memorial Day. There are two sticking points the House won't support, however, he didn't elaborate on the issues.

On the Senate side of things, there is a slower timeline if any. Hunter stated there is no dates for the Senate Farm Bill proposal, but it appears they are working on it. He also stated that [Debbie Stabenow](#), Chairperson of the Senate Ag Committee, will be retiring in January. Hunter stated the Farm Bill funding expires September 30th and most likely they will let it expire and extend another year. If there is a change in administration with the election, the new administration will want input into a Farm Bill. He doesn't see much happening with getting a Farm Bill done anytime soon.

Hunter talked about the Equity Commission and spoke about eliminating COC's, which even the Secretary of Agriculture mentioned. There is big push back on eliminating COC's. He said the Administration has the ability to implement some of these changes. The report contained recommendations and flexibilities on loans with SDA producers with grant/loan combinations. There's a recommendation to allow community-based organizations to work for farmers.

He mentioned recommendations to redistribute base acres to address disparity and also to re-establish base acres on county information.

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Significant changes to COC's would include making them more equitable by training new committee members and have some sort of accountability for inequality. Minority Advisors would have the ability to vote. Create equitable opportunities to serve on the COC such as 1890 land-grant universities, community organizations, and other minority groups. It is recommended to establish performance metrics for COC oversight and establish standard operating procedure for COC's.

Hunter stated the [H.R. 4268, Federal Retirement Fairness Act](#), which would allow employees who have non-creditable service (i.e. temporary appointment) after December 31, 1988, to be creditable under FERS so long as a deposit is made into the retirement fund, still has support, but at a glacial pace right now. It's not likely to come soon, but support is growing. The Windfall Elimination is in the same situation, however, there is more support for that than there is for the Federal Retirement Fairness Act.

Becky Zirpel, President of National Association of Retired ASCS/FSA County Office Employees (RASCOE), stated they are working on issues facing employees into retirement. She mentioned the bill [H.R. 82, Social Security Fairness Act of 2023](#), which eliminates the *windfall elimination provision*, which in some instances reduces Social Security benefits for individuals who also receive a pension or disability benefit from an employer that did not withhold Social Security taxes. She also mentioned it is unacceptable that retirees are waiting over four months to get their retirement going.

Dillard Financial Solutions, Inc. 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 [NASCOE Political Action Committee](#) (PAC), had a presence at the rally and encouraged members to increase their PAC contributions to assist our legislative efforts by helping elect U.S. House and Senate members who support NASCOE priorities.

The following candidacy announcements for NASCOE positions were made:

- Joel Foster - NASCOE President
- Kayla Mattson - NASCOE Vice President
- Taylor Stucki - NASCOE Secretary
- Jessi Colgrove - NASCOE Treasurer
- Janice Acree - MWA Executive
- Stacia Slover - MWA Alt Executive
- Sandy Scott - NEA Executive
- Barbie Parsons - NEA Alt Executive

Wisconsin donated to the scholarship auction, 2 12-packs of Spotted Cow which sold for \$50 each and 2 hand-made quilts that sold for \$55 and \$60 each.

Respectfully submitted,
Jon Beam and Chris Gordon

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National Office Question and Answer Session

1. Explain the OPO Model change from areas based on crops to state by state?
2. Why was there a change to the referral process for AD-1026's? FSA already does a lot for NRCS (Farm Records & Eligibility).
3. Currently we are hiring at grade 4's, but employees have experience. How can we change this? Some CO-4 employees rate at a GS-6 on GS applications.
4. Why does it take up to four months for new hires to get training and onboard for access to our systems?
5. How soon could PT reclassification be seen?
6. WebTA and donated leave. When a recipient doesn't need it, it pops back without notification.
7. New York has been using Conservation Desktop since October 1, 2023, however, they are still getting back determinations from July. What's taking so long? Also, does FSA get credit for the work?
8. Can they change the haying dates for Grasslands CRP as producers can't hay until after August 1st. This limits participation.
9. Is the PIV card exemption part of the initial setup for new machines or is it later in the process?
10. Has the nesting season been looked at by state or regions and can dates be set differently?
11. With prices increasing for FSFL, can we extend used equipment to a 7 or 10 year loan to make it more attractive??
12. PT Reclassification, what does this look like?
13. CEDT Share Point Training site contains outdated information. Can it be updated or removed?
14. How is FSA involved in changes with the upcoming Farm Bill?
15. CED classification and pay plans. All CED's are grade 12's with no change to the qualifications of CED's. Massachusetts is implementing more shared management. Is the trend to decrease CED's nationwide?
16. When will the hold on FSFL debt collection end?
17. Is there an Ad Hoc program coming for the Excess Moisture losses in the Northeast Area of the nation?
18. CEDT Share Point site has 420 modules. It is overwhelming. Could changes be made to be more efficient with the information?
19. The ECP software is nice. Could we get something similar for EFRP?
20. Could you expand on the NAP enhancement options that John Berge alluded to?
21. When will the DMC software be updated for dissolutions, successions, etc.?
22. When can we expect the updates and changes to ELAP for aquaculture?

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23. Can we get aerial imagery flown annually?
24. With the push for urban ag, can CARS be optimized for using other units such as square footage, etc. for such small acreages?
25. With the urban ag push, can the CCC-860 apply to non-profits?
26. With the urban ag offices open, are there going to be programs that apply to these producers?
27. Any additional compensation for CED's with 2+ grade 12 offices?
28. Please, clarify policy for acreage reporting for maple sap.
29. What do we use for a Notice of Loss for insufficient chill for maple sap?

If you clicked to read the questions that were asked and want to continue reading the report from where you left off, click [here](#) to jump back.